

Understanding the Dynamics of Sexual Harassment in Higher Learning Institutions: Experiences and Recommendations from Midlands State University, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the pervasive issue of sexual harassment at Midlands State University (MSU), aiming to illuminate the experiences of affected individuals and identify systemic barriers hindering reporting mechanisms. Utilising semi-structured interviews, data were gathered from a diverse sample of 16 participants across three MSU campuses Harare, Gweru, and Zvishavane including male and female students and staff from various faculties. Through thematic analysis, key themes emerged, revealing a significant gender disparity in harassment experiences, with female participants reporting higher frequencies of inappropriate behaviors such as unwanted sexual advances, sexist remarks, and inappropriate physical contact. The findings indicate a troubling culture of sexual harassment within the university, underpinned by a lack of awareness regarding university policies and perceived barriers to reporting incidents. This study underscores the urgent need for enhanced intervention strategies and institutional accountability. Recommendations for developing a comprehensive sexual harassment prevention model include improving awareness and educational programs, refining reporting mechanisms, strengthening victim support services, and fostering a culture of bystander intervention. The research contributes valuable insights for creating a safer and more inclusive academic environment, positioning MSU as a potential leader in addressing sexual harassment in higher learning institutions.

Keywords: Sexual harassment, Higher education, Reporting mechanisms, Gender disparity

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Sexual harassment is a pervasive issue that significantly affects the academic and professional experiences of both students and staff members in higher learning institutions worldwide. The dynamics of this problem are complex, influenced by various factors that impact the prevalence of harassment as well as the reporting behaviors of victims. Research consistently highlights the prevalence of sexual harassment within educational settings. For instance, Jagath (2023) indicates that a considerable proportion of students face harassment during their academic journeys, which can lead to long-term implications for their mental health, academic performance, and overall university experience. Scholars emphasise the critical need for comprehensive policy frameworks and effective reporting systems that encourage victims to come forward without fear of stigma or retaliation, acknowledging the intricate nature of sexual harassment. Previous studies have demonstrated variability in awareness of existing sexual harassment policies among university populations. Cantalupo (2014) notes that underreporting of incidents often occurs because many students lack knowledge about their rights and the available reporting channels. Additionally, ignorance concerning reporting procedures fosters a culture of silence around harassment, perpetuating the issue and obstructing necessary interventions. Chadwick and Waters (2021) assert that collaboration among students and university staff, can enhance campus safety through multi-stakeholder approaches. Nevertheless, significant gaps in institutional responses to allegations of sexual misconduct remain, highlighting an urgent need for accountability and ongoing improvement.

Rates of sexual harassment in higher learning institutions

Sexual harassment remains a pervasive issue in higher learning institutions worldwide, impacting the academic and professional experiences of both students and staff. Research by McLaughlin, Uggen, and Blackstone (2017) reveals that approximately 62% of female students experience some form of sexual harassment during their college years, with unwanted sexual advances, comments, and even assault being alarmingly prevalent. The normalisation of harassment across various cultural contexts contributes to the significant hurdles victims face when reporting incidents (Worke, Koricha, & Debelew, 2021). Reviews by Chadwick and Waters (2021) emphasise that sexual harassment undermines institutional integrity and students' academic success, thereby necessitating robust accountability measures and effective reporting mechanisms. Studies conducted in Africa revealed that issues of sexual harassment in higher learning institutions acquire unique dimensions that are often influenced by socio-cultural beliefs and institutional frameworks. According to Nkrumah, (2023), nearly 80% of female students in several African universities report experiences of sexual harassment during their university time. Moreover, in Zimbabwe, the prevalence of sexual harassment in higher learning institutions is indicative of similar trends observed in other regions. A comparative study conducted by Mawere (2019) revealed that a significant portion of female students reported experiences of sexual harassment across various state universities in Zimbabwe. The normalisation of such behavior correlates with socio-economic challenges that deter victims from coming forward, alongside inadequate institutional responses that fail to provide necessary support. Nkrumah (2023) highlights how the culture of silence is exacerbated by a lack of awareness regarding sexual harassment policies and ineffective reporting mechanisms; where many students hesitate to report incidents due to fears of backlash and victim-blaming. This situation is further complicated by infrequent institutional accountability, where little action is taken against offenders, thereby creating a daunting environment for potential victims.

Consequently, the prevalence of sexual harassment in higher education is a pressing global concern that requires immediate and multifaceted approaches to enact meaningful change. Efforts must focus on enhancing policy frameworks, improving awareness and reporting mechanisms, and fostering a culture of accountability to protect the rights and welfare of all students and staff members in educational settings. The findings from various studies illustrate an urgent need to address the complex dynamics surrounding sexual harassment, particularly in Africa, where socio-cultural and institutional factors play a significant role in perpetuating the cycle of harassment.

Impact of sexual harassment

Sexual harassment has far-reaching effects that extend beyond the immediate experiences of victims, significantly influencing their mental health, academic performance, and overall well-being. Victims often experience a range of psychological issues, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These mental health challenges can severely hinder academic achievement, leading to lower grades, increased dropout rates, and an overall reluctance to engage fully in campus life (McLaughlin, Uggen, & Blackstone, 2017). The emotional toll of harassment can result in a pervasive sense of fear and isolation, making it difficult for victims to participate in educational and social activities. Research has indicated that the impact of sexual harassment transcends individual experiences, affecting the broader campus climate and institutional integrity. A culture that tolerates or minimises harassment can create an environment characterised by distrust and hostility, ultimately diminishing the quality of education for all students (Nkrumah, 2023). Moreover, institutions that fail to address incidents of sexual harassment not only risk losing their reputation but may also face legal consequences, including lawsuits and financial liability due to their negligence in protecting their students and staff (Cortina & Berdahl, 2008). Furthermore, in most African universities the impact of sexual harassment is compounded by socio-economic factors and cultural attitudes towards gender and power dynamics. Women and marginalised groups often bear the brunt of harassment, leading to systemic inequalities in educational attainment and professional opportunities (Mawere, 2019). Therefore, the interrelation between harassment and broader societal issues demands a comprehensive approach, aiming not only to address individual incidents but also to create a safe and inclusive educational

environment for all. This includes creating supportive reporting systems, providing mental health resources, and fostering a culture of accountability that encourages victims to speak out without fear.

Barriers to reporting sexual harassment

Despite the prevalence of sexual harassment, many victims do not report their experiences. Several significant barriers deter individuals from coming forward, which can perpetuate a culture of silence around this issue. Understanding these barriers is crucial for developing effective reporting mechanisms and support systems.

Fear of retaliation

The fear of retaliation is one of the most significant barriers preventing victims from reporting sexual harassment, as survivors often worry that their perpetrators may retaliate against them, leading to worsening harassment, social backlash, or academic repercussions. This fear is particularly pronounced in environments where power dynamics exist, such as hierarchical institutions where offenders may hold authority over victims (Ngubelanga, 2021). Victims may experience direct retaliation, which can manifest as further harassment or intimidation by the offender after the report is made, leading them to express concerns that the aggressor might use their influence to sabotage their academic or professional prospects, potentially resulting in a loss of grades or job promotions. Additionally, many victims are concerned about the stigma attached to being a victim of harassment, fearing they may be blamed or viewed negatively by their peers and staff members. This apprehension can further inhibit their willingness to report, as the potential for being labeled as someone who "cries wolf" weighs heavily on victims and discourages them from taking action (Jagath, 2023).

Lack of confidence in the reporting process

A profound lack of confidence in the reporting process can deter victims from coming forward, as individuals who believe that the reporting mechanisms are ineffective or biased are less likely to utilise them. Major factors contributing to this lack of confidence include perceived ineffectiveness, where research indicates that many survivors feel that reporting will not lead to meaningful action or resolution, having heard or experienced instances where complaints were dismissed or inadequately addressed, which fosters skepticism about the institution's ability to handle cases of sexual harassment appropriately (McDonald, 2012). Additionally, victims may worry about the potential for bias in the investigation process, especially if the accuser and accused share the same academic or social circles; concerns about impartiality can make victims feel that their reports will not be taken seriously, compounding their feelings of helplessness (Ngubelanga, 2021). Furthermore, many institutions fail to keep victims informed about the status of their reports, leaving them feeling abandoned and unsure of how the process works, which can further erode confidence in the system (Harris & Linder, 2023).

Concerns about privacy and confidentiality

Concerns about privacy and confidentiality are paramount in the context of reporting sexual harassment, as survivors must trust that their identities and the details of their reports will be protected. However, many potential reporters fear breaches of confidentiality, which can be influenced by several factors. One significant concern is the inadequate assurance of confidentiality provided by institutions. If clear and robust assurances that victims' identities will be kept confidential are lacking, individuals may hesitate to report incidents, fearing that their information could be disclosed to the accused or other members of the campus community (Harris & Linder, 2023). Additionally, victims worry about the potential for public disclosure; even if their reports are kept confidential at the outset, the risk of leaks or unintended disclosures during investigations can deter them from reporting. Revelations of a victim's identity or the details of their experiences can have life-altering consequences, which further dissuade them from sharing their experiences (McDonald, 2012). The level of institutional trust also plays a pivotal role; a lack of trust in the institution's ability or commitment to maintaining confidentiality can significantly hinder reporting efforts. If victims have previously witnessed or experienced breaches of confidentiality, they may be particularly wary of entering the reporting process, highlighting the necessity of building a culture of trust and safety to alleviate these fears (Jagath, 2023).

Emotional burden of recounting experiences

The emotional burden associated with recounting experiences of sexual harassment can be substantial and create significant barriers to reporting. For many survivors, discussing their traumatic experiences can trigger anxiety, stress, and even flashbacks of the incidents, making the act of reliving the experience re-traumatising. This emotional distress can lead to reluctance in engaging with reporting procedures (McDonald, 2012), with many victims fearing that recounting their experiences will compel them to confront emotions and memories they are trying to manage. Furthermore, survivors may feel vulnerable when sharing their stories, fearing judgment from those to whom they are reporting or from their peers. They may worry that their experiences will be trivialised or misconstrued, provoking feelings of shame and embarrassment. This apprehension often stems from societal stigmas surrounding sexual harassment and the stigmatisation of victims in public discourse (Jagath, 2023). Additionally, the cognitive load associated with accurately describing an incident in detail can be immense, particularly when survivors have to recall painful events. This mental energy requirement may deter victims from pursuing reporting, as they may feel overwhelmed by the prospect of articulating their experiences and navigating the complexities of the reporting process (Ngubelanga, 2021).

Lack of peer support

Support from peers is crucial in a victim's willingness to report harassment, and a lack of such support can significantly affect their decision. Victims often feel isolated in their experiences, especially if they believe that their peers will not understand or empathise with their situation. The fear of being dismissed or minimised by friends can lead victims to remain silent about their experiences, feeling as though they have no one to turn to for validation or support (Harris & Linder, 2023). Concerns about reputation further complicate matters, as victims may worry that confiding in friends could lead to gossip or damage their standing within their social circle. They may fear that their peers would view them differently or question their character, leading to reluctance to share their experiences or seek support (McDonald, 2012). Furthermore, if peers lack a solid understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment, they may inadvertently normalise harmful behavior instead of condemning it. This absence of shared knowledge can leave victims feeling unsupported, as they may not receive the validation or encouragement necessary to report incidents (Ngubelanga, 2021).

Normalisation of harassment

The normalisation of harassment contributes significantly to a culture where victims feel discouraged from reporting. In many academic environments, certain behaviors associated with harassment may be normalised, leading students to overlook or dismiss the severity of their experiences. Victims may come to believe that harassment is an expected part of university life, thus invalidating their experiences and minimising the likelihood of reporting. When harassment is frequent, individuals can become desensitised to its significance, leading them to internalise a belief that such behaviors are trivial or unworthy of reporting. This normalising effect can perpetuate a cycle where harassment remains unchecked. Additionally, a culture that tacitly accepts or ignores inappropriate behavior can create an environment where bystanders do not feel empowered to intervene or support victims. This complicity not only reinforces harmful behaviors but also detracts from the collective responsibility to address and report harassment.

Consequently, each of these factors, fear of retaliation, lack of confidence in the reporting process, concerns about privacy and confidentiality, the emotional burden of recounting experiences, lack of peer support, normalisation of harassment, and inadequate institutional support and resources, plays a critical role in the barriers to reporting sexual harassment. Addressing these issues comprehensively is necessary to foster an environment where victims feel empowered to report incidents and seek the support they need.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by the Gendered power theory and the Bystander intervention theory which illustrate the interconnected nature of gender dynamics and the role of bystanders in addressing harassment. Gendered

power theory, as articulated by Ruvalcaba et al. (2020), posits that sexual harassment is deeply embedded in systemic gender inequalities reflected within hierarchical structures of higher learning institutions, which foster a culture where harassment is normalised, and women disproportionately bear the brunt of such behaviors. This is complemented by the Bystander intervention theory which emphasises the crucial role that witnesses/bystanders play in the prevention and reporting of sexual harassment, highlighting that potential bystanders often refrain from taking action due to fear of social repercussions and the pervading culture of silence that discourages individuals from intervening (Banyard et al., 2006). The reluctance of bystanders in most higher learning institutions signals a broader systemic issue where both gender power dynamics and social pressures intersect, thereby necessitating educational initiatives designed to empower bystanders and dismantle the normalisation of harassment. Together, these theories provide critical insights into the pervasive nature of sexual harassment within higher learning institutions, illustrating how entrenched gender inequalities and bystander behavior collectively sustain a harmful environment that requires comprehensive strategies to foster a safer and more supportive academic atmosphere.

METHODOLOGIES

The study employed a qualitative research methodology, focusing on the experiences of individuals at MSU who have encountered or witnessed sexual harassment. A purposive sampling strategy was utilised to ensure a comprehensive representation of experiences, including both male and female respondents across the university's three campuses namely Gweru, Harare, and Zvishavane.

Population and sample

This qualitative study focused on the experiences of individuals at MSU who have encountered or witnessed sexual harassment. The research was conducted across three campuses of MSU namely Harare, Gweru, and Zvishavane ensuring a diverse representation of experiences and perspectives within the university community. Participants were selected from specific faculties at each campus. From the Gweru campus which is the main campus of the university, participants were selected from three faculties namely, the Faculty of Business Sciences, Faculty of Engineering, and Faculty of Agriculture, with a total of 6 students and 2 members of staff (2 students from each faculty) and (2 staff member from the non-academic staff), ensuring representation from both genders. From the Zvishavane campus and the Harare campus participants were selected from the faculties of Arts and social sciences respectively. These include 2 students (male and female) and 2 members of the academic staff (male and female) from each faculty. Overall, the sample consisted of 16 participants, including 6 faculty members (3 male, 3 female) and 10 students (5 male, 5 female). A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure comprehensive representation from each faculty and campus, while also addressing gender diversity. Data saturation was considered during the study, as interviews continued until no new themes or insights were emerging from the participants' responses. This approach ensured that the study captured a thorough understanding of the experiences related to sexual harassment at MSU, reflecting the diverse backgrounds of both staff and students.

Demographic information of the participants is summarized in Table 1:

Location	Faculty	Age range	Gender
Gweru	Engineering, Agriculture, Business Science	16-20	Six, (female/ male) students
		25-45	Two, (male/female) staff
Harare	Social Sciences	16-20	Two, (female/male) students
		25-45	Two, (female/male) staff
Zvishavane	Arts	16-20	Two, (female/male) students
		25-45	Two, (female/male) staff
TOTAL			16 participants

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews allowing for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences with sexual harassment. Semi-structured interviews facilitated a conversational approach, encouraging participants to discuss their experiences in detail while providing the interviewer with the flexibility to probe deeper into relevant topics as they arose (Tracy, 2019). This method effectively illuminated the personal narratives and diverse experiences associated with sexual harassment at MSU. All interview sessions were recorded with the consent of participants and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The data collection took place over three weeks, ensuring sufficient time for the researcher to visit all three campuses.

Data analysis

Data were analysed thematically, following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This systematic approach involved several stages, beginning with familiarisation with the data through repeated readings of the transcripts. Coding was then conducted to identify significant patterns and themes related to participants' experiences of sexual harassment, barriers to reporting, and perceptions of institutional responses. A constant comparative method, as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), was employed to enhance the depth and validity of the findings. This process involved comparing pieces of data from different interviews as they were analysed, allowing for the identification of overarching themes while accounting for individual variations in experiences.

Ethical considerations

This study adhered to stringent ethical guidelines to ensure the welfare and rights of participants were protected throughout the research process. Firstly, the process of obtaining informed consent was meticulously executed. Informed consent was obtained from the university registrar and all participants before their inclusion in the study. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks. They were assured that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point without repercussions (McDonald, 2012). This transparency empowered participants to make an informed decision regarding their involvement. Furthermore, participants were informed that any identifying information would not be disclosed in any publications resulting from the study. The handling and storage of data adhered to guidelines emphasising the importance of maintaining participant anonymity and confidentiality (Cortina & Berdahl, 2008). Steps to mitigate potential harm to participants were also paramount. The researcher was aware of the sensitive nature of the topic, and to minimise distress, participants were provided with appropriate support resources, including campus counseling services. During the consent process, participants were informed about these available support services, ensuring they had access to assistance should they experience any discomfort as a result of discussing their experiences. Additionally, participants were encouraged to only share information they felt comfortable discussing, allowing them to control their level of disclosure. By implementing these ethical considerations, the study aimed to respect the dignity and autonomy of participants while ensuring the integrity of the research findings.

RESULTS

Findings of this qualitative study revealed a pervasive culture of sexual harassment at the MSU, which affects both students and employees. Through semi-structured interviews, participants shared extensive and often stressful reports about their experiences and underlined the diverse nature of sexual harassment within the university environment. As a result, four key themes emerged namely the prevalence and nature of sexual harassment, its impact on victims, barriers to reporting, and awareness of policies. From each theme, some subthemes emerged as discussed below.

Theme 1: Prevalence and nature of sexual harassment

Findings illustrated a significant gender disparity in the experiences of sexual harassment within the university environment, indicating not only the widespread occurrence of such incidents but also a systemic issue embedded in the culture of MSU.

Gender disparity in experiences

Female participants reported a notably higher frequency of inappropriate behaviors compared to their male counterparts. This suggests that sexual harassment is not merely an occasional occurrence for many women on campus but rather a pervasive and unsettling aspect of their academic lives. Reports indicate a consistent pattern where female students and staff face greater vulnerability to various forms of harassment.

Types of harassment

The types of harassment commonly reported by most participants include unwanted sexual advances, sexist remarks, and inappropriate physical contact. Unwanted sexual advances encompass suggestive comments, solicitations, and unwelcome flirtations, with many participants describing scenarios where pressure was applied to engage despite clear indications of disinterest from the recipients. Sexist remarks were also prevalent, contributing to an environment that trivialises women's experiences and reinforces harmful gender stereotypes, as such remarks often subject women's bodies and autonomy to unwarranted scrutiny. Additionally, various instances of inappropriate physical contact were noted, ranging from unsolicited hugs to more overtly aggressive behaviors, which foster anxiety and discomfort, intensifying feelings of vulnerability among victims.

Normalisation of harassment

The study revealed alarming incidents that exemplify a troubling normalisation of harassment at MSU. One particularly disturbing account involved a male student entering a female-maintained restroom while completely naked. This incident not only exemplified a blatant violation of personal boundaries but also highlighted a concerning trend where such inappropriate behaviors are frequently dismissed or overlooked. Participants conveyed their distress over this normalisation, illustrating how individuals may become desensitised to harassment, thereby perpetuating an environment where the significance of such actions is minimised. This toxic atmosphere instills uncertainty and fear among victims, leading them to internalise their experiences as commonplace, posing serious challenges to the university's goal of fostering a safe and inclusive environment.

Theme 2: Impact on victims

The emotional, psychological, and academic impacts of sexual harassment are profound and multifaceted, influencing not only the individual experiences of victims at MSU but also their overall engagement within the academic and social environments of the institution.

Emotional and psychological effects

Participants reported a range of negative emotional consequences, including anxiety, depression, and heightened stress levels. Most of them articulated feelings of fear and distress, which can manifest as a perpetual state of vigilance regarding their safety. This emotional turmoil not only diminishes their well-being but also leads to a pervasive sense of vulnerability. Participants also described how this heightened anxiety often extends beyond the immediate context of harassment, affecting their overall confidence and self-esteem. Such psychological impacts render it difficult for victims to engage fully in academic life or maintain social relationships, further isolating them from their peers.

Academic engagement

Findings reveal that experiences of harassment significantly disrupt victims' academic engagement. Participants reported difficulties concentrating on their studies, leading to declines in academic performance. It was noted that the stress and emotional burden stemming from harassment often result in absenteeism or reduced participation in class discussions and activities, undermining the educational experience. For many, the ongoing anxiety surrounding potential encounters with harassers detracts from their focus on coursework and academic responsibilities, ultimately hindering their progress and success in their academic pursuits.

Social withdrawal

The social implications of sexual harassment are equally concerning, as it causes feelings of isolation and disconnection from peers. Participants noted that victims of harassment often withdraw from social interactions and extracurricular activities out of fear that they may encounter their harasser or be subjected to additional scrutiny. This withdrawal can lead to a diminished sense of belonging within the university community, contributing to an even greater sense of isolation. Participants also reported that experiencing sexual harassment can lead one to feel hesitant to build new relationships or engage in social networks, hence exacerbating emotional distress and reinforcing the cycle of silence and avoidance.

Influence on help-seeking behavior

The emotional and psychological consequences of harassment also affect victims' willingness to seek help or support from university resources. Many participants voiced concerns about being judged or not believed, which discourages one from approaching counseling services or seeking help from other members of the staff. This reluctance to seek assistance not only impacts their mental health but also deprives them of crucial resources that could facilitate recovery and healing.

Long-term consequences

The long-term implications of harassment experiences can extend well beyond the university setting. Participants indicated that unresolved trauma or ongoing emotional struggles could hinder one's ability to engage in future academic or professional endeavors. The repercussions can also affect one's social relationships in broader contexts, as trust issues and self-esteem concerns persist. It was also noted that victims may carry the weight of their experiences into their post-university lives, influencing their overall quality of life and future interactions.

Theme 3: Barriers to reporting

The analysis of barriers to reporting incidents of sexual harassment at MSU reveals several significant factors that prevent victims from coming forward. These barriers not only stem from individual fears and perceptions but also reflect deeper issues within the institutional culture.

Culture of Silence

A pervasive culture of silence surrounding sexual harassment at MSU significantly impacts victims' willingness to report incidents. Many participants described feeling discomfort and anxiety when facing the prospect of reporting harassment. The entrenched nature of this silence can lead victims to internalise their experiences, further isolating them and discouraging them from seeking help. The fear that their reports will be met with skepticism or ridicule fosters an environment where victims believe their experiences will not be taken seriously, thereby perpetuating silence.

Fear of retaliation

Most participants cited fear of retaliation as a major factor deterring one from reporting incidents of harassment. The power dynamics inherent in many harassment situations leave victims feeling vulnerable, as they worry that speaking out could subject them to further harm or victimisation. The sentiment captured in one participant's statement,

"I was afraid of his retaliation, so I didn't report him, knowing that I wouldn't stand a chance against his potential accusations" (Student Participant),

underscores the chilling effect that fear has on disclosure. This fear not only silences victims but also discourages bystanders from intervening, thereby allowing harassers to act with impunity.

Dismissal and trivialisation of incidents

Compounding the fears associated with reporting is the perception that university authorities may trivialise or dismiss claims of sexual harassment. Participants recounted experiences where some of the reports were met with indifference, creating a narrative that such experiences were not deemed serious enough for attention or action. This lack of validation from authorities contributes to feelings of helplessness among victims, reinforcing the belief that reporting is futile. Consequently, many victims may choose to suffer in silence rather than risk facing disbelief or a lack of appropriate response.

Attitudes toward reporting and support systems

Participants expressed varying attitudes toward the reporting process and existing support systems at MSU. While some demonstrated a desire for change, many held reservations about the efficacy and accessibility of current mechanisms. The general sentiment indicated a lack of confidence in the reporting process, often rooted in concerns about institutional responses. Participants expressed a wish for clearer communication, more robust advocacy, and a system that is perceived as genuinely supportive rather than punitive. The disconnection between institutional policies and victims' experiences highlights the need for reform in how the university addresses incidents of harassment.

Frustration with reporting processes

Findings revealed high levels of participants' dissatisfaction with the university's handling of reported incidents. Concerns were raised about the prolonged investigation times that often left victims in a state of limbo, exacerbating their trauma and complicating their emotional recovery. Participants noted that the waiting periods often create an environment where victims feel abandoned, as they grapple with their experiences alone while awaiting institutional responses. This delay not only undermines trust in the university's ability to address their complaints adequately but also reinforces feelings of skepticism towards the efficacy of the reporting systems in place. Another core issue reported by participants was the insufficient consequences for perpetrators found to have engaged in harassment. Many expressed frustration that the responses taken by the university did not align with the severity of the incidents reported. As one participant articulated,

"There are just not enough consequences for those who commit these acts; it makes reporting feel futile."

This sentiment encapsulates a significant barrier to reporting, as individuals perceive reporting as an exercise in futility when they believe that offenders face minimal repercussions. This perception not only dissuades victims from coming forward but also has a chilling effect on potential bystanders who might witness harassment, further embedding the cycle of silence.

Gaps in knowledge

Findings also uncovered a significant gap in knowledge about what constitutes sexual harassment. Participants expressed confusion about the definitions, often indicating that they were uncertain whether their experiences fell within the boundaries of what the university might classify as harassment. This ambiguity can lead victims to question the legitimacy of their feelings, causing them to internalise their suffering rather than seek help. The lack of clear education and awareness surrounding the issue perpetuates a cycle where individuals are left to navigate a complex and often overwhelming system without the necessary guidance. As a result, many participants shared feelings of powerlessness when confronted with harassment. The uncertainty surrounding reporting procedures further compounds these feelings, as victims often feel they are trapped in a system that does not provide adequate support or clarity. This is particularly concerning, as the knowledge of available resources and proper reporting channels is crucial for empowering victims to take action and for promoting a culture of accountability.

Theme 4: Awareness of policies

Understanding participants' awareness of university policies related to sexual harassment is critical in evaluating their perceptions of effectiveness and the need for improvement. This theme, therefore, explains

findings from participants regarding their understanding of the existing policies which also include the university's sexual harassment policy.

Knowledge gaps regarding policies

Participants reported confusion not just about the definitions of harassment but also about the university's specific policies on addressing it. Many participants reported a significant gap in their knowledge of MSU's sexual harassment policies, indicating that even though these policies exist, they are not widely communicated or understood. This ignorance surrounding institutional policies not only hinders victims from taking action but also contributes to a broader culture where harassment is normalised and goes unreported. The disconnect between policy existence and university community awareness underscores the pressing need for enhanced educational initiatives to inform all campus members about their rights and reporting procedures. The lack of understanding creates barriers that prevent effective action against harassment, as individuals remain unsure about their rights and the institutional resources available to them, further complicating their ability to report incidents.

Perceptions of policy effectiveness

Exploring perceptions of policy effectiveness revealed mixed feelings among participants. While some acknowledged the existence of policies, they expressed doubt regarding their effectiveness in practical application. Most participants indicated that their experiences were not adequately addressed within the framework of these policies, leading to skepticism about the university's commitment to tackling sexual harassment. The ineffectiveness perceived by participants further discourages reporting and fosters an environment where individuals feel unsupported in their attempts to seek redress.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study paint a stark picture of the prevalence and normalisation of sexual harassment at MSU, underscoring the urgent need for systemic change within the institution. The experiences shared by participants illustrate not only the various forms of harassment that exist but also the broader cultural and institutional barriers that hinder reporting and perpetuate a cycle of silence. The asymmetry in reporting between male and female participants aligns with existing literature, which often indicates that women disproportionately bear the brunt of sexual harassment in academic settings. The qualitative data revealed significant emotional and psychological impacts on victims, including fear, anxiety, and a sense of isolation. Many participants articulated feelings of disbelief and shame, which are common reactions in environments where harassment is trivialised or where victims face potential retaliation for speaking out. The predominant theme of a "culture of silence" at MSU is particularly concerning. This environment of fear and stigma prevents many potential victims from reporting incidents, which perpetuates the cycle of harassment. The factors identified namely, lack of awareness of reporting procedures, inadequate support for victims, and ineffective consequences for offenders highlight systemic issues within the institution that must be addressed to foster a safer and more inclusive campus environment. Furthermore, the results indicate a critical disconnection between university policies and the actual experiences of individuals on campus. Although sexual harassment policies are reportedly in place, the lack of awareness and understanding among students and staff raises significant questions about their effectiveness. The findings suggest a need for more robust, accessible, and transparent policy frameworks that genuinely empower individuals to report harassment without fear.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study regarding the awareness and effectiveness of reporting systems as well as the overall culture surrounding sexual harassment at MSU, the following recommendations are proposed:

Enhance awareness and education programs

- **Regular workshops and training sessions:** Implement mandatory training for all students and staff that clearly defines sexual harassment, provides examples, and explains the reporting processes.

Workshops should be held at the beginning of each semester and offered periodically throughout the year.

- **Awareness campaigns:** Launch ongoing awareness campaigns using various mediums (posters, social media, information booths) to educate the university community about sexual harassment policies, bystander intervention, and available resources for victims.
- **Incorporate curriculum changes:** Integrate sexual harassment education into existing courses, particularly in first-year programs, ensuring that incoming students have a foundational understanding of their rights and the reporting channels available to them.

Improve reporting mechanisms

- **User-friendly reporting platforms:** Revamp the existing reporting systems to ensure they are accessible and straightforward. This could include an online reporting portal that allows for anonymous submissions, as well as multiple reporting options (in-person, phone, email).
- **Clear communication of procedures:** Provide clear, step-by-step instructions on how to report incidents of sexual harassment. Create easy-to-read guides that can be distributed during orientation and made available online.
- **Anonymous reporting options:** Establish truly anonymous reporting channels that protect the identities of complainants, thereby alleviating fears of retribution or stigma.

Strengthen support services for victims

- **Comprehensive support resources:** Ensure that all victims have access to a range of support services, including counseling, medical care, legal assistance, and academic accommodations. These services should be well-publicised and easily accessible.
- **Peer support programs:** Develop peer support initiatives where trained student advocates can provide guidance, support, and assistance to those who have experienced harassment. This can foster a sense of community and mutual support among students.
- **24/7 support hotline:** Implement a confidential hotline that operates 24/7 for individuals to seek support and advice regarding incidents of sexual harassment.

Reassess policy and consequence framework

- **Comprehensive policy review:** Conduct a thorough review of current sexual harassment policies to ensure they are clear, comprehensive, and reflect best practices. Include specific definitions of harassment and outline detailed reporting and investigatory processes.
- **Consistent disciplinary measures:** Establish clear and consistent consequences for perpetrators of sexual harassment that match the severity of the offenses. This should also include a system for transparent communication regarding the outcomes of investigations to restore trust in the process.
- **Regular policy training:** Require ongoing training for all staff involved in handling complaints to ensure they understand the policies, procedures, and trauma-informed practices necessary for supporting victims effectively.

Promote a culture of bystander intervention

- **Bystander intervention training:** Provide training programs that empower students and staff to intervene safely in situations of potential harassment. Training should focus on strategies for intervention and how to support victims.
- **Recognition programs:** Develop recognition programs to acknowledge and reward individuals or groups who take proactive steps to deter harassment or support victims, helping to cultivate a campus culture of accountability and respect.
- **Engagement of student organisations:** Encourage student organisations to actively participate in discussions and initiatives around sexual harassment, ensuring that students have a voice in shaping campus policies and programs.

Regular feedback and assessment mechanisms

- **Surveys and focus groups:** Conduct regular surveys and focus groups to assess the awareness, perception, and effectiveness of the university's sexual harassment policies and programs among students and staff. Use this data to identify areas needing improvement.
- **Annual reporting on progress:** Produce an annual report summarising findings related to sexual harassment incidents, responses, and the effectiveness of educational initiatives, providing transparency and accountability to the university community.
- **Intervention studies:** There is a pressing need for intervention studies that evaluate the effectiveness of educational programs designed to raise awareness about sexual harassment and reporting mechanisms. Researchers could collaborate with institutions like MSU to develop and assess these programs, measuring their impact on participants' knowledge and willingness to report incidents.
- **Quantitative surveys:** While this study provided rich qualitative insights, future studies could incorporate quantitative surveys to gather broader data on the prevalence of sexual harassment across a more extensive range of demographics and institutions. This data would facilitate comparisons and highlight patterns that may be overlooked in qualitative studies.

Proposed University Sexual Harassment Prevention Model

The proposed model to combat sexual harassment at universities includes a comprehensive framework that consists of six key components: to improve the consciousness and educational program through workshops and curriculum changes; improvement of reporting mechanisms to ensure accessibility and anonymity; strengthening support services for victims, including peer support and a 24/7 hotline; guidelines and disciplinary measures to reflect best practices; promotion of a culture of audience intervention through training and recognition; and the implementation of regular feedback and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of these initiatives. Together, these elements aim to create a safer and more respectful university environment. (See figure 1 below)

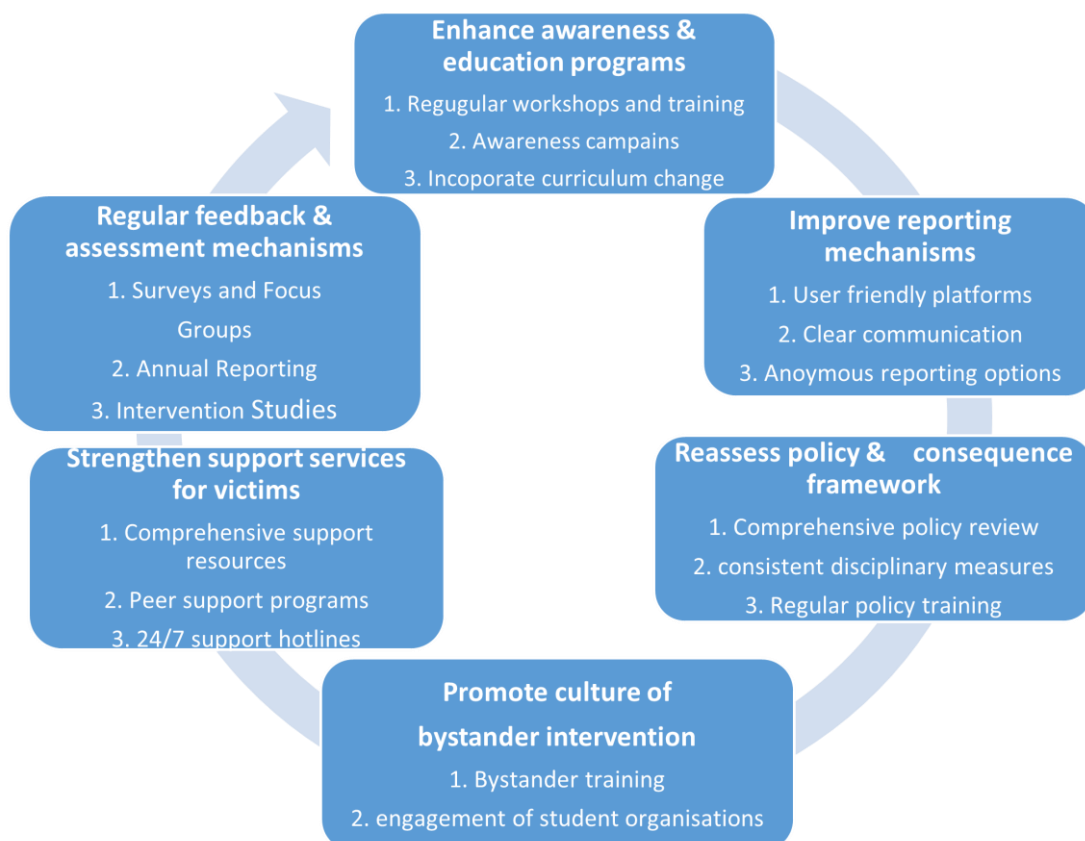


Figure 1.

While the study highlights alarming trends regarding sexual harassment at MSU, it also catalyses change. By fostering an environment where all individuals feel safe and supported, and by addressing the identified barriers to reporting, MSU can pioneer efforts to combat sexual harassment in higher education and serve as a model for other institutions. Implementing the recommendations derived from this research is essential in creating a culture of respect and accountability, ultimately leading to a safer and more inclusive academic environment for everyone.

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