



Perceptions and Experiences of Sexual Harassment Among Health Care Workers in a Nigerian Health Care Institution

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Sexual harassment is a major issue of universal discourse. However, the degree of attention to the issue is not universal because of cultural, economic and perception of sexual harassment differences. This study provides a description of perceptions and experiences of sexual harassment of health care workers in a Nigerian health care institution. **Method:** A questionnaire was administered to health workers in a University Teaching Hospital located in a metropolitan city in the South-South region of Nigeria. **Results and Conclusion:** A hundred and ten questionnaires were analyzed. The majority (92.7%) of respondents were females. Respondents ages ranged from 18 to 64 years. The 45-64 age group accounted for

36% of respondent followed by 18-25 age group (26%). Of the respondents, 62.7% were married and 30.9% single. Seventy percent of respondents were in the nursing profession. Fifty four (49.1%) respondents affirmed that there was enough societal awareness of sexual harassment. Although 19% of respondents reported having experienced sexual harassment, there appears to be discrepancies in the interpretation and/or perception of sexual harassment in this group. Some respondents who said they had never been victims of sexual harassment reported they had been sexually harassed and identified forms of sexual harassment they had experienced. Results also show that there is victim-blaming among this group with 50% of respondents believing “provocative” dressing is an invitation for harassment. A greater number of participants from different backgrounds and walks of life should be used to validate the findings in this study.

Keywords: Culture, Perception, Sexual harassment.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is an age-old phenomenon whose consequences have become recognized, acknowledged and legislated in many parts of the world especially in the more Technologically Advanced Countries (TAC). Sexual harassment refers to persistent and unwanted sexual advances that threaten and impact the mental, physical and emotional wellbeing of the victim irrespective of the outcome. While the discourse and litigation of sexual harassment cases in countries like the United States and United Kingdom have become a staple on the social menu, many Less Technologically Advanced Countries (LTAC), especially on the continent of Africa, are still grappling with the concept of sexual harassment which is complicated by historical, cultural and social factors. The LTAC in general, and Nigeria in particular, at this point in time, remains a bastion of inequality where men and women are not of equal social status. This is entrenched by the patriarchal, polygamous and economic situations that continue to put women at a disadvantage in the power-play of equality. Ige and Adeleke (2012) have reported the connection between culture and the perception of sexual encounter between females and males. They have suggested that there is need to define sexual harassment and for various Human Resource departments to redefine the conditions of working women in Nigeria in order to provide a conducive work environment.

The media is replete with stories and investigations into the prevalence of sexual harassment in Nigeria, both in academia (Omonijo, et. al, 2013; Akinbode and Ayodeji, 2018) and the workplace and professions, (Johnson, 2010; Aina-Palemo et. al. 2019). Ekore (2012) has looked at perception of what acts constitute sexual harassment and found differences between male and female students. These studies have also concluded that women are predominantly on the receiving end of sexual harassment and are disparately impacted as employees (Haruna et all, 2016). However, not much had been done to investigate working women's view of sexual harassment, given the predominant cultural context. There is anecdotal evidence that many believe sexual harassment is a result of the victims' behavior (victim blaming and shaming). The goal of this study is to provide a description of sexual harassment perceptions and experiences of health care workers in a Nigerian health care institution. Perceptions in conjunction with attitudes about sexual harassment are important preludes in shaping reactions to and finding solutions to the abuses. It is true that cases of sexual harassment are seldomly reported and studies have shown various reasons why victims do not report abuses (Sable, et.al, 2006; Tillman, et al, 2010; Zinzow and Thompson, 2011). We believe that wrong perceptions, real or imagined, together with misunderstanding enables the perpetuation of this "crime". Therefore, there is a need for collective actions based on a purposeful understating by all stakeholders in order to curb the scourge of sexual harassment on the society as a whole and among females in particular.

METHOD

This investigation was conducted at a teaching hospital in a metropolitan city in South-South region of Nigeria. Having been introduced by an executive of the institution, a senior Public Health Nurse was identified as the liaison between the researchers and the employees of the teaching hospital. Her major role was the administration (distribution and retrieval) of the study questionnaire. The procedure for questionnaire administration was discussed with the liaison.

A modified (for cultural sensitivity and context) questionnaire from a previously published study on sexual harassment (Johnson, 2013) was administered to the health workers in the teaching hospital. Health care professionals has been reported elsewhere as one of the professions with the highest cases of sexual harassment (Dult,1982). Having observed all research protocol including consent that was duly affirmed by participants, copies of the

questionnaire were distributed to the employees who were present at work on the day of administration in July 2019. This represented a convenient sample with no subsequent inquiry into other employees who may have missed the opportunity to participate. Participants were instructed not to have any identifier on the questionnaire for anonymity. A working definition of sexual harassment was provided on the questionnaire in order to prevent misinterpretation of the phenomenon. It is the authors' anecdotal experience that sexual harassment means different things to different people in the Nigerian culture. The questionnaire was collected on the day of administration and the following day.

The questionnaire consisted of twenty-three items including demographic information, sexual harassment knowledge and related behavior. Also included were opinion items about sexual harassment using a Likert scale of 1 (strongly agree/definitely YES) to 5 (strongly disagree/definitely NO). Personal experience, knowledge about harasser and comments about sexual harassment made up the rest of the questionnaire. The data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

RESULTS

Of the one hundred and fifteen (115) questionnaires returned, one hundred and ten (110) were useable; with five missing a significant part of the responses and one determined to be a duplicate of another. One hundred and two (92.7%) of the respondents were females, five (4.5%) males and 3 (2.7%) did not respond. Table 1 shows the age break down, with 36.4% (40) of the respondents in the 45-64 age group.

Table 1: Age distribution of respondent

		Age			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18-25	32	29.1	29.1	29.1
	26-34	15	13.6	13.6	42.7
	35-44	23	20.9	20.9	63.6
	45-64	40	36.4	36.4	100.0
	Total	110	100.0	100.0	

Table 2: Positions/Ranks of Participants

		Position and Rank			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Student Nurse	21	19.1	19.4	19.4
	Student Midwife	6	5.5	5.6	25.0
	Nursing Officer I	5	4.5	4.6	29.6
	Nursing Officer II	10	9.1	9.3	38.9
	Senior Nursing Officer	17	15.5	15.7	54.6
	RN/RM	6	5.5	5.6	60.2
	Principal Nursing Officer	12	10.9	11.1	71.3
	Data Processing Assistant	1	.9	.9	72.2
	Assistant Director	7	6.4	6.5	78.7
	Chief Nursing Officer	21	19.1	19.4	98.1
	Chief Nursing Tutor	1	.9	.9	99.1
	Senior Social Worker	1	.9	.9	100.0
	Total	108	98.2	100.0	
Missing	System	2	1.8		
Total		110	100.0		

Of those responding, 62.7% were married and 30.9% single. The professional ranks or positions of the respondents varied but 71% identified with the nursing profession while the rest were professionally employed at different ranks and positions within the health care establishment. (Table 2).

Major findings

- Fifty four (49%) of respondents affirmed that there was enough societal awareness of or publicity about sexual harassment. The rest (50.1%) either disagree or had no opinion about sexual harassment publicity.
- Due to the varying views about and interpretation of sexual harassment, the authors deliberately used two similar statements on the questionnaire to solicit participants' experiences: (a) as an opinion on a the Likert scale "have you been a victim of sexual harassment"?; and (b) "have you been sexually harassed"? To the former, 19.1% (21) said definitely yes (Strongly agree) or yes (Agree) and 83 (85.4%) said no. But to the later question, "have you been sexually harassed", 21.8% (24) said yes and 70% (77) said no.

- Of the 24 respondents who reported that they had been sexually harassed, six (6) said they had not been victims; whereas of the 21 who reported that they had been victims, 4 said they had not been sexually harassed (Table 3). This incongruity may be a result of the misconception or misunderstanding of the true concept of sexual harassment.

Table 3: Cross tabulation between Having Been a Victim of Sexual Harassment and Having Been Sexually Harassed

	Have You Been Sexually Harassed?				
		Yes	No	Neutral/DK	Total
Have you been a Victim of Sexual Harassment?	Yes	17	4	0	21
	No	6	69	4	79
	Neutral/DK	1	2	0	3
		24	75	4	103

- Fifty two percent (52%) of those reporting having been harassed are singles, 43% married and 4% widowed.
- Overwhelming majority of respondents reported knowing persons who had been harassed (98.2%) and knowing a harasser (95.4%).
- Paradoxically, those reporting that they had never been harassed indicated various types of harassment experiences by definition, to include teasing remarks (20), sex jokes (4), repeated request for dates (8), physical touch (1) and request to give sexual favors (1). Table 4 presents the breakdown.

Table 4: Cross tabulation of types of sexual harassment by ever been harassed

Types of sexual harassment Experienced											
	Teasing Remarks	Sex Jokes	Repeated Request for dates	Propositions for Sexual Relations	Physical Touch	Forced to Have Sex	Request for Sexual Favor	Offered Money for Sex	Other (not specified)	Total	

Ever Been Harass ed	Yes	8	1	4	1	3	4	1	1	1	24
	No	20	4	8	0	1	0	1	0	0	34
	DK	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
	Tot al	31	5	12	1	4	4	2	1	1	61

- Likewise, Table 5 shows the breakdown of responses to the types of harassment experienced when the question “ever been harassed” was asked differently – “have you ever been a victim of sexual harassment”. This shows the semantic interpretation of sexual harassment in this culture.

Table 5: Cross tabulation of types of sexual harassment by ever been a victim of harassment

		Types of sexual harassment Experienced									
Ever Been a victim of sexual Harass ment		Teasin g Rema rks	Sex Jok es	Repea ted Reque st for dates	Propositi ons for Sexual Relation s	Physi cal Touc h	Forc ed to Hav e Sex	Requ est for Sexu al Favo r	Offer ed Mone y for Sex	Other (not specifi ed)	Tot al
	Yes	6	1	4	1	3	3	1	1	1	21
	No	23	4	7	0	1	1	1	0	0	37
	DK	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
	Tot al	32	5	11	1	4	4	2	1	1	61

- Seventy-eight (71%) respondents said they do not find sexually suggesting jokes funny and would not laugh at them.
- While 10% of respondents would not report cases of sexual harassment, about 18.2% reported knowing victims who were afraid to report incidents.
- Fifty percent (50%) and 17.3% of respondents respectively, believe or remain neutral that a female’s dressing style, like wearing a short skirt “is asking to be harassed”.

- Physicians were identified as most likely harasser (42%) with 34% of victims reporting having been harassed by them in the past 12 months. In this culture, physicians are usually regarded as bosses in a hospital setting. Nineteen (17.2%) reported knowing bosses who are harassers and an equal number have been asked for sex by their bosses. However, 6.3% and 20% respectively reported having sexual feelings towards or would go out on a date with their bosses.

DISCUSSION

It appears that the problem of sexual harassment is more rampant than people care to admit. While roughly 20% of respondent reported having been harassed, overwhelming majority of respondents reported knowing persons who had been harassed (98.2%) and knowing a harasser (95.4%). It shows that there is an underreporting of sexual harassment in this group as has been documented by other investigations (Head, Sorensen & Pincus, 1995; Mensah, 2019). This could be explained, though speculative, by the misunderstanding of the definition of sexual harassment on the one hand, the social stigma, reprisal by a “superior” and victim-blaming on the other. Although 80% in this group said they would report cases of sexual harassment, only about 18% of those who had experienced sexual harassment complained to, not the authority, but friends and family members about their experiences. Most of them reported been shocked, warned the harasser, leave the seen or ignored and did nothing; perhaps for the lack of structural mechanisms to address such transgression without being subsequently victimized. The fact that 20% of the respondents indicated they would date their bosses, reporting any misconduct in the “relationship” will be viewed with suspicion; an indication of, perhaps, the lack of understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment. It was only on July 7, 2020 that the Nigerian Senate finally passed a bill titled “*Bill on the Prohibition of Sexual Harassment in Tertiary Institutions*” that was first introduced in 2016 (The Guardian Newspaper July 7, 2020). It should be noted that this Bill is narrowly focused on tertiary educational institutions only. This has led many people to question the sincerity and seriousness of the Legislators’ intent. Unsubstantiated rumor has it that the Bill was promulgated by the close relationship of a university sexual harassment victim to a Legislator. Nevertheless, a comprehensive legislation that applies to every sector of the society is needed to cause a cultural shift in attitudes, responses and the ambiguity to sexual harassment.

This survey attempted to explore this perceived misunderstanding by using two different phrases to ask the same question: “have you been a victim of sexual harassment” and “have you been sexually harassed”. Twenty five percent (6/24) of those who reported having been harassed indicated they were not victims of sexual harassment and 23.5% (4/17) of victims of harassment said they had not been sexually harassed. Could this be a question of the cultural semantics of the term sexual harassment? Anecdotal evidence suggests that victimization in this culture usually refers to the physicality of sexual harassment, the extreme of which is rape, and not the subtle indications of the behavior. This phenomenon is further amplified by the fact that 50% of respondents who indicated they had never been harassed and 46% of those who reported they had not been victims of sexual harassment respectively, said they had experienced teasing remarks, sex jokes, repeated request for dates, physical touch and request to give sexual favor. It is therefore clear that the concept and context of what constitutes (by definition) sexual harassment is not uniformly regarded among the respondents in this survey and indeed, in this patriarchal, polygamous and economically male-dominated society.

One out of the five male respondents in this survey reported having been sexually harassed and did nothing about it. The gender of the offender in this case is not identified. However, the same result (1:5) was found in a South African study of perceptions and occurrence of sexual harassment among male student athletes with male coaches (Van Niekerk and Rzygula, 2010). The authors contend that if the harasser is a female (female perpetrator-male victim), the behavior may not, generally, be considered harassment by males in this culture but regarded as a “sexual advancement” to which they (males) may accede, depending on the circumstance; and reporting of such may be met with suspicion and ridicule.

The effects of sexual harassment are well known and documented (Hotelling,1991; McLaughlin, Uggen, & Blackstone, 2017). Frustration, anger, fear, helplessness, depression and humiliation were some of the emotions experienced by respondents who indicated they had been sexually harassed in this survey. In a culture with no established laws against sexual harassment, victims are left to deal with the outcomes of harassment without an official protocol for redress.

CONCLUSION

The prevalence of sexual harassment in this group mirrors what has been reported in other investigation. More participants from all works of life should be surveyed to get the true extent of the incidence, attitudes and perception of sexual harassment in this society. However, it is clear that the concept of sexual harassment is not uniformly regarded in this group and various institutions, not only in academia, need to embark on a campaign to further the awareness and understanding of the true meaning of the sexual harassment. Furthermore, policies should be formulated to provide avenues for victims' redress and hold perpetrators accountable. These and other concerns are echoed in the comments made by participants in this study and provide a glimpse into their attitudes, perceptions and responses to sexual harassment. Participants' comments which may be more telling than responses to the survey questions are provided in table 6.

Table 6 - Participants' comments

1. Most people think sexual harassment is only physical contact but it's certainly not. Hence, efforts should be made to sensitize people on this matter so that majority can identify it early enough and protect themselves from much harm.	2. Sexual harassment should be looked into and appropriate measures put into place to correct them.
3. Indecent dressing should be discouraged. Late night keeping should also be discouraged.	4. I feel anyone who sexually harasses a person should be duly punished and brought to justice.
5. Sexual harassment of any sort shouldn't be condoned for any reason. Therefore, strict measures must be taken to put a stop to it. The victim should be given opportunity to share and discuss their pain and seek justice.	6. I suggest that anyone who is found to engage in sexual harassment be brought to book and could be relieved of his position in the management. I also suggest that individuals should be well informed about sexual harassment and a body should be established so that people can run to when they feel insecure.
7. Public enlightenment on sexual awareness and how to present it.	8. Sexual harassment can be carried on a small child who has no idea of what is being done to her and she subconsciously blocks the memory which she only remembers upon a trigger. My own experience. I can remember 15 years later.
9. Improving awareness on sexual harassment and enforcement of laws to punish individuals who	10. Improve the awareness of sexual harassment and laws should be passed for

break the law.	defaulters.
11. Government should take it serious and they should make a law concerning it. The person that harasses people should be jailed.	12. Culprit should be arrested and punished.
13. Sexual harassment bill should be passed in the house of Assembly to put a stop to the act.	14. A major key to avoiding sexual harassment is to avoid sending mixed messages like flirting, dressing provocatively, being alert as to dangerous environment especially at night and setting appropriate boundaries with friends of the opposite sex.
15. Please our minors should be given health education on how to recognize sexual harassment and to report it at the earliest stage before it is actualized.	16. If any one happens to be sexually harassed, they should report to the nearest hospital immediately who will advice them on what to do.
17. Ladies (young or old) should dress decently and behave in a respectable manner so they will not be vulnerable to sexual harassment.	18. Females especially should be encouraged to dress proper always and be well disciplined both in/out of their homes. Avoid night movement and above all face their studies well so that they won't give room to their teachers. Also female staff should be well behaved and not throw themselves to their male supervisors. Thanks.
19. This topic is an interesting topic. Law should be passed to put those who are involved in this act under control.	20. Due to the country's economic recession, sexual harassment is likely to be on the increase especially amongst female staff from their supervisor.
21. – People should make discipline a priority	- Parents should inculcate good morals and values in their children from cradle to adolescence age
- Good dress sense at the work place will help to prevent sexual harassment and	- Fear of God by both the subordinate and the supervisor is very important.
22. Anyone who harass a person should be punished greatly.	23. Lecturers should stop harassing their students sexually, they should be given their pass mark if they answer their questions well during exams.
24. Sexual harassment should be well	25. Sexual harassment in its different forms

publicized for better awareness.	should be taught in secondary schools and work places.
26. Sexual harassment depends on individual personality, not profession.	27. Sexual harassment is a reality in our society, offices should be designed in such a way that others can see through.
28. Most people will not own up to sexual harassment because of the stigma attached.	29. Dress the way you should be addressed.
30. There should be adequate awareness and victims should not be bullied about it. Women should be encouraged to speak up and those in authority should give it a priority.	31. A bill should be passed into law by the senate regarding sexual harassment, that anybody that does that should be punished.
32. Sexual harassment is a thing (problem) that is popular in Nigeria. Even little children are being sexually harassed by old people (men). I think the government and NGO should do something about it.	33. Awareness on what constitutes sexual harassment is required.
34. Life imprisonment for offenders no matter the age.	35. The media should take it upon themselves to give awareness to the public on sexual harassment. Thank you.
36. There should be a better enlightenment. Make it mandatory.	37. Any confirmed sexual harassment should be punished accordingly.

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