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THE SOUND OF SILENCE

Interrogating the culture around
Sexual harassment in first generation
federal universities in South Western Nigeria
(CARTA SHINE PROJECT.)

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Main Highlights

The sexual harassment policies were comprehensive with clear policy statements and definitions.

Prevalence of sexual harassment was high with significant experience of same sex and heterosexual SH. Perpetrators of both same sex and heterosexual SH were more likely to be males.

Attribution of SH to indecent dressing was supported by most interviewed participants and makes the case for awareness raising and training around sexual harassment in higher institutions.

The majority of the members of the campus community were not aware of sexual harassment policy of the institution or how and where to get support.

Background and introduction

Sexual harassment (SH) in tertiary institutions remains a huge problem leading to severe emotional, academic and career difficulty as well as undue suffering. Institutions have responded in various ways to alleviate the burden of sexual harassment with little success, especially in Nigeria. The global prevalence of SH in tertiary institutions is high with more than a third of university women in the United Kingdom ^[1], a fifth of Lebanese women in educational institutions ^[2] and over 8 of 10 female high school students in Canada had experienced sexual harassment ^[3]. In Nigeria, the prevalence of SH in tertiary institutions is higher, ranging from 68% to 80% among female participants ^[4, 5] and 69 - 99% when a broader spectrum of SH was assessed ^[6]. Despite the high prevalence of SH, reportage remains low due to the culture of silence around sexual harassment in educational institutions.

This project interrogated the culture around sexual harassment in higher education setting in Nigeria, identified factors associated with SH, the institutional mechanisms to prevent and respond to SH, the lived experience of survivors of SH, how the experiences of SH survivors differ between men and women in heterosexual and same-sex relationships, and how socio-cultural contexts and perceptions about dressing, including institutional practices, may influence the experience and responses of survivors to SH.

Research Method

This study used a mixed methods design that consisted of policy review, survey, Focused Group Discussions (FGDs), In Depth Interviews (IDIs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The study sites were the three federal universities in Southwest Nigeria - the University of Ibadan (UI), the Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), and the University of Lagos (UNILAG). The target population were staff and students of the selected universities. The survey had 550 respondents from each of the three institutions with a total of 1 650 respondents. Proportional sampling was used to calculate the sex and the staff to student ratios for recruitment. This was to determine the correlates of SH.

A purposive sampling approach was adopted to identify, screen and select policy documents on sexual harassment across the three institutions. Also, six students and three staff Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted to explore the perspectives of the university community concerning SH, twelve In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) to explore the lived experiences of survivors of SH, and fifteen Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) to understand the perspectives of people who provide interventions to survivors^[7].

Key findings

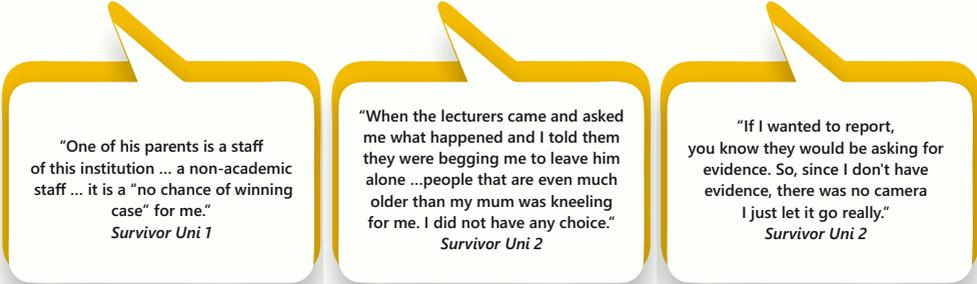
Policy Response to SH

All the policies provided a clear definition of SH and recognised a wide range of survivors and perpetrators. However, there were a number of issues noted. One policy did not explicitly state a timeline for the commencement and conclusion of investigations regarding sexual harassment complaints. This leaves room for investigations to drag, which may increase distress of both survivor and alleged perpetrator. Another policy lent credence to dressing as a cause of sexual harassment, and yet another mentioned indecent dressing as a form of SH. These statements may inadvertently lead to victim blaming. One policy predetermined a time limit for reportage. This is counterproductive as literature recognises that survivors process SH differently. Furthermore, for all policies, there is no clear mention of prevention and response to same-sex SH. Also, specific plans for training, evaluation, feedback, reflections, and regular checks for improvements need to be more clearly outlined within the documents.

Experiences of SH Survivors

The quantitative survey reported that perpetrators of SH by all respondents were more likely to be male. SH was positively correlated with high suicidality and low perception of campus safety for all respondents. Among males, SH was positively correlated with age, and suicidality. Low perception of campus safety was positively correlated with suicidality, anxiety and depression. Among females, a lower perception of campus safety was associated with suicidality.

The in-depth interviews found that the forms of the sexual harassment experienced ranged from physical touch to assault, attempted rape, and rape. The locations of the incidents included the perpetrator's abode, offices, lecture theatre, library and a party. Reasons for not formally reporting ranged from avoiding stigma and negative repercussions following reportage, a perception of not having enough evidence and being begged not to report to not wanting people to know, protecting the perpetrator and perception that the perpetrator would be protected by the system since they were from a high social class.



"One of his parents is a staff of this institution ... a non-academic staff ... it is a "no chance of winning case" for me."
Survivor Uni 1

"When the lecturers came and asked me what happened and I told them they were begging me to leave him alone ...people that are even much older than my mum was kneeling for me. I did not have any choice."
Survivor Uni 2

"If I wanted to report, you know they would be asking for evidence. So, since I don't have evidence, there was no camera I just let it go really."
Survivor Uni 2

However, most of the survivors shared their experiences of sexual harassment with friends, roommates, and family members. Survivors used several coping mechanisms ranging from talking with peers, joining social clubs, and heavy drinking. Consequences included not trusting others, blaming themselves, feeling sad, suicidal, angry and guilty.

"I have like suicidal thoughts, so I try as much as possible not to stay alone (hmm) I don't stay alone... I try to surround myself with people ... that is the only thing keeping me alive."

Survivor Uni 1

"I started drinking and then my school ... they party and all. So, I try to find two parties in a week... I end up crying though ... I just walk and then I get lost and then I call someone to come and pick me..."

Survivor Uni 2

"I cry sometimes because I feel like it is my fault and there is something that I could have done to change it but I did not so, I just have to just leave it and live with the pain and guilt." *Survivor Uni 3*

Perception around dressing and SH

From the quantitative survey, the perception of dressing as being provocative was significantly associated with a higher rating on expectation of SH. An individual who is perceived to be provocatively dressed is rated as having a higher likelihood for experiencing SH.

The interviews found that attribution of SH to indecent dressing was supported by most participants of the KII, all participants of the staff FGD, more male participants and about half of the female participants from the students FGD.

"...somebody who has dressed indecently has some motive in dressing like that. If you dress decently nobody will want to harass you."

KII Uni 2

"Indecent dressing can definitely lead to sexual harassment. The way our ladies dress these days is tempting. I think even the school need to put a rule or give them code of dressing so that that can check them. The way they dress can definitely tempt those that can't control themselves."

KII Uni 2

"In my opinion, dress code is important... because sometimes you would see some girls, in fact their dressing ... they would be nude on campus and they are some guys that when they see things like that, they get aroused easily, from there they would be planning on how to..."

FGD Uni 3

Institutional Response to SH

The quantitative survey reported that over half of the students and almost half of the staff considered the campus safe. About a third of students and a fourth of staff were aware of ASH policies. Over two thirds of the students and about half of the staff were not aware of the existence of support services within the institution. All the interviews showed that majority of participants were not aware of the anti-sexual harassment policy of the institution.

Conclusions

The antisexual harassment policies all use deterrence as an approach to SH prevention. While this is one effective strategy, it is more encompassing when it is combined with other strategies ^[8]. Survivors of SH often do not report these incidents because of the perceived poor environmental support to do so ^[9]. Moreover, survivors adopt adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms to deal with the emotional challenges associated with the experience of sexual harassment ^[9]. The study also showed that same-sex harassment also occurs in higher-education institutions in Nigeria ^[9].

Recommendations

The institutions need to improve prevention and response to SH by implementing and regularly revising policies and ensuring a transparent process of reportage and support. Stakeholders must be involved in policy development and review so that end service users will have an input into the process of reportage and support. Future research should focus on risk reduction and health promotion as alternative approaches to prevention of SH in higher education settings, factors that enable survivors to adopt adaptive coping strategies, universal promotion of healthy relationships and prosocial skills and persistent training for stakeholders on responding to disclosures of SH. Also, on provision of anonymous spaces for survivors to speak their truth, use of social media to register SH perpetrators, instituting punishment for perpetrators and paying attention to same-sex SH.

Main source of policy brief

The CARTA Shine Project. <https://ishineproject.net/>

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