

Sexual harassment of vulnerable people in the University no longer a taboo

Author: Ifeoma Obi . June 2020

Reilly et al (1986) investigated the sexual harassment of junior, senior, and graduate student women and men by male and female professors, graduate assistants, and staff to determine students' personal experiences in the classroom, outside the classroom, and in job-related settings. Usable survey responses were returned by 393 students, and incidents were detailed by 38 women and 9 men who noted their responses to the harassment and its effects. Attitudes toward and acceptance of sexually harassing behaviors were measured by a 10-item Tolerance for Sexual Harassment Inventory (TSHI). The frequency of initiation of sexual behaviors was also assessed.

In the research, more women than men reported being sexually harassed. Male and female perceptions of classroom behaviors were in agreement for most items. Men and women differed significantly on the TSHI, with men more tolerant of sexual harassment than women. Highly significant age differences were found, indicating a greater acceptance of sexual harassment by younger students. There was little difference between male and female students in the frequency of their initiating sexual behaviors (Reilly et al, 1986).

Moving closer to home, a research carried out by Zindi (1994) states that sexual experiences with lecturers occur in 98 percent of female varsity students. SEXUAL relations between students and lecturers at Zimbabwe's universities are unregulated, and have become an incontrovertible social issue. The majority of the students are very sexually active and some of them end up in convenience relationships with older men including their lecturers when they are desperate for fees or accommodation. In addition they cannot negotiate secure sex in many of those relationships.

Findings from a 2015 Female Student Network Trust baseline study show that 98 per cent of female students reported having experienced sexual harassment, mainly from male lecturers, and that cases of sexual harassment are under-reported in tertiary institutions. A 1994 study conducted by Professor Fred Zindi, "Sexual Harassment in Higher Learning Institutions," revealed that sexual harassment is widespread in higher learning institutions and much of it is committed by men.

In the background of Zimbabwe, the majority of reported cases of sexual assault in higher education institutions are committed by male lecturers and it has much to do with culture that pressures males to make their first step when they decide to enter a female relationship. A small number of people in power, such as lecturers, "trainers," and physicians, fail to recognize their moral obligation but try instead to manipulate the vulnerability of those under them (Zindi, 1994).

Sexual harassment is defined by law as requests for sexual favour, sexual advancement or other sexual behaviour, where firstly, submission is either explicitly or implicitly a condition affecting academic or

employment decisions; secondly, behavior is sufficiently severe or omnipresent to create an intimidating, hostile or repugnant environment; or thirdly, behaviour, despite the objection by the person to whom the conduct is directed sexual harassment persists.

Such behaviour, whether physical or verbal, should be viewed by the institutions as a violation of their code of conduct and should try to avoid these events and take disciplinary action when sexual harassment occurs. Evidence from interviews with many students enrolled in higher learning institutions shows that quite a number of students are involved in matters with lecturers with a lot being sexually harassed. Female students noted that they are usually not ready to report lecturers who ask for sexual favours for fear of victimization. The issue of power differentials comes into play in this case.

Zimbabwe is currently struggling with the high incidence of HIV and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) in universities and recurrent unchecked cases of sexual harassment may be a major contributing factor. According to the journal published by the University of Michigan (2019), it has been noticed that quite a number of female university students have a horrible slapdash knowledge of the difference between sexual assault and a respectable proposal and many others.

Female students say it is difficult to say no to a male lecturer who sexually harasses them because they fear that he will deal with them when marking their assignments and in-class tests. They claim that they are at university to get their degree. However, despite the challenge of sexual harassment by male lecturers and the temptation to get into sexual affairs with lecturers, some female students indicated that they were safe.

A final year student at one of the local universities noted that it is important to know one's limits and to play it safe, as well as avoid experimenting. "The purpose of coming to college is to attain a degree not several sexual encounters with lecturers. I have so far not had any challenges with all of my male lecturers," she explained. Other students indicated that they know the lecturers who make sexual advances towards female students and those who make nasty sexual comments and strive to avoid them but sadly others can not simply escape the hook. Not all male lecturers are guilty of this inappropriate behaviour. Some actually refuse to give their personal contacts to students preferring only to deal with their class representatives.

Sexual harassment has several effects on students, including loss of interest in studies, low self-esteem, stress, trauma and the development of male phobia, becoming the subject of gossip and speculation on campus. There are emotional effects – recent studies have shown that female victims of sexual harassment become vulnerable and tend to have intense anger at their perpetrators or all males surrounding them. Sexual harassment in most cases results in STIs, physical injuries and unplanned motherhood.

In view of the growing concern for the safety of female students at universities, higher and tertiary education authorities should ensure that all universities have a policy of sexual harassment in place. In practice, that would be a panacea. There should also be billboards at every higher learning institution warning students about the dangers of engaging in unsafe sex and getting into matters with lecturers. Lecturers should in turn urge female students to report all forms of sexual assault to the responsible

authority. As it is their duty to ensure the safety of students as their responsible guardians on campus.

References

1. Reilly, M.E., Lott, B. and Gallogly, S.M. (1986). Sexual harassment of university students. *Sex Roles*, 15(7–8), pp.333–358.
2. University of Michigan (2019). What is Sexual Harassment? | Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center. [online] Umich.edu. Available at: <https://sapac.umich.edu/article/63>.
3. Zindi, F. (1994). Archive of African Journals. [online] digital.lib.msu.edu. Available at: <http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/> [Accessed 16 Mar. 2020].

Ifeoma is a Business Analytics and Research Consultant at Industrial Psychology Consultants (Pvt) Ltd, a business management and human resources consulting firm.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/ifeoma-obi-92b4b9121/>

Phone: +263 242 481946-48/481950

Mobile: +263 775 187 283

Email: ifeoma@ipcconsultants.com

Main Website: www.ipcconsultants.com

<https://thehumancapitalhub.com/articles/Sexual-Harassment-Of-Vulnerable-People-In-The-University-No-Longer-A-Taboo>