

# The Psychological Effects of Sexual Harassment on Female Students at a Zimbabwean University

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the psychological sequelae of sexual harassment among female university students in Zimbabwe. The research was prompted by the high incidence of sexual harassment in higher education institutions and the limited reporting on its psychological impact. The primary objective was to delineate the psychological effects experienced by female students at the Zimbabwean university due to sexual harassment. A descriptive survey design was employed for data collection. Key findings indicated that female students were cognizant of sexual harassment, acknowledged its occurrence within the university setting, and reported that it led to mental health issues in victims. The study concluded that female students were more vulnerable to sexual harassment, with many having experienced it from male students, administrative staff, or lecturers. Recommendations include the establishment of a dedicated sexual harassment committee, a psychological assessment unit, and the development of a distinct sexual harassment policy within the university.

**Keywords:** Sexual Harassment, Psychological Effects, Female Students, Zimbabwean University, Sexual Abuse, Trauma

## BACKGROUND

Oni, Tshitangano and Akinsola (2019) note that sexual harassment refers to the persistent, unsolicited and unwelcomed sexual advances which could be visual, physical, verbal and non-verbal gestures and it is seen as a disease of present-day learning in institutions. Menon et al (2014) note that sexual harassment seems to be common in higher education institutions and that it is estimated that 20-30% of all college women have been sexually abused. Kelley and Parsons (1990) note that most studies report that between 20% and 40% of undergraduate and graduate women experience some form of sexual harassment during their college life. Oni, Tshitangano and Akinsola (2019) reviewed research done on sexual harassment in various universities across the world. They noted that a study at Brown University in the United States revealed that among 234 students, there were 6% incidents of attempted rape and 3.8% rape cases. In another study conducted among undergraduate female students by So-Kum Tang, Criteli and Porter at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in China among undergraduate female students, of the total participants, there was 14.9% reported cases of attempted rape and 1.4% of rape cases. Oni, Tshitangano and Akinsola (2019) reported that, in Africa, a few studies had shown a high incidence of sexual harassment, for instance, a study conducted at the University of Malawi showed 67% of sexual harassment on campus and 12.6% of the students were raped. Similarly in South Africa, studies showed that 30% of female learners were raped and sexually harassed by male learners and teachers in high school. The studies done in the United States, China, South Africa and Malawi all show that the rate of sexual harassment in universities is alarming, but the studies did not look at how those cases of sexual harassment were affecting the victims.

Female students who are subjected to sexual harassment tend to experience some psychological challenges as opined by Okeke, Anierobi and Ezennaka (2021), who note that, sexually harassed individuals can suffer from irritation and frustration to anxiety, stress, and trauma. Depending on the severity of the harassment, a victim can experience anything from mild annoyance to extreme psychological damage. In Zimbabwe, there have been media reports about the escalation of sexual harassment in tertiary institutions. The Parliament of Zimbabwe, at one time, summoned the relevant authorities to investigate sexual harassment issues that had escalated to

alarming rates. Mashininga (2022) in his article reported that a Zimbabwean parliamentary probe had unearthed rampant sexual harassment at universities and tertiary education institutions in the country, which was being fuelled by drug abuse and lecturers demanding sex from the female students in exchange for high marks. According to Mashininga (2021), Zimbabwe was formulating a sexual harassment bill to criminalise abuse following studies that showed rampant sexual harassment, especially by lecturers in the higher education sector. Mashininga (2021) further asserts that the Director of SAYWHAT, a non-profit organisation, indicated that students had raised concerns over the absence of effective policies to prevent and manage sexual exploitation and abuse, and sexual harassment at tertiary institutions around the country. In an article by Moyo (2022) it was noted that there is rampant sexual harassment of female students at most tertiary institutions in the country with victims suffering in silence for fear of being made to fail by the male perpetrators. Moyo (2022) reported that, in some institutions, there is no clear sexual harassment policy while for those with the document, the students are not informed of such. The lack of a sexual harassment policy may fuel the increase of unreported cases of harassment and ultimately lead to female students suffering in silence. Suffering in silence could pose mental health challenges such as anxiety, panic attacks, depression and trauma.

Moyo (2022) asserts that the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) in Bulawayo was singled out as the only institution having taken deliberate steps to raise awareness of sexual harassment. An inquiry on the prevalence of sexual harassment in higher and tertiary education institutions in Zimbabwe was carried out by the joint portfolio committees on higher and tertiary education, innovation, science, and technology development and women's affairs, community, and small to medium enterprise development. According to the report by the Joint Portfolio Committee, most universities did not have stand-alone sexual harassment policies, and most of the staff members and students professed ignorance about the existence of the sexual harassment policies. The Committee also established that the high prevalence of sexual harassment in institutions of higher learning was attributed to the rising poverty level and substance abuse among students. The report also established that the staff in most institutions, particularly at Solusi University further attributed the high prevalence of sexual harassment in universities to the degradation of the socio-cultural and moral fabric as well as the increased exposure to media content such as pornography.

Another Committee's findings established that some institutions, such as the NUST had taken steps to raise awareness of sexual harassment issues, and the interventions included online surveys to gauge the awareness of sexual harassment campaigns. At another Zimbabwean university, issues to do with sexual harassment are embedded in the university's Gender Policy. The issues are recorded in part iv and vii of the university's Gender Policy. In part iv of the Policy, it is articulated that the aim of the Gender Policy, is to promote the formulation of gender-sensitive policies, for example, regarding sexual harassment policy. The Policy further articulates sensitization and empowerment of students on issues relating to sexual harassment and mutual respect. Additionally, the institution has a registered Code of Conduct where sexual harassment is defined as a verbal and non-verbal nature including the unsolicited sending or display of pornographic material to a student or staff. This is considered a serious offence, for which one would be dismissed if found guilty of having contravened that section. At the Midlands State University's Zvishavane campus main entrance, there is a banner that conscientize students about the university's zero tolerance towards sexual harassment. Regardless of the presence of these sexual harassment documents and awareness, the prevalence of sexual harassment cases remains high.

Obi (2020) notes that research carried out by Zindi (1994), sexual experiences with lecturers occur in 98% of female university students. This finding by Zindi (1994) of high prevalence of sexual harassment on female students grounded the basis for this study. Obi (2020) asserts that sexual relations between students and lecturers at Zimbabwe's universities are unregulated and have become an undeniable issue. It was reported that the majority of the students were sexually active and some of them ended up in convenient relationships with older men including their lecturers when they are desperate for fees or accommodation. In addition, they could not negotiate secure sex in many of those relationships. The power dynamics that exist between a lecturer and a student give the lecturer more leverage on decision making in those sexual relationships and this leaves students vulnerable. That vulnerability poses psychological problems on the girlchild. Mawere (2022) states that, in the Zimbabwean context, most research had been conducted in terms of sexual harassment of students by lecturers, sexual harassment of female students by male lecturers, and sexual favours in return for grades including contra power transactions. An analysis of the research that had been carried out on the issue of sexual harassment in

institutions of higher learning, showed that most of it had focused on the magnitude of sexual harassment in the institutions and there is marked inadequacy of research that specifically focuses on the psychological effects of sexual harassment on university female students.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The study is informed by the Bronfenbrenner Ecological Systems Theory to examine the multiple layers of influence that contribute to sexual harassment. The theory provides a comprehensive exploration of how all the subsystems influence female students' perceptions and experience of sexual harassment in universities.

### **Female students' awareness of sexual harassment**

McLeod (2020) notes that the microsystem is the first level of Bronfenbrenner's theory and are things that have direct contact with the child in their immediate environment, such as parents, siblings, teachers and school peers. Relationships in a microsystem are bi-directional, meaning the child can be influenced by other people in their environment and is also capable of changing the beliefs and actions of other people too. Furthermore, the reactions of the child to individuals in their microsystem can influence how they treat them in return. University students have diverse family and social backgrounds meaning that all the students will be of unique characters. Female students in Zimbabwe are mainly socialised in patriarchal society where the man is perceived to be superior to the woman. In such a discourse, female students may fail to know what sexual harassment is and may even be subjected to it and fail to realise it. In their understanding of the patriarchal system in which they grew up, they may think that it is culturally correct to tolerate unwelcome behaviour of a sexual nature from a man. Some other students come from families that are part of church denominations that have strict religious beliefs, and these students may see it as ungodly for a man to make any sexual advancement to them. Some students come from backgrounds where their families and parents are not concerned about how they dress, walk, talk or carry themselves around others especially of the opposite sex. In that case, such students may not be bothered by getting unsolicited sexual comments from other students. A female student coming from an affluent family or community may be used to hugging others as a gesture of greeting whereas some students from strict ethnic backgrounds may perceive the same act as taboo and in fact an invasion of their personal boundary space. Some religions and ethnic groups do not allow females to be physically contacted by the male counterparts, and this involves even a handshake. That cohort of female students would perceive a handshake from a male student as sexual harassment.

### **Sexual harassment policy that protects female students**

The school as a structure in the microsystem helps protect students from being sexually abused and in this regard, the university has to put in place a policy document that protects students from sexual harassment. The macrosystem challenges the university culture to provide an enabling environment with easy to follow procedures for students to report freely any issues of sexual harassment. At the exosystem level, the sexual harassment policy has to be accessible to all students so that everyone would be aware of its contents. The unavailability of a sexual harassment policy within an organisation would present a myriad of challenges where students could be harassed unchecked. Also, students may not be in a position to distinguish between sexual harassment and non-sexual harassment conduct. The policy that the university has would be used by students to know what to do in the event that one has been sexually abused. Considering the dynamic world we live in, the policy should be evolving remain effective and relevant in all times. At the chronosystem, the university should constantly revise the policy to ensure that it adapts to the contemporary societal needs and also operate within the dictates of the governing law in Zimbabwe.

### **Psychological effects of sexual harassment on female students**

The five nested levels of influence enshrined in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory show that an individual has various factors that influence him or her at any given time in life. The values and norms that an individual absorb and assimilate during his or her course of life are influenced by what they see, experience and learn through the environment. All the values and norms that female students are taught are challenged by the way in which the university operates. Students at a university would be coming from diverse backgrounds and

would be subscribing to different values. A change of environment that presents a new way of doing things has a potential of affecting the mental well-being of a student at university. Some students may fail to cope with issues to do with unsolicited or unwelcome sexual contact, body shaming and request of sexual favours from lecturers in return for higher marks. That failure may lead into stress, depression, anxiety and even suicidal ideation and intent. At the microsystem level, the environment that the student directly interacts with is important for her emotional response to sexual harassment. If her family and friends provide her with emotional support, she will be able to cope but if there is no support structure, she may suffer from anxiety and distress. The mesosystem is critical to the student if it presents supportive peers and university programs that focus on helping sexual harassment victims. With regards to the ecosystem, the students could benefit if the community provided thematic awareness campaigns and focus group discussions on sexual harassment. On macrosystem, a community that believes in 'the just-world phenomenon', could pose challenges to the victims of sexual harassment because there would be stigmatization and blaming of the victim. A community that supports victims can empower the students to cope with the psychological effects of sexual harassment. The chronosystem presents a life transition for the female student that is moving from high school to university. Sexual harassment at the university could therefore exacerbate the fragile transition from being a high school pupil to a university student presenting psychological effects to the victim.

### **Coping strategies for victims of sexual harassment**

The five nested levels of influence in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory help proffer coping strategies for female students especially those who have been harassed sexually. From a microsystem level, the family provides a support structure for the student who would have been sexually harassed. The family can even refer the student to professional counsellors for help. In universities there are peer counsellors who are trained to provide counselling interventions to their peers. The Student Affairs department in a university set-up also has support structures in the form of the Chaplaincy office, Residence office, and Counselling services office. At a mesosystems level, the students could be encouraged to connect with those Non-Governmental Organizations that operate at the campus to get help on sexual harassment related issues. The ecosystem could help the female students to get help from organisations such as Musasa Project and Family Support Trust which specialize in helping sexual assault victims. The Zimbabwe Republic Police – Victim Friendly Unit is also a critical component of the ecosystem that could be utilised by female students who would have been sexually harassed because the unit educates the girlchild about her rights and also proffer information on legal aid services that could be critical for the victim to get justice. The macrosystem which entails culture is essential for victims to cope because issues like patriarchy, gender inequity, gender inequality, and gender role stereotypes are discussed and a redress of chauvinistic approaches done to pave way for social justice and equality amongst men and women. The chronosystem may help the students to understand that some behaviours may be influenced by change experienced overtime which may have a bearing on culture. The dynamism of culture could present new ways of doing things in universities and for the female students, they need to build resilience in order for them to cope with their peers' behaviour.

### **Sexual Harassment In Universities**

#### **Power Dynamics**

Oni, Tshitangano and Akinsola (2019) note that, sexual harassment perpetrator could be a colleague, supervisor, management personnel and or a student. They further assert that the perpetrator and victim may be of the same gender but however, they highlight that, in most incidents, men had been found to be perpetrators either in the learning institutions or workplace. The main reason to this could be attributed to the conventional power that men have in organizations. A lecturer has power over the student by virtue of him being a staff member and that power could be used to manipulate a female student. In a university where power is wielded by males and rarely questioned, sexual harassment is more likely to be rampant. Students fear retaliation after reporting or they believe that reporting would not change anything. With regards to the power dynamics, when a student wants to meet a lecturer for research supervision, the lecturer is the one who has the power to decide on where to meet with the student and can take that opportunity to create a hostile sexual environment during the meeting. Burn (2005) in Dhlomo (2014) et al. note that a hostile sexual environment exists when supervisor/lecturer creates an

atmosphere so infused with unwelcome sexually oriented conduct that an individual's reasonable comfort or ability to perform is affected. Win (1994) in Zindi (1994) describes the relationship between students and lecturers as David and Goliath situation, where the one in power or authority uses his power to get what he wants.

Armstrong (2012) states that there are three problems in dealing with harassment, the first one being that an accusation of harassment can be hard to prove unless there are witnesses. Considering power dynamics in universities, the student may decide not to report because of fear that the university administration would believe the lecturer and not her. Armstrong (2012) notes that, those who indulge in this practice usually take care to carry it out on a one-to-one basis so that when reported, the situation becomes a case of one person's word against another's. Armstrong (2012) notes that the second problem is that victims of sexual harassment are often unwilling to act and in practice seldom do so. This could be attributed to the Zimbabwean culture which promotes patriarchy. Students coming from a patriarchal society may tend not to report cases of sexual harassment because they may be accustomed to men domineering women and hence, they would treat the harassment as normal behaviour. Armstrong (2012) notes that the third and perhaps the most deep-rooted and difficult problem is that sexual harassment may be part of the culture of the organization. In such a situation, some students may find it difficult to report cases of sexual harassment because they would have experienced it for a prolonged time at the institution and nothing would have been done, or no perpetrator would have been reprimanded before. In such instances, the contributing factor could be attributed to a male-dominated staff in a university where cases of sexual harassment may go unresolved or unreported because no one would have been reprimanded before.

Monsalve et al. (2022) note that, different research has suggested that the interpretation made by social actors regarding whether a behaviour constitutes sexual harassment or not may vary according to the gender of who judges such behaviour, the context in which it occurs, the ideology of the perceiver, the relationship between the actors, the attractiveness of the perpetrator and the victim, the status of the perpetrator in relation to the victim, and the individual's experiences, personality, or cultural, religious, and family background. In a university, the female students may fail to report a sexual harassment case because of how they feel about the perpetrator whom they see as attractive or as a distinguished academic whose reputation cannot be tainted by sexual harassment issues. Students may be afraid to report a perpetrator of sexual harassment because of his status at the university. The perpetrator could be a dean of a faculty, a doctor, a professor, or a senior lecturer whose academic and administrative statuses would be respectable across all academic spectra. The other contributing factor is that the perpetrator could be the one who presides over sexual harassment cases at the university and in this regard, the students would not bother reporting the case.

## **Institutional Culture**

Ekore (2012) notes that, despite the known consequences of sexual harassment on the victim, the attention it has enjoyed comes largely from research that focus on workers in organizations and not much has been done to consider the degree of its prevalence among university students, especially in sub-Saharan Africa where the policies that address students' sexual harassment problems are rarely made. Crosset et al. (1995) in Volkwein et al. (1997) note that other factors contributing to the continued silence of women who have experienced sexual harassment and sexual abuse include the university's failure to publicize complaint mechanisms adequately, its reluctance to regulate the private lives and personal relationships of faculty or staff and gender bias in policies and procedures. In a study conducted by Timmerman and Bajema (2000), they found out that respondents who reported that their company had a more social climate, as well as placed a strong emphasis on advancing gender equity in the workplace and supported family-friendly policies, reported fewer instances of unwanted sexual behaviour in the workplace. In this regard, it can be noted that institutional culture is critical in promoting or inhibiting sexual harassment. The social climate together with the emphasis by the organisation on advancing gender equity in the workplace provides a safe space for female employees and unsafe environment for the would be offenders.

Maphosa (2025) notes that in many academic environments, certain behaviours associated with harassment may be normalised, leading students to overlook or dismiss the severity of their experiences. He further asserts that, victims may come to believe that harassment is an expected part of university life, thus invalidating their experiences and minimising the likelihood of reporting. Maphosa (2025) states that when harassment is frequent, individuals can become desensitised to its significance, leading them to internalise a belief that such behaviours

are trivial or unworthy of reporting. Maphosa (2025) suggests that a culture that tacitly accepts or ignores inappropriate behaviour can create an environment where bystanders do not feel empowered to intervene or support victims. This could explain why most students in universities do not bother to report cases of sexual harassment they witness because they will be knowing that no action will be taken. Singer (1989) in Zindi (1994) conducted a study which demonstrates that those institutions that do have a policy designed specifically for sexual harassment and grievance procedures have a significantly higher number of reports of harassment than those that do not.

### **Psychological Effects**

Klein et al. (2022) notes that students who experience sexual harassment have lower grades, less connection to their academic communities, and experience higher rates of physical and psychological health issues including alcohol use and misuse. Ekore (2012) notes that, sexual harassment has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's performance or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive environment. Mayekiso and Bhana (1997) note that, the adverse effects of sexual harassment are not restricted to the victim's study or work environment but also extend to the victim's health and well-being. They further note that, depending on the severity of harassment, clinical observations of victims revealed that, psychologically, sexual harassment engenders a sense of helplessness and stimulate self-criticism, shame and guilt and also anger, fear, anxiety, loss of self-esteem and depression. Hall (2022) notes that, failure to deal with stress of sexual harassment can lead to self-harming behaviours as a way to forget or escape the memories and that if one experiences distressing behaviour, they may turn to drugs or alcohol to help them cope because it would be so detrimental to their mental health. Hall (2022) notes that Spray who is an expert in the military sciences, note that, some people can develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) following sexual harassment. Mahoney (n.d.) posits that, after experiencing a traumatic event most individuals will experience avoidance, as they try to forget and disassociate themselves with anything related to the initial event. Mahoney (n.d.) further asserts that this can create lost friendships and relationships, poor job performance, social withdrawal, and potentially self-destructive behaviour.

### **Coping Strategies**

Vohlidavola (2015) notes that there are many ways to conceptualize responses to sexual harassment and coping strategies. Vohlidavola (2015) states that the strategies that students use to cope with their situation are divided into external (strategies focused on coping with the situation in the sense of its actual resolution) and internal (strategies focused on managing one's own emotions and mental coping with the situation). Vohlidavola (2015) notes that legitimating sexual harassment, denial, downplaying and normalization of sexual harassment are some of the most frequent strategies aimed at dealing with the problem emotionally. Popoola (n.d.) conducted research and identified some coping strategies that are used by female students in Nigerian University campuses. Popoola (n.d.) noted that the findings of the study on the coping strategies adopted by victims of peer sexual harassment indicated that avoiding the harasser was the most commonly used strategy against acts of sexual harassment such as unnecessary touching, verbal abuse of a sexual nature and physical assault. Popoola (n.d.) states that, ignoring or enduring the harassment was also commonly used against acts such as sexist remarks, sexual bugging and indecent sexual rumours. According to Humura (2019), Femme Forte in partnership with Akina Mama wa Afrika and Urgent Action Fund hosted an equip circle to address sexual harassment at institutions of higher learning. The equip circle created a safe space for young women to have an in-depth and thorough conversation on the definition and manifestation of sexual harassment. Humura (2019) states that the safe space created by the equip circle would provide an opportunity for the students to run for support without being ashamed or victimized.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The researcher used the descriptive research design because it incorporates both the quantitative and qualitative insights. The quantitative helped the researcher to investigate the number of female students who reported experiencing sexual harassment at the university. The approach also assisted the researcher to examine how sexual harassment experiences correlate with psychological distress. The qualitative approach helped the

researcher to examine how female students described the psychological impact of their sexual harassment experiences and also in assessing the coping mechanism that the female students employ.

### **Participants and Context**

The researcher administered a sexual experiences survey to all female students at the university campus. This survey was done to assess all the female students and to use the results to screen for research participants. The results indicated that all the students had at one time been subjected to sexual harassment directly or indirectly. The study sample consisted of 60 female students at the university campus in Zimbabwe. There are two faculties at that university campus and a sample was drawn from both the faculties through a two-stage stratified sampling process. The faculties were divided into two strata based on the students' field of study meaning that the two faculties became the two strata. In each strata a sample of 30 students was drawn from the academic departments through simple random sampling. Proportional stratification was applied to ensure that each stratum contributed equal number of participants. The samples from both strata were combined to form one sample size for the research which was 60.

### **Pilot Study**

The researcher randomly identified seven individuals from all the university's faculties to pre-test the questionnaire. The seven individuals were drawn from all the seven departments at the campus and all the academic levels were represented. The pre-test was done to assess the clarity of the questions in the questionnaire and also to evaluate the length of the instrument. The researcher obtained feedback from the participants through structured debriefing and analysed it. The questions that required refinement were noted and adjusted to sync with the research objectives. The researcher also documented the common trends for comparison with the responses from the main study.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through the use of questionnaires and the sexual experiences survey. The questionnaire was developed through the combination of both qualitative and quantitative elements to gather comprehensive data. The sexual experiences survey was conducted to obtaining information pertaining to the prevalence and types of sexual harassment at the institution.

### **Data Analysis**

Excel was used for all the statistical analyses and google forms were used for the tabulation of graphs and charts. After summarizing quantitative data, thematic analysis was used to analyse survey data based on the four thematic areas namely power dynamics, institutional culture, psychological effects and coping strategies.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations for this study were rigorously observed to ensure the protection and well-being of participants. Approval to conduct research on campus was secured from the University Registrar's office. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were required to complete an informed consent form. Participants' psychological and emotional safety was prioritized, with assurances provided if questions elicited distress. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, anonymity was strictly maintained. Participants were informed that their responses would remain anonymous, achieved by omitting names from questionnaires. For hardcopy questionnaires, a lockable drop box was utilized to further ensure foolproof anonymity. Electronic responses were password protected and slated for disposal post-publication of research findings. To mitigate the influence of power dynamics, particularly as the researcher was a university lecturer, open invitations were extended to all students, explicitly stating that participation was voluntary.

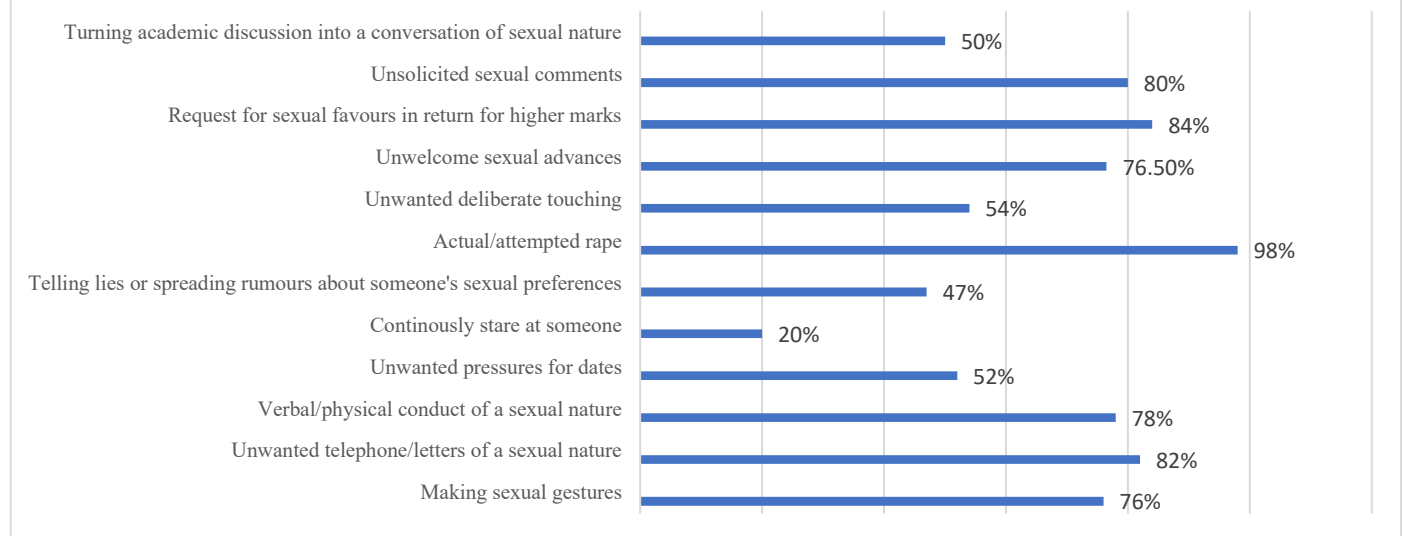
## **FINDINGS, DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

### **Student's awareness of sexual harassment**

The research sought to investigate the level of knowledge that the female students had with regards to sexual

harassment. The following figure shows the responses by all the participants:

**Figure 1: Distribution of acts that constitute sexual harassment**

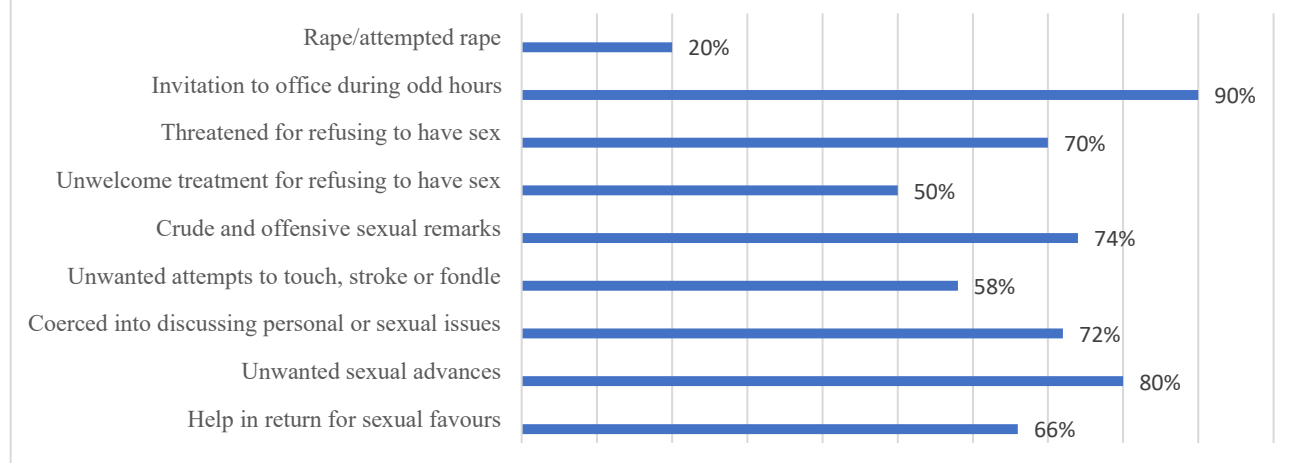


Female students demonstrated an understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment, such as actual/attempted rape, request for sexual favours in return for higher marks, and unwanted telephone/letters of a sexual nature. This suggests that clear and explicit acts of harassment are well-recognized. However, there's a notable gap in recognizing more subtle behaviors, with only 20% identifying continuously staring at someone as sexual harassment. This indicates a need for education that addresses the full spectrum of harassment, including non-verbal and less overt forms, which can still be deeply uncomfortable and harmful.

### Sexual Harassment Experiences at The University.

The researcher formulated a list of predetermined experiences which only required the respondent to indicate if she had experienced sexual harassment before. The following figure shows all the predetermined experiences and how the participants responded.

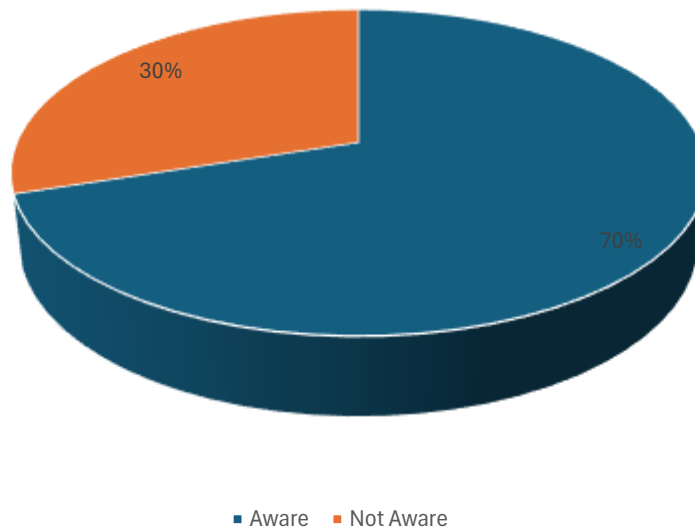
**Figure 2: Distribution of sexual harassment experiences at the university**



The data reveals a high prevalence of sexual harassment experiences among female students. Invitation to the office during odd hours was the most frequently reported experience. This finding suggests the involvement of individuals in positions of power, such as lecturers or administrators, who can leverage their authority. Unwanted sexual advances, crude and offensive sexual remarks and receiving threats for refusing to have sex are also, pointing to a pervasive issue within the university environment. The relatively lower reporting of rape/attempted rape might indicate underreporting due to fear, stigma, or a lack of trust in reporting mechanisms, despite it being the most recognized form of harassment.

## AWARENESS OF THE SEXUAL HARASSMENT POLICY BY STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY.

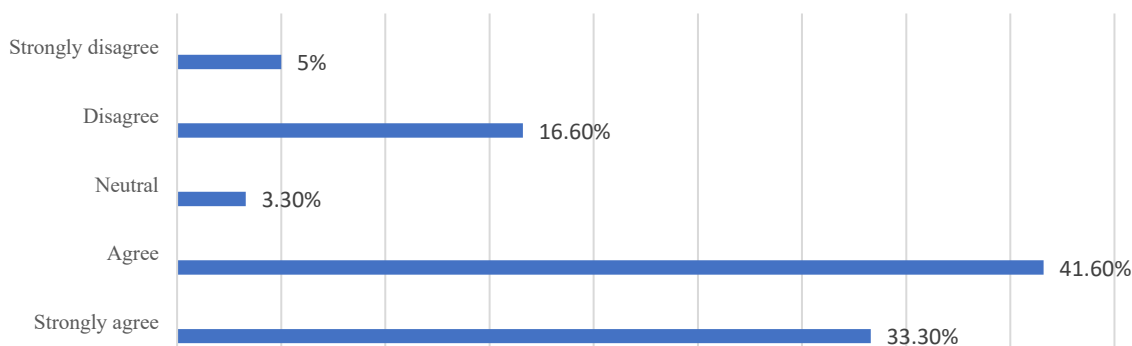
Figure 3: Awareness of the sexual harassment policy by students



70% of the students were aware of the sexual harassment policy. This is a positive indicator that the university has communicated the existence of such a policy. Furthermore, a significant proportion believed that a well-crafted policy could protect female students. However, the fact that 25% of the respondents either disagree, strongly disagree, or are neutral suggests that there may be a perception among a quarter of the student body that the policy is either ineffective or insufficient in providing actual protection. This could stem from past experiences with policy implementation, a lack of visible enforcement, or a general distrust in institutional responses.

### Sexual Harassment Policy and The Protection of Female Students from Sexual Abuse

Figure 4: Perception on the Sexual Harassment Policy as a tool for protecting female students



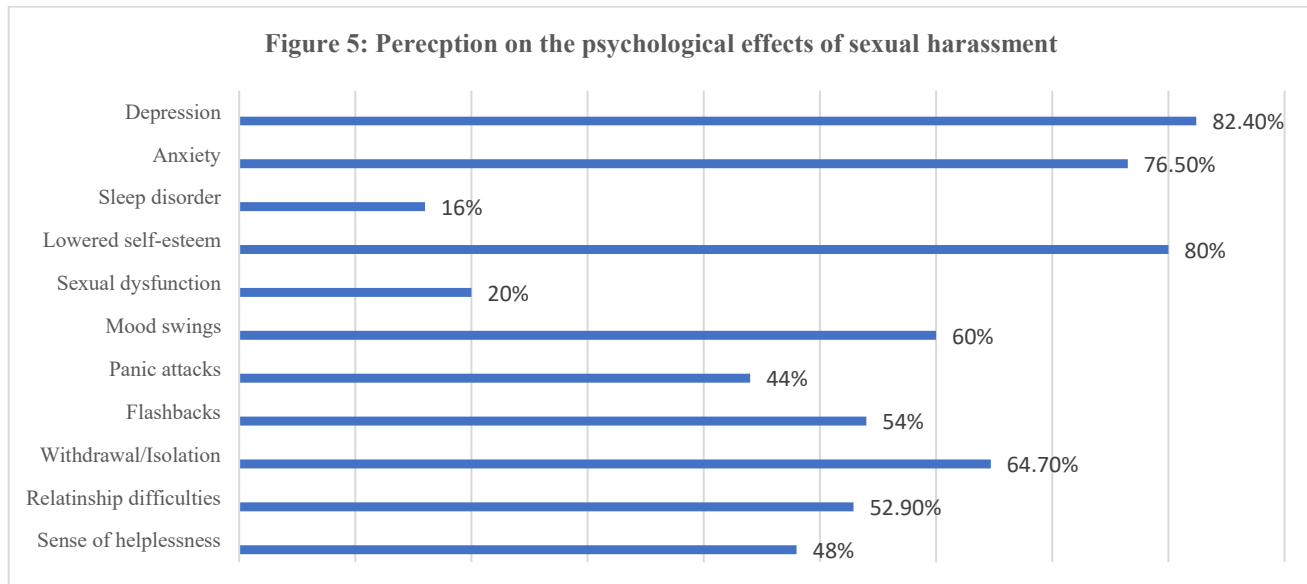
A combined total of 74.9% of respondents held a positive view of the policy's protective capacity. This is derived from 41.6% who agreed and 33.3% who strongly agreed that a well-crafted sexual harassment policy could protect female students. This indicates that a significant majority of female students believed in the potential of the policy to safeguard them from sexual harassment. A notable minority, 21.6%, expressed a negative perception. This group is composed of 16.6% who disagreed and 5% who strongly disagreed that the policy serves as a protective tool. This segment highlights a crucial area of concern, suggesting that these students may have reservations about the policy's implementation, enforcement, or overall effectiveness in practice. A small proportion of respondents, 3.3%, remained neutral. This group might be undecided, lack sufficient information, or have ambivalent feelings about the policy's protective capabilities.

## Procedure for reporting sexual harassment

70.4% of respondents knew the procedure to follow if sexually harassed. This high level of procedural knowledge despite the acknowledged underreporting of sexual harassments experiences in universities, highlights a critical disconnect. It implies that simply knowing how to report is not enough. Other barriers, such as fear of retaliation, lack of confidence in disciplinary action, social stigma, or a belief that reporting will not lead to a satisfactory outcome, are likely significant factors contributing to underreporting.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

The researcher compiled a list of psychological effects so that the respondents could indicate those that they felt were the ones that victims of sexual harassment experienced. The participants responded as follows:



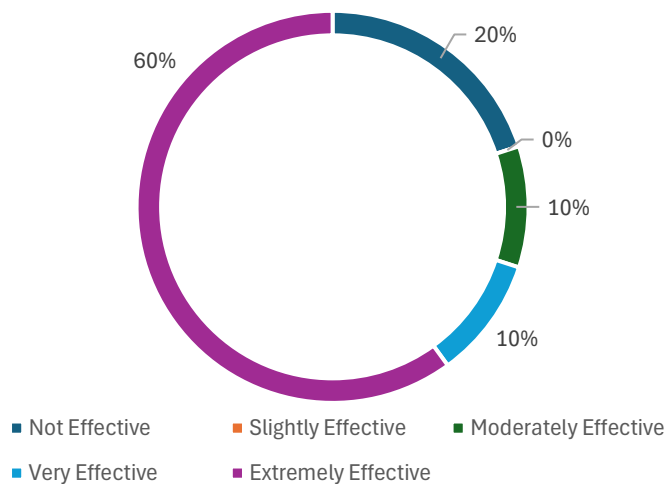
Depression was the most frequently identified psychological effect, with 82.4% of respondents selecting it. This suggests a strong consensus that depression is a very common outcome for victims. Lowered self-esteem and anxiety also rank very highly, indicating that these are widely recognized and have pervasive psychological impacts. In terms of the social and emotional impacts, the data indicated that a significant number of respondents identified withdrawal or isolation and mood swings, highlighting the profound impact on victim's social interactions and emotional stability. Challenges in stable relationships further underscore the lasting interpersonal difficulties faced by survivors. In view of the trauma-Related Symptoms, the data indicated that flashbacks were identified by 54% of the respondents, which points to the traumatic nature of sexual harassment experiences. Panic attacks, noted by 44% of the respondents, also fall into this category, indicating acute stress responses.

Nearly half of the respondents believed victims developed a sense of helplessness, which is a critical psychological state that can affect a victim's ability to cope, seek help, or recover. In terms of behavioral effects, sexual dysfunction and sleep disorder received the fewest responses. This could suggest that respondents are less aware of these specific physiological or behavioral manifestations, or that these effects are perceived as less common compared to the more overt emotional and psychological impacts. However, it's important to note that there were responses although few, indicating that these effects do occur.

The findings strongly emphasize that sexual harassment inflicts substantial psychological harm, with depression, lowered self-esteem, and anxiety being particularly prevalent. The data also highlights significant impacts on victims' social functioning, emotional regulation, and mental well-being, including trauma-related symptoms. The relatively lower recognition of sexual dysfunction and sleep disorders might suggest a need for broader awareness about the full spectrum of psychological and physical consequences of sexual harassment. This analysis underscores the critical need for comprehensive mental health support services tailored to survivors of sexual harassment.

## Effectiveness Of Counselling Sexual Harassment Victims

Figure 6: Effectiveness of Counselling Sexual Harassment Victims

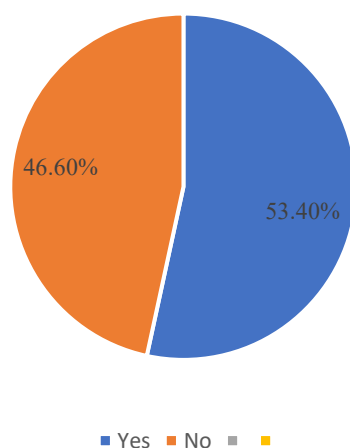


94.1% recommended counseling or therapy as a coping mechanism, and 60% considered it extremely effective. This indicates a strong student belief in the value of professional support. However, the 20% who found counseling not effective is a significant minority, suggesting that the quality or accessibility of counseling services may be inconsistent, or that some individuals may require different forms of support.

## Measures Put in Place to Help Female Students Cope with Sexual Harassment

The following is an illustration of the participant's responses when they were asked if they were aware of any measures put in place at the university to help victims cope with the effects of sexual harassment.

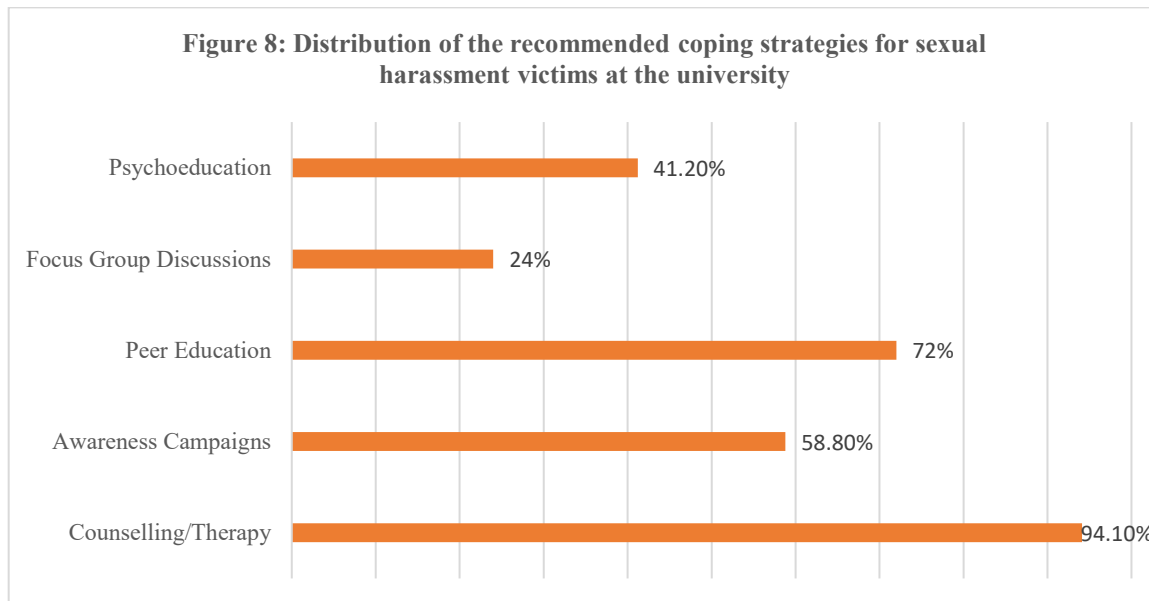
Figure 7: Distribution of knowledge of coping strategies for sexual harassment victims put in place at the university



53.4% of the respondents stated that they were aware of the coping measures implemented at the university to assist victims in dealing with the effects of sexual harassment. This suggests that just over half of the female student population is informed about the available support. Conversely, a significant 46.6% of the respondents indicated that they were not aware of these coping measures. This large percentage highlights a considerable gap in communication or accessibility of information. While it is positive that over half of the students are aware of coping mechanisms, the fact that nearly half are unaware is a critical concern. This lack of awareness could severely hinder a victim's ability to seek and utilize necessary support after experiencing sexual harassment. If students are unaware of the resources, the measures, however well-intentioned or effective they might be, cannot serve their purpose.

## Coping Mechanisms for Victims of Sexual Harassment

Since the female students were the ones who were facing challenges with sexual harassment, the researcher sought to probe them to initiate some mechanisms that they could use to cope with the effects of sexual harassment. The respondents were given a variety of coping mechanisms to identify those that they felt would be most appropriate and the results were as follows:



94.1% of the respondents recommended counseling or therapy as a primary coping mechanism for victims of sexual harassment. This strong consensus underscores the recognition among students of the critical role that professional psychological support plays in healing and recovery from such traumatic experiences. Peer education was identified as an effective coping strategy by 72% of the participants and this suggests that support and learning from peers who may have similar experiences, or who are educated on the topic, is seen as a valuable avenue for coping and understanding. 58.8% of the respondents indicated that awareness campaigns are effective and this points to the belief that widespread knowledge and open discussion about sexual harassment, its effects, and available resources can contribute positively to coping by fostering a more supportive and informed environment. Psychoeducation received 41.2% of the responses and focus group discussions received 24%. While lower than counseling and peer education, these percentages still indicate that structured educational approaches and group settings are considered beneficial for processing experiences and building coping skills. The findings reveal a strong and clear demand for formal and informal support systems. The high recommendation for counseling/therapy indicates that female students perceive sexual harassment as an issue requiring professional psychological intervention. The significant support for peer education and awareness campaigns also suggests that students value community-based approaches that foster understanding, solidarity, and a sense of shared experience.

## CONCLUSIONS

The researcher concluded that there were incidences of sexual harassment at the university. The study found that the participants were aware of what sexual harassment is as they were able to state what constituted sexual harassment. The participants had once experienced from male students, lecturers and or administrative staff some form of sexual harassment. Most of the literature reviewed in this study highlighted on how rampant cases of sexual harassment were in universities but also noted that there was under reporting of such cases. The study concluded that female students at the university were aware of the sexual harassment policy that was in place at the institution and that they regarded the policy as effective in protecting the female students from being sexually harassed. The university female students knew that sexual harassment had some psychological effects on the mental health of the victim. The researcher concluded that the participants were aware of the psychological effects of sexual harassment as they were able to identify some such as, depression, anxiety, lowered self-esteem, anger, withdrawal/isolation, flashbacks, sexual dysfunction, mood swings, relationship difficulties, sense of

helplessness, and panic attacks. The researcher noticed that victims of sexual harassment experienced some psychological effects and therefore require some coping mechanisms. The study established that, counseling or therapy, peer education, focus group discussions, and psychoeducation were coping mechanisms that could be put in place to help victims of sexual harassment.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The university should establish a sexual harassment committee responsible for sexual harassment issues at the institution. The committee should be made up of representatives from the university staff and students.
2. The university should mandatorily schedule sexual harassment awareness campaigns for both staff and students so that every individual becomes accustomed to what constitute sexual harassment. That knowledge will help the staff and students to know what is right or wrong when it comes to issues of sexual harassment.
3. The university should craft and avail a stand-alone sexual harassment policy that will be easily accessible by all students. The policy should not be part of the gender policy as is the case.
4. The university should incorporate sexual harassment in a contextual manner that suits the university in modules such as Gender studies that is done by every student at a certain academic level
5. The university should outsource the services of a qualified psychologist to periodically conduct mental health assessments to all female students. This will help to identify the challenges that the female students will be facing and notice those who would have not reported but suffering in silence.
6. The government should constitute another parliamentary portfolio to assess the psychological effects of sexual harassment on female students. The erstwhile committee had only investigated on how rampant the cases of sexual harassment were in institutions of higher learning
7. The university should proffer an enabling environment that encourages the victim to report to the police any case of sexual harassment.
8. There is room for further inquiry into this research where future studies should also investigate how sexual harassment affects the psychological well-being of the male students.

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