

Curtiling Sexual Harassment in The Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

Esohe Ajao¹, Elizabeth Tolulope Sodipo² and Olufunke Ajibare³

¹Department of General Studies, the Federal Polytechnic Ilaro

²Moverate Group of Schools

³Department of General Studies, Allover Central Polytechnic, Sango, Ota, Ogun State

¹Esohe.ajao@federalpolyilaro.edu.ng; ²Elizabethsodipo1@gmail.com; ³ajibareolufunke@yahoo.com

Abstract

Sexual harassment is not peculiar to Nigerians alone. It appears to have established itself as a norm in the society today, considering its high incidence in our tertiary institutions, places of employment and worship. It has become a contemporary challenge in our institutions of higher learning. Consequently, there is a need to draw the attention of the public to the cankerworm that is now one of the biggest threats to the development of education and academic excellence in our society. In a bid to curtail the wave of sexual harassment and its concomitant effect; this paperwork identified forms of sexual harassments; the multiplying effects on victims and suggested possible solutions to the issue of sexual harassment.

Keywords: Sexual Harassment, Tertiary Institution, Policy Statement, Mental Re-orientation and Quid Pro Quo.

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1. Introduction

The issue of sexual harassment is not a new occurrence in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Over the years, there has been increasing widespread media attention, which has resulted in a remarkable increase in public awareness. There have also been several research works carried out to address issues relating to sexual harassment of students within the Nigerian tertiary institutions. Sexual harassment is one of the many social vices plaguing our higher institutions of learning as well as the society at large. Hence, there is need to draw the attention of the public to cankerworm that is silently eroding academic excellence in our tertiary institutions. The school system has the utmost responsibility to create a learning environment that is safe and conducive for all of its students

Tertiary Institution, more commonly referred to as post-secondary education, refers to the third place of learning after graduating from high school or secondary school in the Nigerian context. Nigeria is one of the countries with many tertiary institutions in the world. These institutions include Universities, Polytechnics, Monotechnic and Colleges of Education. Tertiary Institutions have come a long way, in building, guiding and growing intellectuals and reputable leaders who are equipped to drive the change and innovation required for economic growth and development through their intellectual prowess.

Tertiary institutions in Nigeria includes all post-secondary levels of the educational system which includes Universities, Polytechnics, and Colleges of Education, the advanced teacher training college, correspondence colleges and such institutions that may be affiliated to them. The objectives of Tertiary Institution for citizenry

are to acquire intellectual and physical skills, develop intellectual ability and capability that is required by the individual within the environment and acquire the development and fostering of values adaptation in order to ensure the survival of the individual in the society at large. Functions performed by this Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria are teaching, research and dissemination of information and storing house of knowledge

Sexual harassment is an unsolicited sexual behavior that is offensive, degrading or threatening. It can be written, oral or physical, and can happen physically or online. In the context of the academic environment, sexual harassment can be regarded as enforcing through bullying or coercion, unwanted sexual advances, demands for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical sexual demands in exchange for employment, academic performance or better living condition. It is a very demeaning and indecent act, particularly because the perpetrators are often authority figures and models to the students who are most often their victims.

Menon *et al.* (2011) described Sexual harassment as unwanted sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conducts of a sexual nature, when submission to or rejection, explicitly or implicitly affects a person's employment or education, unreasonably interferes with a person's work or educational performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive working or learning environment.

Sexual harassment can take the form of non-consensual touching, grabbing or other physical contact, making Sexual remarks, jokes and comments, requesting for sex or sexual favour, ogling and giving suggestive looks, showing nude and sexually offensive material for you or others to see, making sexual gestures or suggestive body movements towards another, insulting another with sexual jabs and committing a criminal offence against another, such as making an obscene phone call, offensively exposing themselves or sexually assaulting you.

Sexual harassment is classified into two key categories namely *quid pro quo* and a *hostile environment*. *Quid pro quo* in simple terms means this for that in Latin. Other similar interpretations are: "give and take", "tit for tat", "you scratch my back, and I'll scratch your back." A *Quid pro quo* sexual harassment incidence occurs when it is stated or implied that an academic performance of a student depends on whether the student consents to sexual acts. Bridget M, (2014) while hostile environment sexual harassment incidence happens when an unsolicited sexual conduct creates a working or learning environment that is intimidating, threatening or hostile or its consistent pushiness or reoccurrence affects a person's ability to partake in or benefit from an academic program or activity. The learning environment is considered hostile, when an individual's educational experience is unreasonably and adversely affected by a staff's discriminatory actions, thus creating an intimidating environment. When compliance or non-compliance to a sexual request or gesture has an adverse effect on a person's employment or education, impedes a person's professional or educational performance, or creates a threatening, unfriendly or hostile working or learning environment. Menon *et al.* (2011).

This paper looks at sexual harassment from a solution focused perspective. In particular, it focused on a clear definition of sexual harassment, the forms of sexual harassment that exists in tertiary institutions, the consequences of sexual harassment on victims; and also proffer strategies to curtail sexual harassment in institutions of leaning.

2. Sexual Harassment Within Tertiary Institutions

Sexual harassment occurs at all levels of education including elementary schools. Sexual harassment has been in existence in the school system for a number of years. Hence, sexual harassment is not an emerging trend in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Studies have shown that countries with weak educational systems, low levels of accountability, high level of poverty and gender inequality have higher incidences of sexual harassment in the school system. Further discovery has revealed a higher prevalence of sexual harassment in institutions where

educators are poorly trained, underpaid and severely under sourced (Beninger, 2013; Lynch, 2013 and Sharma, 2013).

A survey carried out on female undergraduates, focusing on their experiences with sexual harassment as a student in any of the Nigerian tertiary institutions revealed that a high percentage (69.8%) of the respondents had experienced sexually harassment, most especially from male classmates and lecturers. Two-thirds of the respondents have experienced the non-physical sexual harassment, while 48.2% have experienced the physical sexual harassment. Non-physical harassment comprised of sexual remarks and comments (57.8%) and requests for sexual favors as a barter for academic favours (32.2%). Physical forms of sexual harassment included unwelcome sexual touching (29.4%) and being deliberately brushed against in a sexual manner (28.9%). However, these statistics barely reveals the true state of the ugly practice (Owoaje & Olusola-Taiwo, 2011).

The increasingly widespread use of social media in Nigeria, has given more women a platform to be more outspoken on their experiences with sexual harassment. Social media trends such as the #MeToo movement where victims share their experiences with sexual harassment has further revealed the prevalence of sexual assault in our institutions and shone light on its silent culture.

3. Effects of Sexual Harassment

The consequences of sexual harassment are usually very profound and can range from uncomfortable to severe distress. If not properly managed, sexual harassment can leave long lasting physical, emotional and mental scars on victims which are often females, and this can affect their academic performance and likely their future relationships with the opposite sex.

For victims, experiencing sexually harassment can have demoralizing effects on their overall physical and psychological well-being health and their education. Psychological effects can consist of: anger, shame, depression, guilt, denial, irritability, anxiety, shock, frustration, fear, insecurity, self-blame, seclusion. Physiological effects can show up as: panic reactions, headaches, nightmares, laziness, lackadaisical attitude, weight fluctuations, and sexual problems. The Effects on education can include, low class attendance or total absenteeism, pulling out of school, poor academic performance as a result of stress. (North Michigan University, 2019).

Sexual harassment can also generate a "ripple effect" of negative impact on the overall development of Nigeria as a nation in achieving sustainable development. It is a threat to achieving the girl child education. It has created non conducive and unsafe learning environment for the female students which has promoted slow and uneven progress towards attaining gender equality of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) that it is detrimental to sustainable development. Therefore, it is pertinent to note that sexual harassment is a threatening social phenomenon in the Nigerian educational sector; which has severe psychological and social consequences on the victims. The economic and political consequences of sexual harassment are also a threat to the nation in achieving sustainable development. (Mohammed, 2017)

4. Solution to Curtailing Sexual Harassment in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

The key reason for the continuous perpetuation of this cruel act is the existence of weak mechanisms and penalty procedures in tertiary institutions. Unfortunately, sexual harassment weakens the integrity of the ivory towers. The primary responsibility of curtailing incidences of sexual harassment in tertiary institutions falls on the leaders of these institutions who have the will to rid their campuses of sexual harassment. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the management of all the tertiary institutions in Nigeria to reduce the occurrences of sexual harassment to the lowest possible rate in order to create an environment that is conducive for female students.

A clear and comprehensive policy statement on sexual harassment should be clearly communicated to all stakeholders including faculty and students. A policy statement on sexual harassment is an official statement from the institution's management to all staff and students inclusive, clearly communicating the institution's policy, and its commitment to promoting a positive and conducive working environment by eradicating sexual harassment within the institution. The policy statement should come from senior management to guarantee acceptance and strict adherence. The policy should include at least the following elements:

A clear definition of sexual harassment. A detailed definition is necessary to ensure that every stakeholder, including faculties as well as the management is clear about conducts that can be interpreted as sexual harassment. The main purpose of the definition is to ensure individuals in the institution are fully aware of conducts that can be seen as unwelcome and offensive to others, and so forbid such conducts in the institution.

A complaints/grievance procedure. Sexual harassment complaints are both sensitive and personal; hence it is important that school managements design a complaint procedure that is solely focused on sexual harassment related complaints. A complaint procedure should include measures on how to protect victims from further humiliation during the course of reporting and investigating the complaint. A complaint procedure should have at least: a step-by-step process for reporting and handling a complaint as well as a time limit for each step; an investigation procedure; and an appeal procedure to enable a disgruntled party to appeal against the outcome of an investigation to a higher authority.

Disciplinary rules and penalties against the perpetrator and against anyone wrongfully accuse another. It is important that offenders are disciplined in order to ensure that the policy and preventive mechanism is effective. Liable consequences to which the offender will be answerable if the offence is committed should be clearly communicated. The nature and type of penalty should vary depending on the severity of the offence. To reduce incidences of false and fictitious accusations, strict disciplinary penalties should also be set against anyone who makes such accusations.

Protective and remedial measures for the victim. To encourage victims to report sexual harassment, there should be adequate measures to ensure maximum confidentiality so as to minimise embarrassment to the victim especially at the time of reporting and in the course of investigation into the complaint

Prevention is the most effective instrument that tertiary institutions can utilize to combat sexual harassment in tertiary institutions. It is not enough to simply develop institutional policies and preventive mechanisms to contain sexual harassment, the dissemination of these policies among the stakeholders are quite important. This can be done through communication, education and training. Promotional and educational programmes should be put in place to communicate the institution's policy on sexual harassment and to promote awareness on sexual harassment and its destructive consequences within the learning community. Furthermore, the institution should set up programmes targeted at educating faculties and students on issues relating to sexual harassment. The institution should share how to deal with issues of sexual harassment as and when they arise. The need for training is particularly very important for persons assigned to function as disciplinary panels and counselors.

Partnerships and Collaborations. No culture change or education initiative can be implemented successfully, anyway in a silo. These efforts require partnerships and collaborations. Partnering with external organizations such as the Mirabel centre which is a Sexual Assault Referral Centre located in Lagos, Nigeria and was established to provide holistic and top quality medical and psychological help to survivors of sexual assault and rape.

New students on boarding course. New intakes of students at the Tertiary Institutions should also be mandated to complete a general class on sexual harassment during their first semester of school.

The Need for a Mental Re-Orientation: An effective and lasting solution to this problem is a massive re-orientation of the Nigerian citizenry starting from the family units to the schools, churches and also the media. This way, proper social values such as decent dressing and sexual discretion can be encouraged.

Regardless of who is involved as the harasser, it is important that we call out inappropriate behaviours witnessed in the workplace. If there are more people calling out inappropriate behaviours, then it is more likely that it would caution intending harassers to check their behaviours. Policies regarding sexual harassment should be clearly articulated and visibly displayed all over the institution to stand as a reminder that any form of sexual harassment is totally unacceptable. If all these are done, the high incidences of sexual harassment would be reduced to a minimal level and many people especially the parents will heave a sigh of relief. Most importantly, it is our collective responsibility to unite in order to contain this seemingly unending narrative of sexual harassment in Nigeria, especially within the workplace and the school system.

5. Conclusion

Considering the current rape cases being discussed on media, there is no better time than now for higher institutions to check within and evaluate their current policies and also put corrective and remedial measures in place to curtail this menace. Not only does sexual harassment affect the victims physiologically and psychologically, but its ripple effect on sustainable economic development cannot also be overlooked. Sexual harassment is a threat to attaining gender equality of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) which is detrimental to sustainable development.

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