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Sexual harassment: perceptions and coping strategies among undergraduate students in Nigeria

First submission: June 2003

This article reports on an investigation into the sexual harassment (SH) experiences, coping strategies and educational outcomes of undergraduate students from the University of Agriculture in south-western Nigeria. Questionnaires were administered to 290 undergraduate students. Female students were found to be the main targets of harassment and male students the typical perpetrators. Students perceived sexual propositions and dating propositions accompanied by threats as constituting severe forms of SH. There was no association between sexual harassment and students' satisfaction with the institution but the targets of harassment had a lower academic performance than non-harassed students.

Seksuele teistering: persepsies en hanteringstrategieë onder voorgraadse studente in Nigerië

Hierdie artikel doen verslag oor 'n ondersoek na ondervindings van seksuele teistering (ST), hanteringstrategieë en opvoedkundige uitkomst van voorgraadse studente van die Suid-Wes Nigeriese Landbou Universiteit. Vraelyste is aan 290 voorgraadse studente uitgedeel. Daar is bevind dat die hoofteikens van teistering vroulike studente is, en die tipiese skuldiges manlike studente is. Studente het seksuele voorstelle en afspraak waar dreigemente 'n rol speel as uiterste vorme van ST beskou. Daar was geen verband tussen seksuele teistering en studente se tevredenheid met die instansie nie, maar die akademiese prestasies van teikens van seksuele teistering was laer as dié van nie-geteisterde studente.

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Much attention has recently been paid to sexual harassment (SH) in the workplace and in academe by organisational scholars.¹ This is because SH has become a work-place stressor with huge costs to organisations in the form of management time devoted to investigations, legal fees, potential tort claims against employers, and/or perpetrators, absenteeism, turnover, lowered morale, and decreased productivity. At the individual level, studies indicate that SH could have a negative impact on the psychological well-being, job attitudes, and work behaviour of victims (Addley 1997; Drummond 2000; Munson *et al* 2001; Schneider *et al* 1997). For instance, female faculty members who had experienced harassment were less satisfied with their professional and personal relations with colleagues, viewed colleagues as incompetent, and were prone to stress (Dey *et al* 1996). Harassment can also adversely affect students' learning and academic performance (Riger 1991).

The controversies surrounding the meaning and/or perceptions of a wide range of behaviours considered as SH are well documented in the literature. There is consensus that any socio-sexual behavioural conduct that denigrates the dignity of females or males at work can be considered SH if: (a) it is intimidating, unwanted by or offensive to the target; (b) it creates a hostile work environment for the target, or (c) a person's rejection of, or submission to, such conduct on the part of employers or workers (including superiors or colleagues) is used explicitly or implicitly as the basis for a decision which affects that person's access to vocational training or employment, continued employment, promotion, salary or any other employment decisions (Addley 1997). Whereas the first two scenarios constitute a hostile work environment, since the behaviour in question is severe, the third scenario relates to *quid pro quo* harassment involving an abuse of authority by a supervisor, an employer or even a faculty member. The general consensus is that SH encompasses a wide range of socio-sexual behaviours such as: (a) verbal conduct of a sexual nature (unwelcome sexual or dating propositions accompanied by threats, offensive flirtation, lewd comments,

1 Cf Dey *et al* 1996; Gehlauf & Popovich 1994; Kelley & Parsons 2000; Malamut & Offermann 2001; Munson *et al* 2001; Rotundo *et al* 2001; Schneider *et al* 1997; Wayne *et al* 2001.

etc); (b) physical conduct of a sexual nature (brushing against the target, unwanted touching, pinching/patting sensitive places, etc); (c) non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature (conspicuous display of graffiti or pornographic materials for the target to see, sexually suggestive gestures, etc), and (d) sex-based conduct (gender-related derogatory remarks, sexually offensive comments, etc).

Research evidence suggests that there are individual differences in the perception of sexually harassing behaviour. Females are more likely than males to consider a broad range of behaviour as harassing. In situations involving power differentials, such as the supervisor-worker and faculty-student scenarios, behaviour is more likely to be perceived as harassing by both sexes if it is engaged in by the individual with higher status or formal authority over the target (Rotundo *et al* 2001).

Studies in the USA on the prevalence of SH in academe indicate that 19% of graduate females and 43% of administrators experience some form of harassment on campus (Kelley & Parsons 2000). Schneider *et al* (1997) reported that 63% of women working at university had experienced repeated harassment within a 24-month period. The apparent discrepancy between students and administrators in terms of the incidence of harassment is due to administrators' greater knowledge of what constitutes SH. There are few reported cases of females harassing males, and the perpetrators in most harassment situations have been males. In academe, 91% of offenders were male and only 9% female. Female undergraduate students often reported male students as offenders, while graduate females and staff identified male faculty as the main culprits (Kelly & Parsons 2000).

A significant area of interest in the research on SH is the manner in which victims (especially females) cope with harassment. Despite the negative consequences of SH, victims seldom take formal action against perpetrators, instead preferring to employ indirect and sometimes non-assertive strategies. These include avoiding and/or ignoring the offender, telling a friend and persuading themselves that the incident was not important. However, a few victims do opt for formal action against the perpetrator (Kelley & Parsons 2000; Malamut & Offermann 2001; Schneider *et al* 1997). Malamut & Offermann (2001) suggest that in an organisation perceived to be tolerant of SH, where the power differential between the perpetrator and the target is signi-

ficant, the victim is highly likely to employ social and avoidance-denial strategies. Riger (1991) observes that the preference for the informal means of dealing with harassing situations is flawed, since offenders are not censured by the organisation, and may thus view their behaviour as insignificant and harmless. Thus, organisational attitude is likely to encourage others to engage in such acts. It should be noted that the choice not to file formal actions against offenders has been seen as a result of potential negative outcomes for victims in terms of reprisals, embarrassment, not being taken seriously, and being blamed instead of the perpetrator (Davidson & Earnshaw 1990; Schneider 1987).

There is some indication that women are less tolerant of sexual harassment than men, probably because women are more often the victims, and men the perpetrators. Younger women are less tolerant of harassment than younger men (Ford & Donis 1996). This implies that the age of both potential victims and perpetrators is a crucial factor in the harassment situation. From this perspective and in the university environment, it can be assumed that female students will be more likely than male students to judge certain socio-sexual behaviours as offensive.

This study therefore attempts: (a) to determine whether certain socio-sexual behaviours constitute SH in the opinion of the focus group of students; (b) to assess the occurrence of these socio-sexual behaviours in the undergraduate sample; (c) to investigate the coping strategies employed by the victims of SH in the sample, and (d) to determine whether there is a relationship between SH and students' academic outcomes (both satisfaction with the institution and academic performance).

1. Method

1.1 Sample

The respondents were 80 male and 210 female undergraduate students studying agriculture-related courses, who volunteered to participate in the study at the University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria. Their ages ranged from 18 to 35 years, with a mean of 24.28 years ($SD =$

2.73 years). Only 5.2% (three males and twelve females) were married. Their mean academic performance (Cumulative Grade Point Average) was 2.70 ($SD = .76$) out of a possible maximum of 5. Two versions of the same questionnaire were administered to the male and female students when they visited the Students' Centre over a two-day period. The reason for administering two versions of the same questionnaire was that some of the items were gender-specific. Top-level administrators in the institution had endorsed the study and permitted the researchers to interview the students. The confidentiality of the students and the data was assured.

1.2 Research instrument

- Satisfaction with the institution

This was assessed by means of a self-constructed five-item scale. An exploratory principal component analysis showed the scale to be unidimensional, with the obtained factor explaining 49.40% variance in scores, and the eigenvalue being 2.47. The items, with their individual loadings on the factor, were: (a) I will be willing to recommend this institution to my friends as a good place to come and study (.78); (b) I am able to concentrate on my studies here because of the harassment-free environment of this institution (.76); (c) I am satisfied with the conduct of the lecturers (.72); (d) In general, I am satisfied with this institution (.66), and (e) Compared with other schools, I think this institution is relatively free of sexual harassment (.54). The goodness-of-fit test indicated that the single-factor solution was a good fit to the data ($\chi^2(5, N = 290) = 35.46; p < .00$). The response categories were in an ascending four-point format from strongly agree (4) to strongly disagree (1). The internal consistency reliability of the scale was ($\alpha = 0.73$).

- Perception of behaviour as sexual harassment

Table I shows the eight-item scale that was employed to assess this variable (Konrad & Gutek 1986). Agreement that the behaviour described in any of the items represented harassment was coded as Yes (2) and disagreement as No (1). The internal consistency reliability coefficient obtained for the scale was ($\alpha = 0.81$).

- Experience of SH

This section of the questionnaire employed a single item: Have you been sexually harassed before? It was coded: Yes (2) and No (1). Specific incidents of SH experienced by the respondents were then assessed by asking them to indicate with a tick which scenario(s) they had experienced. The incidents were later aggregated for each respondent in order to form an index of sexual harassment incidents (SHI). Finally, the perpetrators of SH were categorised as: head of department (1), male faculty (2), female students (3), male students (4), or non-academic staff (5), with respondents being able to indicate more than one option.

- Coping strategy

This was assessed via a five-item scale (Schneider *et al* 1997) (cf Table 3). Responses to the items were categorised as Yes (2) and No (1). The internal consistency reliability of this subscale was ($\alpha = 0.66$). Knowledge of grievance procedure was measured using a three-item scale adapted from Davidson & Earnshaw (1990). Items were reworded to improve their face validity. One sample item was: "There is a specified procedure for dealing with complaints of sexual harassment in the university". The internal consistency reliability of the subscale was ($\alpha = 0.82$).

- Students' academic performance

This was measured using students' own report of their cumulative grade point average. The highest score in the focal university is 5.0 (A).

1.3 Statistical analysis

A step-wise regression procedure was employed to determine the contribution of SHI to explaining variance in student performance and satisfaction. Because of their importance to students' outcomes, control variables such as age, sex, and marital status were included in the regression analysis. Other statistical tools employed in the study included *Chi*-square and student *t*-test analyses.

2. Results

2.1 Perception of behaviour as sexual harassment

Table 1 shows the relative and absolute frequencies of students' assessment of each of the vignettes as SH. The vignettes are ranked according to the percentage of students considering them sexually harassing. Students considered sexual and/or dating propositions accompanied by threats as severe forms of SH. Such propositions were ranked highest by 79.3% of respondents. Dating propositions with threats were ranked next (78.6%). Behaviours considered less severe instances of sexual harassment were ranked 3rd through 8th, with a significant decrease in the proportion of students who rated them as harassment. These were: looks or gestures meant to be sexual (43.1%), intimate questions (41.0%), sexual comments (40.0%), sexual touching (39.3%), pet names (38.9%), and hugging intended as sexual (37.2%).

Chi-square analyses were performed to test for possible gender differences in the perceptions of harassing behaviour. There was gender consensus on the perceptions of sexual and dating propositions accompanied by threats, sexual comments and pet names as constituting SH. However, significant gender differences were observed with respect to looks or gestures meant to be sexual $\chi^2(1, N = 290) = 7.73, p < .01$; intimate questions $\chi^2(1, N = 290) = 5.55, p < .05$; sexual touching $\chi^2(1, N = 290) = 4.01, p < .05$; and hugging intended as sexual $\chi^2(1, N = 290) = 5.71, p < .05$. In Table 1, more female than male students considered as SH looks or gestures meant to be sexual (females 48.1% : males 30%), intimate questions (females 45.2% : males 30%), sexual touching (females 42.9% : males 30%), and hugging (females 41.4% : males 26.3%).

Table 1: Proportion of respondents in agreement that certain types of behaviour constitute sexual harassment

Survey items Sexual harassment is:	Males (N = 80) f (%)	Females (N = 210) f (%)	Total (N = 290) f (%)	Rank
1. A member of staff of this institution asking you to have sexual relations with her/him with the understanding it would hurt your studies if you refused or help if you accepted.	59 (73.8)	171 (81.4)	230 (79.3)	1st
2. A member of staff asking you to befriend (date) him/her with the understanding it would hurt your studies if you refused or help if you accepted.	61 (76.3)	167 (79.5)	228 (78.6)	2nd
3. Looks or gestures of a sexual nature that were meant to be complimentary.	24 (30.0)	101 (48.1)**	125 (43.1)	3rd
4. Asking you intimate questions about your sex life.	24 (30.0)	95 (45.2)*	119 (41.0)	4th
5. Comments of a sexual nature that were meant to be complimentary.	28 (35.0)	88 (41.9)	116 (40.0)	5th
6. Being touched or pinched on the arm, shoulder, cheek, etc, that was meant to be sexual.	24 (30.0)	90 (42.9)*	114 (39.3)	6th
7. Being called pet names like darling, honey, (etc) by a member of staff.	32 (40.0)	80 (38.1)	112 (38.6)	7th
8. Being hugged that was meant to be sexual.	21 (26.3)	87 (41.4)*	108 (37.2)	8th

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

2.2 Experience of sexual harassment

The results indicate that 24.8% (N = 72) of the students have experienced SH. In agreement with the existing literature, a higher proportion of these were females (31.4%, N = 66, compared with 7.5%, N = 6 males). Harassed male students reported female students as the perpetrators, while female students who experienced SH ranked male students first as the main perpetrators of SH (74.2%). Other perpetrators in order of severity, according to female students, were male faculty members (60.6%, ranked 2nd), administrative staff (57.6%,

3rd), and heads of department (6.1%, 4th). Three married female students in the subsample of harassed females reported having been harassed by their heads of department (4.5%).

Table 2 reflects the forms of harassment suffered by respondents. Less severe forms of harassment experienced by both sexes are ranked 1st through 6th, while the more severe behaviours (sexual propositions with threats (54.5%) and dating propositions with threats (53%)) were experienced by female students, and ranked lowest, judging by the proportion of female students who experienced such forms of harassment. The most common harassment behaviours experienced by respondents were: looks and gestures meant to be sexual (63.9%), sexual comments (61.1%), and hugging intended as sexual (61.1%). Other SH behaviours experienced were sexual touching, being called pet names, and being asked intimate questions. These behaviours were indicated by the same proportion of students (59.7%). *Chi-square* results showed that more females than males experienced sexual touching ($\chi^2(1, N = 72) = 5.04; p < 0.05$) and sexual comments ($\chi^2(1, N = 72) = 5.44; p < 0.05$).

2.3 Coping strategies

None of the harassed students had complained formally to the university authorities. As indicated in Table 3, they chose to deal with the situation personally, employing a combination of direct assertive and indirect passive strategies in dealing with the harassing situations. Their direct assertive strategy was to confront the perpetrators and ask them to desist from the behaviour (females 82.8% and males 66.7%). The indirect strategies included staying away from the perpetrator(s) (females 81.3% and males 50.0%), confiding in friends, putting up with the situation, and ignoring the perpetrator(s). However, more female students (65.6%) than males (16.7%) chose the passive strategy of putting up with the situation ($\chi^2(1, N = 70) = 5.54; p < 0.05$). More female students also reported employing the strategy of staying away from their harasser(s) than did males.

2.4 Knowledge of grievance procedure

From the few number of responses to the scale items it appeared that the students were generally not aware of any grievance procedure for

Table 2: Forms of sexual harassment

Harassment incidents	Males (N = 6) f (%)	Females (N = 66) f (%)	Total (N = 72) f (%)	Rank
1. Looks or gestures of a sexual nature that were meant to be complimentary.	2 (33.3)	44 (66.7)	46 (63.9)	1st
2. Comments of a sexual nature that were meant to be complimentary	1 (16.7)	43 (65.2)*	44 (61.1)	2nd
3. Being hugged that was meant to be sexual	3 (50.0)	41 (62.1)	44 (61.1)	3rd
4. Being touched or pinched on the arm, shoulder, cheek, etc, that was meant to be sexual.	1 (16.7)	42 (63.6)*	43 (59.7)	4th
5. Being called pet names like darling, honey, (etc) by a member of staff.	2 (33.3)	41 (62.1)	43 (59.7)	5th
6. Asking you intimate questions about your sex life.	5 (83.3)	38 (57.6)	43 (59.7)	6th
7. A member of staff of this institution asking you to have sexual relations with him/her with the understanding it would hurt your studies if you refused or help if you accepted	-- --	36 (54.5)	36 (50.0)	7th
8. A member of staff asking you to befriend (date) him/her with the understanding it would hurt your studies if you refused or help if you accepted	-- --	35 (53.0)	35 (48.6)	8th

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

dealing with SH in the institution. This may be because the institution has neither a formal SH code nor an established grievance procedure for handling SH claims. An aggrieved female student is expected to lodge a formal complaint with the Student Affairs Office if the SH claim is strong enough to warrant its investigation. Further research revealed that there is no official record of reported incidents of SH of students in the institution (Personal communication with the institution's registrar).

Although most of the students were unaware of any grievance procedure on their campus, the few responses to this question did indicate that SH is treated as a disciplinary offence by the institution

(40.0%), that there is a specified procedure for dealing with harassment (35.5%), and that “SH complaints are dealt with sympathetically by the university” (33.1%).

Table 3: Coping strategies employed by victims

Coping strategies	Males (N = 6) f (%)	Females (N = 64) f (%)	Total (N = 70) f (%)	Rank
1. I told the person I didn't like what he/she was doing to me	4 (66.7)	53 (82.8)	57 (81.4)	1st
2. I always try to stay away from the offending person	3 (50.0)	52 (81.3)	55 (78.6)	2nd
3. I confided in my friends	3 (50.0)	50 (78.1)	53 (75.7)	3rd
4. I simply put up with the situation	1 (16.7)	42 (65.6)*	43 (61.4)	4th
5. I simply ignored the person	2 (33.3)	17 (26.6)	19 (27.1)	5th

* $p < 0.05$

2.5 Students' academic outcomes

It is widely believed that, even at relatively low frequency or intensity, SH impacts negatively on targets in the workplace and even in academe. Since this study employed cross-sectional data, it would be impossible to present a cause-effect linkage between SH and the academic outcomes of students. The intention here is to show that SH covaries with student performance and satisfaction. Each of the two outcome variables was treated in turn as the criterion variable, with the other as a predictor variable.

Regression analyses indicated that neither the SHI nor the control variables (age, marital status, sex and performance) were predictors of students' satisfaction with the institution. A *t*-test analysis was performed to determine if there was a significant difference between the satisfaction levels of non-harassed (14.83, *SD* = 2.51) and harassed students (14.23, *SD* = 1.95). The results were not significant ($t(288) = 1.83; p > .05$). In Table 4, where performance is the criterion variable, only SHI ($b = -.44; p < .00$) entered the regression model, explaining 18.9% of the variance. The *t*-test indicated that harassed

students (2.38, $SD = .64$) had lower academic performance levels than non-harassed students (2.81, $SD = .77$), ($t(288) = 4.20; p < .00$).

Table 4: Results of stepwise regression analysis

Variables	Performance	
	β	t
1. Age	.02	.19
2. Marital status	-.10	-1.03
3. Sex	-.10	-.92
4. Student satisfaction	.17	1.68
5. SHI	-.44	-4.38***
6. Coping strategy index	-.12	-1.23
(Constant)	23.81***	
R^2 44.7%		
R^2 19.9% (adj = 18.9%)		
F 19.88***		
S.E .62		

*** $p < .000$

3. Discussion

The study results indicated that SH was present in the institution studied, with female students being the typical targets. Harassed female students reported male peers as the most common perpetrators, though male faculty members, heads of department, and non-academic staff members were also involved. A few married female students also reported being harassed by their heads of department. This may be due to the small number of married women in the sample ($N = 3$). The few male students who reported being harassed indicated female students as the perpetrators.

Consonant with the existing literature, male and female respondents agreed that sexual propositions and dating propositions accompanied by threats constituted a severe form of sexual harassment (Konrad & Gutek 1986; Popovich *et al* 1986; Rotundo *et al* 2001; Terpstra & Baker 1987). Less severe forms included looks or gestures meant to be sexual, intimate questions, sexual comments, sexual touching, the use of pet names, and hugging intended as sexual.

Students who were targets of harassment did not file formal complaints, but chose instead to employ either assertive or indirect, less assertive strategies in dealing with the situation. This may have been due to the absence of an established SH code or grievance procedure in the university. Another explanation may be that since male fellow students were involved, female students felt less inclined to pursue a formal line of action. They may have believed that assertively rejecting the behaviour would solve the problem, a strategy which must have worked, as they did not then have recourse to institutional intervention.

No significant association was found between SH and student satisfaction with the university. This may indicate either that harassment in the institution was not of an intensity to affect students significantly, or that since the female students identified male fellow-students as typical perpetrators of harassment, they may not have been greatly concerned. Although the study did not determine any causal link between SH and academic performance, SH was found to be associated with lower academic performance. (This argument may only hold good for female students.) Another explanation for the common variance between SH and performance could possibly be that faculty members selectively preyed upon female students whose academic performance was weak.

The results of this study reveal a need for the university's management to show more concern for its climate, with a view to fostering an environment conducive to students' realising their full cognitive potential. It is imperative that the university management put in place a formal policy on SH in the institution. The policy must spell out the meaning of SH and highlight the specific socio-sexual behaviours in which staff and students must not engage. The It must be given wide coverage through the institution's communication channels, to make staff and students sufficiently aware of the enacted policy. Finally, a grievance procedure for investigating SH and punishing offenders should be established.

This study revealed several limitations. One potential limitation is the extent to which the results of the focal institution can be generalised to the public university institutions in Nigeria. However, the findings support earlier studies (cf Ladebo 2003) and this study may

serve as a starting-point for further research on SH in the nation's tertiary institutions. Secondly, the study employed a single-item measure of harassment (with a dichotomous response), which did not attempt to consider the severity of harassment, its chronological or academic level, or its frequency. Thirdly, there was no examination of the extent to which incidents of sexual harassment were enacted by the various classes of harassers (faculty members, male students, non-academic staff, and heads of department). Fourthly, this study did not ask the victims of harassment their reasons for not taking formal action against offenders, but instead dealing with the situation personally. Future investigations will need to focus on the academic levels at which female students are most vulnerable, the disciplines (or departments) involved, and the categories of students (undergraduates or graduates).

Furthermore, the role played by the personality types of the students as they affect students' perception of and reaction to sexually harassing incidents calls for study. Lastly, systematic investigation is needed to examine the influence of the personal characteristics of harassers, for example whether a married male faculty member is less likely than an unmarried one to engage in harassing behaviour. Other personal factors include religious belief and age. The rationale for a consideration of the personal characteristics of a male faculty member is premised on research findings that certain socio-cultural factors prevalent in the South-Western part of Nigeria encourage males to have multiple sexual partners. According to Orubuloye *et al* (1997), the sexuality of the Yoruba² male precludes faithfulness to a single partner. From this perspective, therefore, it can be hypothesised that some male faculty members are likely to seek sexual or dating partners among female students since they are within easy reach.

2 The Yoruba are a major tribe occupying the southwest part of Nigeria.

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