

Sexual harassment and victimization of students: a case study of a higher education institution in South Africa

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Abstract

Introduction: Sexual harassment has been identified as a major public health problem that is hidden in most institutions/organizations.

Objective: This study assessed sexual harassment and victimization of students in a higher institution in South Africa.

Methods: A quantitative, cross-sectional descriptive design was used in this study. The target population was registered students of the higher education institution and the sample size was 342. Questionnaire was used for data collection and data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23.0 program. The basic principles of ethics were duly observed and the ethical clearance certificate was obtained prior to data collection.

Results: The findings revealed that 27 (17.3%) of the male and 47 (25.5%) of the female respondents (P = 0.047) had personally experienced unwanted touching. Two (1.3%) male and 5 (2.7%) female students admitted that they have been raped. Seventeen (10.8%) of the males and 19 (10.2%) of the females had been coerced to comply with a sexual relationship on campus.

Conclusion: This study shows that both male and female students on campus are experiencing different forms of sexual harassment.

Keywords: Students, sexual harassment, higher education institution.

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Introduction

Sexual harassment refers to as persistent, unsolicited and unwelcomed sexual advances which could be visual, physical, verbal and non-verbal gestures and it is seen

as a disease of present-day learning institutions¹. It has been identified as one of the major stressors that constitute a threat to the performance of an individual in organisations or academic institutions². According to Dz-iech and Weiner³, Catharine MacKinnon viewed sexual harassment of learners, particularly female learners as a form of women abuse and invented the term 'sexual harassment'. The Code of Good Practice on the Handling of Sexual Harassment Cases had made South Africa one of the countries around the globe which had specifically designed legislation to deal with sexual harassment. The Code (1998) defined sexual harassment as "unwanted conduct of a sexual nature". The "unwanted and potentially coercive or disruptive nature" distinguished sexual

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harassment from consensual behaviour that is welcomed and mutual^{4,5,6}. Parrot and Bechhofer⁷ identified factors that put both students and staffs at risk of being sexually harassed in school settings. These include university community social structure, alcohol and substance abuse, absence and ineffective implementation of policy on sexual harassment and failure of victims to report the incidence.

Sexual harassment perpetrator could be a colleague, supervisor, management personnel and/or student. The perpetrator and victim may be of the same gender⁸. However, in most incidents, men had been found to be perpetrators either in the learning institutions or work places⁹. It has been documented that most victims of sexual harassment show cognitive, behavioural, emotional, and physical symptoms following harassment that may persist long after the harassment has ended and even change the course of their lifestyles¹⁰⁻¹³. Families, communities and society at large are not excluded from the adverse consequences of sexual harassment^{10,13}.

In developed countries, studies had been conducted to determine the prevalence of sexual harassment at the various higher education institutions as well as its impact on the victims. In the United States of America, studies showed that sexual harassment in higher education institutions takes place more frequently than people imagined¹³. A study at Brown University in the United States revealed that among 234 female students, there was an incidence of 6% attempted rape and 3.8% rape cases¹⁴. In another study conducted by So-Kum Tang, Critelli, and Porter¹⁵ at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in China among undergraduate female students; of the total participants, there was 14.9% reported cases of attempted rape and 1.4% of rape cases.

In Africa, few studies had also shown a high incidence of sexual harassment. For an instant a study conducted at the University of Malawi showed 67% of sexual harassment on campus and 12.6% of the students were raped¹⁶. Similarly, in South Africa studies showed that 30% of female learners were raped and sexually harassed by male learners and teachers in high schools¹⁷. Meanwhile, the extent of this problem is unknown in higher education institutions and study of this kind is rare in South Africa¹⁷. It is important to determine the prevalence of sexual harassment in every institution so as to develop strategies that will help in prevention and reduction of its occur-

rence. Therefore, this study aimed to determine sexual harassment occurrence and victimization of students in one of the biggest higher education institutions in South Africa.

Methods section

Study design

The study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional descriptive survey design¹⁸.

Study setting

The study was conducted in one of the higher education institutions in Limpopo province of South Africa. The higher education institution has a total number of 13693 enrolled students for the 2014 academic year which spread across various schools. These schools offer qualifications such as certificates, undergraduate degrees as well as post-graduate qualifications. The student population is diverse with students from Africa countries such as Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Swaziland.

Population and sample

The target population of this study was students who are 18 years and above, residing on campus. There was a total number of 2165 bed spaces with 1176 (54.32%) allocated to female students and 989 (45.68%) allocated to male students on campus. The sample size 338 was calculated using the Slovin's formula, $[n=N/\{1+Ne^2\}]$, where "N" is the total number of resident students, "n" is the sample size and "e" is the accepted level of error which is 0.05. Systematic sampling was used to select students' room numbers. This is calculated by dividing the total number of the rooms by the sample size to find "k" value which is the interval value ($2165/338 = 6^{th}$). Therefore, every room was selected for the study. The first room, to begin with, was chosen using simple random sampling¹⁹.

Validity and reliability of the data collection instrument Questionnaire was used to collect data from participants. The questionnaire was developed based on extensive literature review, coupled with expert consultation in assessing the representativeness of the questions on the variables under study to ensure validity. In addition, the questionnaire was structured in simple English to avoid ambiguity and the participants were allowed to go through it while the researcher was still around so as to clarify any concerns.

The reliability of the questionnaire was measured using the test-retest method. The questionnaire was administered to a small sample of 38 students who did not participate in the main study twice at an interval of one week. The Cronbach Alpha correlation was calculated and a correlation coefficient of 0.87 was established, which fell within the acceptable limit¹⁹.

Data collection procedure

A self-administered questionnaire was used for data collection. Data collection began on the 2nd of April, 2015 and lasted for 30 days. In order to achieve a high level of questionnaire return and study objectives, though the calculated sample size for this study was 338, a total of 400 questionnaires were administered. The questionnaire was administered in each participant's room. Three hundred and fifty questionnaires were collected out of 400 distributed, giving a return rate of 87.50%. Eight questionnaires were not properly completed and were excluded from the study. In total 342 questionnaires were analysed. Due to the sensitive nature of this study, prior arrangement was made with the two of the institution's counsellors and each participant were provided with their contacts for counselling consultation.

Informed consent and confidentiality

The information sheet and consent form were given to each participant to sign. The researcher ensured that all the essential information such as the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, assurance of anonymity and confidentiality as well as voluntary participation were provided in the information sheet, so as to enable the participants to make an informed decision before signing the form. Only the individuals who tender their written informed consent were allowed to participate in the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by

requesting the participants not to write their names or provide any form of identification on the questionnaire and consent form. Completed questionnaires were kept under lock and key and the information provided by the participants were only used for the purpose of this study.

Data analysis

Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 23.0 program was used for analysis of data. Chi-Square test is used to check the statistical significant difference between two variables. Statistical significance is set at $p < 0.05$ and confidence interval at 95%.

Ethical procedure

The basic principles of ethics were duly observed and the ethical clearance certificate to conduct this study was issued in February, 2015 by the University of Venda, Health, Safety and Research Ethics Committee: SHS/15/PH/05/1903. Access to the participating students was granted by the appropriate authorities. Participants were instructed to read the information page which explained the purpose of the study, ensure anonymity and confidentiality as well as voluntary participation before signing the consent form attached to the first page of the questionnaire.

Results

Demographic information of the respondents

A total of 342 students consisting of 186(54.39%) males and 156(46.61%) females participated in the study. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 40 years. As shown in Table 1, the majority ($n = 282$; 82.46%) were in the 18-24 age group. Most of the participants were at degree level. One hundred and eighty-five (54.09%) and 131 (38.30%) respectively had spent up to four years at the higher education institution.

Table 1: Demographic distribution of the respondents (N=342)

	Age					Total
	≥ 18-24yrs	25-29yrs	30-34yrs	35-39yrs	≥ 40	
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n(%)	
Gender						
Male	132 (35.48)	23(6.73)	1(0.29)	0(0.00)	0(0.0)	156(45.6)
Female	150(43.86)	22(6.43)	4(1.17)	3(0.88)	7(2.1)	186(54.4)
Total	282(82.46)	45(13.16)	5(1.46)	3(0.88)	7(2.1)	342(100)
Level of Education						
Certificate level	9(2.63)	0(0.00)	0(0.00)	0(0.00)	0(0.0)	9(2.6)
Diploma level	1(0.29)	1(0.29)	0(0.00)	0(0.00)	0(0.0)	2(0.5)
Degree level	259(75.73)	32(9.36)	5(1.46)	2(0.54)	7(2.1)	305(89.2)
Postgraduate level	13(3.80)	12(3.51)	0(0.00)	1(0.29)	0(0.0)	26(7.6)
Total	282(82.47)	45(13.16)	5(1.46)	3(0.88)	7(2.1)	342(100)
Year spent in the higher education institution						
1-2yrs	168(49.12)	10(2.92)	2(0.58)	2(0.6)	3(0.9)	185(54.1)
3-4yrs	102(29.82)	21(6.14)	3(0.88)	1(0.3)	4(1.2)	131(38.3)
5-6yrs	11(3.21)	10(2.92)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	21(6.1)

Whilst only 6(0.60%) participants were married, an overwhelming majority (n= 334; 97.66%) indicated that they were single. The dominant (n=339; 99.12%) faith among the participants was the Christian religion, and this was followed by 1(0.29%) participant who reported belonging to the Muslim religion.

Occurrence of sexual harassment and victimization of students in the higher education institution

Table 2 shows the percentage distribution of the respondents regarding occurrence of sexual harassment and students' victimization in the higher education institution by

gender. In this section of the questionnaire, due to some missing data, the 'n' also varied slightly from one variable to the other. With regards to contact sexual harassment, amongst males, 17.3% experienced unwanted touching, 36.5% observed unwanted touching and 46.2% were aware of unwanted touching. Among females, 25.3% personally experienced unwanted touching, 35.5% observed unwanted touching and 39.2% were aware of unwanted touching. However, 1.3% males had personally experienced rape, 10.9% had observed it and 87.8% were aware of it. While 2.7% females admitted that they have been raped, 4.3% had observed it and 93.0% were just aware of such incident.

The distribution according to the frequency of verbal harassment shows that 12.2% of the males and 18.4% of the females ($P = 0.017$) had personally experienced unwanted sexual advance. Only 37.4% of the male and 39.2% of the female students had observed sex-related jokes on campus. The results with regards to non-verbal harassment, an equal percentage (16.7%) of both male and female students had personally experienced unwanted sexual oriented text messages.

Regarding the variables under quid pro quo harassment, 10.8% of the male students had been coerced to comply with a sexual relationship, 18.6% had observed it and 70.5% were aware of it. Meanwhile, 10.2% of the female students had personally experienced coerced sexual relationship, 18.6% had observed it and 74.2% were aware of it. Of the study group, 8 (5.1%) of the male and 10 (5.4%) of the female respondents had been intimidated into submitting to unwanted sexual advances in return for marks. While, 117 (75.0%) of the males and 142 (76.3%) of the females were aware of such scenario.

Table 2: Percentage distribution of respondents regarding occurrence of sexual harassment and students' victimization in the institution by gender

Variables	MALES				FEMALES				P Values (Chi-Square)
	n	Personally experienced	Observed	Aware of	n	Personally experienced	Observed	Aware of	
Occurrences of sexual harassment in the University									
<i>Physical Harassment</i>									
Unwanted touching	156	17.3%	36.5%	46.2%	186	25.3%	35.5%	39.2%	0.177
Rape	156	1.3%	10.9%	87.8%	186	2.7%	4.3%	93.0%	0.047
Attempted rape	156	2.6%	12.8%	84.6%	186	3.8%	7.0%	89.2%	0.167
Unwanted hugging	156	17.3%	43.6%	39.1%	185	30.3%	32.4%	37.3%	0.023
Unwanted kissing	156	19.2%	34.0%	46.8%	185	21.1%	25.9%	53.0%	0.325
Unwanted fondling	156	10.3%	32.1%	57.7%	186	14.0%	22.0%	64.0%	0.095
<i>Verbal harassment</i>									
Unwanted sexual advance	156	12.2%	28.8%	59.0%	186	18.4%	16.8%	64.9%	0.017
Sex-related jokes	156	31.4%	35.3%	33.3%	186	33.3%	30.6%	36.0%	0.662
Sex-related insults	155	23.2%	39.4%	37.4%	186	29.6%	31.2%	39.2%	0.245
Comment about a person's body	155	33.5%	40.0%	26.5%	186	41.4%	30.1%	28.5%	0.165
<i>Non-verbal harassment</i>									
Unwanted sexual gestures	154	15.6%	29.2%	55.2%	186	18.8%	17.7%	63.4%	0.034
Unwanted sexually suggestive staring	155	15.5%	26.5%	58.1%	186	20.4%	16.7%	62.95	0.090
Unwanted sexually oriented letter	155	9.7%	18.7%	71.6%	185	6.5%	17.3%	76.2%	0.486
Unwanted sexual oriented e-mail	155	9.7%	13.5%	76.8%	185	9.7%	8.6%	81.6%	0.387
Unwanted sexual oriented text messages	156	16.7%	21.2%	62.2%	186	16.7%	17.7%	65.6%	0.717
Unwanted sexual oriented phone calls	155	21.9%	24.5%	53.5%	186	18.3%	12.4%	69.4%	0.007
<i>Quid Pro quo harassment</i>									
Coerced for sexual relations	156	10.9%	18.6%	70.5%	186	10.2%	15.6%	74.2%	0.724
Treated better for sexual cooperation	156	14.1%	23.7%	62.2%	185	8.6%	22.2%	69.2%	0.281
Made to feel afraid for refusing to cooperate to sexual relation	156	7.7%	23.7%	68.6%	186	11.3%	22.6%	66.1%	0.532
Treated bad for refusing to cooperate to sexual relation	155	9.7%	25.2%	65.2%	186	11.3%	22.6%	66.1%	0.647
Intimidation of students into submitting to unwanted sexual advances in return for marks.	156	5.1%	19.9%	75.0%	186	5.4%	18.3%	76.3%	0.931

n = number of participant, % = percentage, statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. Confidence interval 95%

Discussion

The respondents in this study were youths mostly aged 18 to 24 years. The findings of this study indicate that both male and female students are experiencing sexual harassment on campus. A few of the respondents self-reported to have been raped, personally experienced attempted rape and unwanted kissing. Of note, there is a statistically significant difference between the variable of rape and gender ($P = 0.047$), which shows that female students (2.7%) are more likely to be raped. The aforementioned is similar to the findings of Norman et al.²⁰ study on sexual harassment in public medical schools in Ghana. The authors reported that female students were two to three times more likely to be sexually harassed than their male counterparts. Not too dissimilar, a study in Uganda among higher education institution students revealed a higher rate of sexual harassment among female students²¹.

Of note, this study focuses on both male and female students because it has been documented that any person irrespective of gender is prone to sexual harassment^{19,20}. For instance, Luk-Fong et al.²² reported that in Taiwan 50% of the female college students and one-sixth of male students had been sexually harassed.

Consistent with previous studies²³⁻²⁴, the results of this study revealed the common forms of sexual harassment experienced by the students. These include: unwanted touching, unwanted fondling, unwanted sexual advance, sex-related jokes, sex-related insults, unwanted sexual gestures and unwanted sexual oriented text messages, letters and phone calls, etc. Though, we expected a significant difference in all forms of sexual harassment between the female and the male students but to our surprise, sexual harassment among both genders are more or less the same, this is in line with a study conducted in Canada²³. Though, the study took place in high schools but the findings were akin to the findings of this study. This is not unexpected since the settings are alike.

In educational setting quid pro quo sexual harassment is said to occur when a superior (supervisor/lecturer) conditions the granting of an economic/academic reward upon receipt of sexual favours from a subordinate/student or effuse fear by threatened the subordinate/student if he/she refuses to submit to his request²⁵⁻²⁷. Females mostly fall prey of this type of sexual harassment. Al-

though, this study did not specify the harassers surprisingly the study revealed no significant difference between gender variables and quid pro quo form of sexual harassment. Therefore, we recommended a qualitative study to further explore this particular form of sexual harassment among higher education institutions students.

Limitations of the study

A limitation of this study is that the generalization of study findings to other South Africa's higher education institutions may not be possible since the study is a case study of a university. However, the results can still be vital in establishing a basis for comparison of the students' perceived occurrence of sexual harassment between various institutions. It can also serve as base-line data for future studies on the above subject.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings revealed that both male and female students are experiencing sexual harassment in different forms. However, females are more likely to experience greater forms of sexual harassment such as rape. In order to prevent and mitigate sexual harassment in higher education institutions, the following are recommended:

- All sectors of the higher education institution should be made aware of the existence of the policy and how to use the grievance procedure, clearly spelling out the definition of sexual harassment. These efforts should especially be directed at the first-year female and male students when they arrive on campus. Clear guidelines pertaining to safety and facilities available on campus should be given to all students.
- A regular forum of stakeholders with management should take place at least once a semester, where cases and issues are discussed.
- The institution's management should make a clear statement about its seriousness of purpose in dealing with sexual harassment, and that such harassment will not be condoned under any circumstances.
- Regular communication about sexual harassment should take place through all the campuses media, such as the institution's radio station and notice boards.
- The sexual harassment policy should be reviewed to prescribe severe punishment for sexual harassment perpetrators and ensure confidentiality and anonymity in order to encourage the students to report cases of sexual harassment.

• The Department of Human Resources in charge of the implementation of the policies should take responsibility for staffs and students training regarding sexual harassment and that a budget is allocated for this purpose, so as to promote effective implementation.

Ethical approval

Ethical clearance certificate (SHS/15/PH/05/1903), was issued by the University of Venda, Health, Safety and Research Ethics Committee to conduct the study.

Informed consent

A written informed consent was obtained from each participant after the purpose and participant rights had been clearly explained.

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Competing of Interest

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Competing interest

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