



ATTITUDE AND PERCEPTION AS ASSOCIATED RISK FACTORS OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT OF SECONDARY SCHOOL GIRLS IN ABAK LGA, AKWA IBOM STATE

Wisdom Matthew Akpan¹, Edidiong Anthony Ekoriko²

Anne Ekerette Ekanem³ and Inimfon Joseph Ottong⁴

¹⁻⁴Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Faculty of Social Sciences,

Akwa Ibom State University.

*Corresponding Author's Email: wisdommatthewakpan@gmail.com

Cite this article:

Wisdom M. A., Edidiong A. E., Anne E. E., Inimfon J. O. (2024), Attitude and Perception as Associated Risk Factors of Sexual Harassment of Secondary School Girls in Abak Lga, Akwa Ibom State. African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research 7(1), 174-184. DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-BFL1J7YK

Manuscript History

Received: 19 Nov 2023

Accepted: 9 Feb 2024

Published: 13 Mar 2024

Copyright © 2024 The Author(s).

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0), which permits anyone to share, use, reproduce and redistribute in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

ABSTRACT: *Sexual harassment occurs when people are targets of unwanted sexual comments, sexual gestures, or sexual actions and, for many years, this has been a major challenge among secondary school girls. School girls have been plagued by sexual harassment occurring in school; a place which was meant to be a safe environment where girls acquire knowledge needed for future development has become an unsafe environment where girls are sexually harassed. This study therefore examined how the perception and attitude of secondary school girls predict the possibility of their sexual harassment. To achieve the purpose of this study, 384 questionnaires were administered to secondary school girls through a 3 stage multi sampling. The data were analyzed using simple percentage and chi-square $P \leq 0.05$. The study found that students have poor perception and negative attitudes toward sexual harassment and these are risk factors of sexual harassment. The study recommends that students develop and maintain a positive perception and attitude so as to help them to avoid being sexually harassed. Students should report any case of sexual harassment in school and such complaints should be made to people in authority not just to friends and fellow students.*

KEYWORDS: Sexual harassment, school girls, attitude, perception, development.



INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is a global problem and every society has its own story to tell concerning the menace that has become an integral part of everyday life in many organizations including educational institutions (secondary schools). Everywhere the menace is found, it significantly hinders development and education of girls, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa including Nigeria, where the sexual harassment is high (Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey, 2008; Uduma, Samuel & Agbajef, 2015).

Sexual harassment is one of the commonest forms of gender-based violence encountered by girls in their everyday lives. Despite this reality, many factors have contributed to a widespread reluctance to acknowledge its existence and harmful effects on the victims. Sexual harassment of secondary school girls increases their vulnerability to early pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS, incomplete education, negative self-concept and low achievement (Bendixen & Kennair, 2017). Sexual harassment is being reported to be caused by multiple factors, including attitudinal and situational factors, etc.

Sexual harassment in schools is a major obstacle to universal schooling and the right to education for girls (UNICEF, 2019). One major challenge in the Nigerian educational system is the issue of sexual harassment. Though under-reported, sexual harassment assumed a critical dimension in Nigeria's institutions of learning (Aluede, 2000; Quick & McFadyen, 2018). Sexual harassment in school can undermine the victim's sense of personal dignity and safety, disrupt their education, and interfere with their ability to reach their full potential in life (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2011).

Sexual harassment is "unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours and other verbal or physical conduct of sexual nature" (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 1990; Bendixen *et al.*, 2017). Sexual harassment also includes intimidation, bullying or coercion of a sexual nature or the unwelcome or inappropriate promises of rewards in exchange for sexual favours.

The act has seriously eroded academic excellence in Nigeria's institutions of learning- primary, secondary or tertiary. Sexual harassment is a serious problem for all students at all educational levels. Students in elementary and secondary schools as well as vocational schools, apprenticeship programmes, colleges and universities can be victims of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment occurs in secondary schools at the important stage of life where teachers are expected to teach students what the curriculum is, its nature and how to avoid it through related subjects (Agbajor & Alordiah, 2022).

Previously, sexual harassment was viewed primarily as a form of violence experienced by women in the workplace (cooperate organization). As such, several researchers and scholars addressed the problem of sexual harassment in workplace and among university women. Today, there has been growing recognition and concern that sexual harassment begins much earlier than previously thought, and that it is a common feature of girls' lives in their homes, schools, communities and even churches.

Statistic by National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) (2002) and United Nation (2015) shows that worldwide, 15 million adolescent girls have experience sexual harassment. Women are usually victims and bear the overwhelming burden of sexual harassment (Andrews *et al.*, 2004; Uduma *et al.*, 2015) not only because they comprise the vast majority of victims



but also because they are vulnerable to sexual and reproductive health consequences such as unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortion and a higher risk of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, during vaginal intercourse (Smit & Plessis, 2011). In most cases, victims of sexual harassment are usually women, while men are the perpetrators. National Sexual Violence Resource Center (2002) reported that 91% of sexually harassed victims are girls. However, the statement is not to undermine the experiences and effect of such violence on men who have in some cases been victims. About 3 in every 4 women experience sexual harassment many of whom are reported to be verbal sexual harassment and unwelcomed sexual touching (Chatterjee, 2018).

Nevertheless, the effects of sexual harassment can vary depending on the individual, severity and duration of the harassment. However, in many situations, sexual harassment can have life altering effects particularly when they involve severe/chronic abuses and/or retaliation against a victim who complains about it openly (Chatterjee, 2018). Suicide, negative self-concept, low self-esteem and anxiety have been reported to be aftermaths of chronic sexual harassment. Sexual harassment has reduced many students' ability to participate in extracurricular activities or attend classes (Chatterjee, 2018).

This horrendous violation of human right has taken root in secondary schools and has effects on the individual (adolescent) and even a more devastating effect on the girl-child's education and further places the attainment of educational goals specified in the post-primary education curriculum in jeopardy (Bendixen *et al.*, 2017). Secondary school girls are generally adolescent, a stage of life where lasting self-image is likely to be formed and carried along for a lifetime. Although self-image/concept is not static but dynamic, it can be changed over time due to experience and exposure. However, the self-image formed during adolescence is likely to significantly impact the individual for a lifetime.

It is clear that sexual harassment is pervasive and has multiple negative effects on women and society at large. Teens who are sexually harassed are faced with a lot of challenges generally, but how their perceptions and attitude predicts the possibility of their harassment is an issue that has received inadequate attention. This problem is more common and enormous than often reported because many students are scared or too embarrassed to report sexual harassment (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2002; Cortina & Berdahl, 2008).

Furthermore, considering that in the nearest future, these harassed girls grow up to be not just women but possibly mothers, caregivers, national leaders, etc., the next generation of women are likely to be women with negative self-image and low self-esteem and the society stands to bear the burden. Therefore, there is a need to address the issue of sexual harassment and understanding how the perception and attitude of secondary female students contribute to their sexual harassment is important.

However, while there are considerable research works related to the sexual harassment of women, the focus is usually on sexual harassment in the workplace and university, sexual harassments and academic performance, sexual harassments and suicide, and prevalence and forms of sexual harassment, but how the attitude and perception of girls towards sexual harassment contribute to their sexual harassment is still unknown. Relatively, little attention has been paid to how their attitude and perception encourage sexual harassment of secondary school students especially in Akwa Ibom State. Against this background, this paper examined



the perception and attitude of secondary school students in Abak L.G.A towards sexual harassment.

METHODOLOGY

Descriptive survey design was adopted for the study; it describes perception and attitude as predictors of the sexual harassment of secondary school girls in Abak LGA. The study population was female secondary school students who reside in Abak LGA. The total number of students could not be ascertained at the time of data collection. Therefore, Cochran's formula for calculating the infinite population was used to calculate the sample size. The sample size was 384. The sample size (study population) was achieved through a multi stage sampling. At stage one, four schools were purposely selected to exclude all boys' schools. At stage 2, in the four selected schools, all classes, JSS 1 – SSS 3, were all sampled so no method was used here. At stage 3, sixteen questionnaires were administered per class year (JSS 1 – SSS 3) using simple random sampling. Data for the study was derived through the administration of questionnaire, which served as the main instrument of data collection for the study.

The data generated for the study were subjected to statistical analysis using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS v21); the analysis involved the use of univariate analysis. Descriptive statistics (simple percentage) was used to analyse the socio-economic and demographic characteristic, while chi-square was used to test the association between perception and attitude of secondary students towards sexual harassment.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Described in Table 1 are the background characteristics of respondents: the characteristics are age, educational class and religion.

A greater percentage of the respondents (25%) were 15 years old while the least percentage (3%) of respondents were 17 and 18 years old. The SSS 3 class had the highest percentage of respondents (19%) while JSS 1 had the least percentage of respondents (13%). More than half (94.4%) of respondents were Christians while Muslims and African traditional religion (ATR) both had the least percent (1%).

Table 1: Background Characteristics of Respondents

Background characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age		
12	61	18
13	51	15
14	77	23
15	86	25
16	44	13

17	9	3
18	10	3
Class		
JSS 1	44	13
JSS 2	49	15
JSS 3	58	17
SSS 1	61	18
SSS 2	62	18
SSS 3	64	19
Religion		
Christianity	317	94
Muslims	4	1
ATR	2	1
Other	15	4

Prevalence of Sexual Harassment

The study explored the level of prevalence of sexual harassment among secondary school students in Abak.

Figure 1: Experience of Sexual Harassment

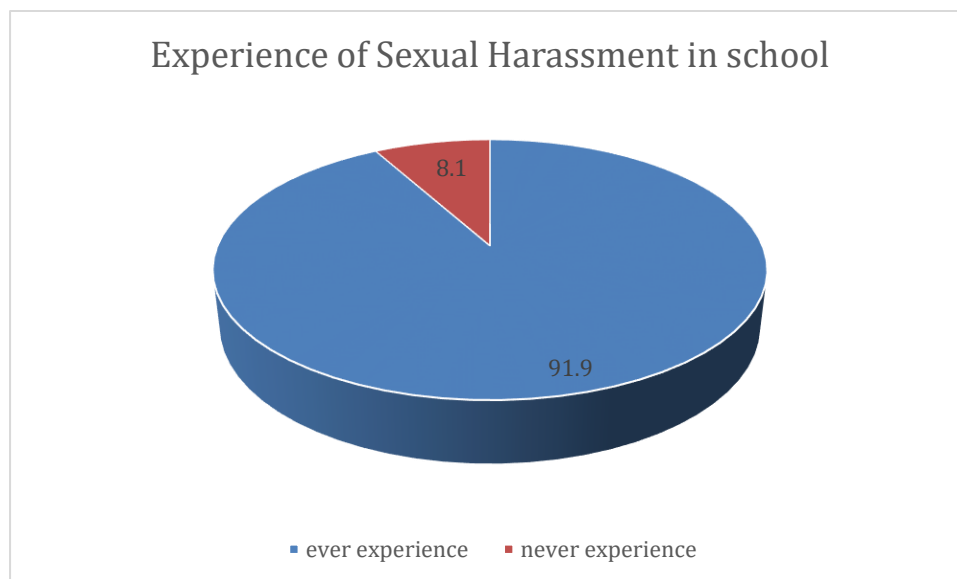
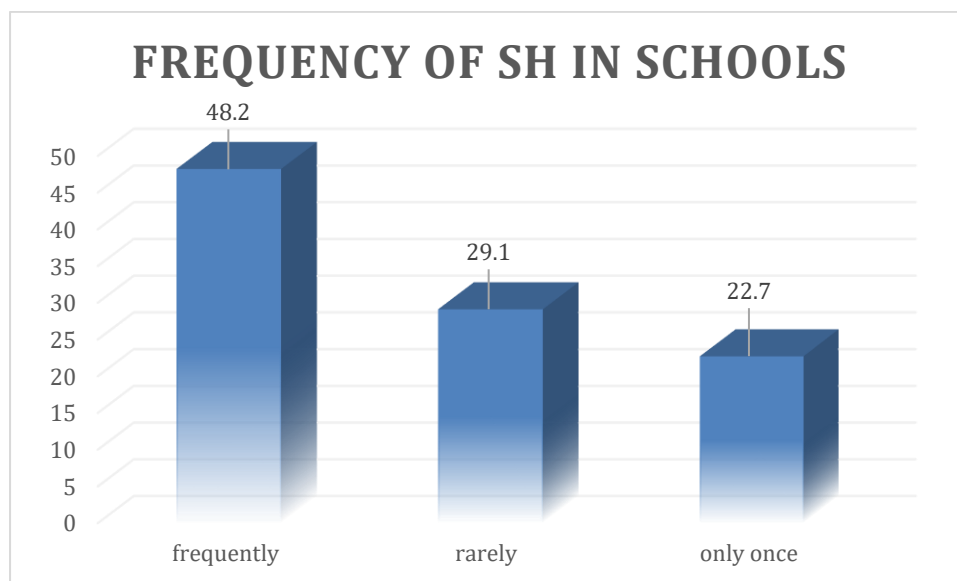


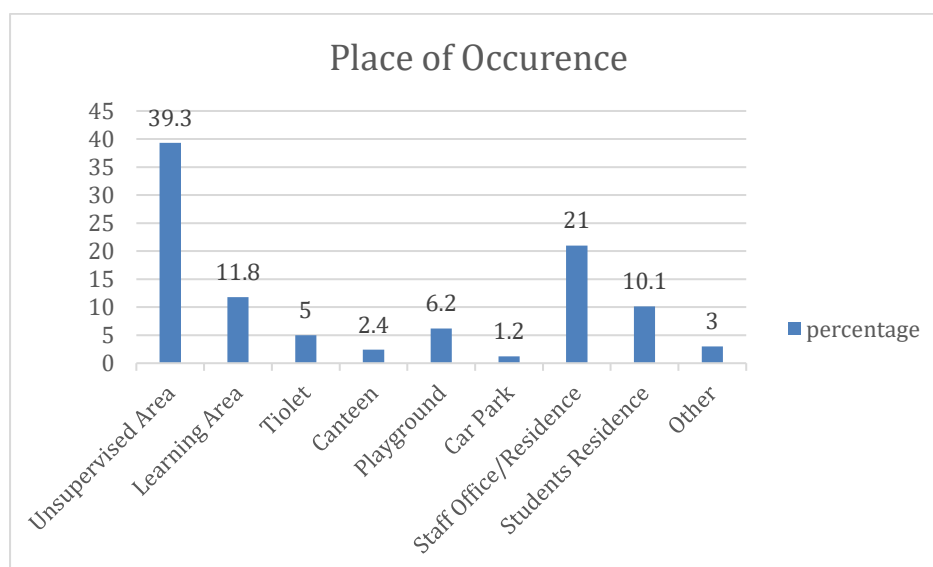
Figure 1 shows that 91.9% of the total respondents reported to have experienced sexual harassment while in school while 8.1% reported to have had no such experience in school.

Figure 2: Occurrence of Sexual harassment



Almost half of the respondents who reported to have experienced sexual harassment (48.2%) said sexual harassment occurred frequently while the least percentage of respondents 22.7% said it occurred only once.

Figure 3: Place of Occurrence of Sexual Harassment



Among girls who experienced sexual harassment in schools, a greater percentage of respondents (39.3%) reported that sexual harassment usually occurred in unsupervised areas, while the least percentage of respondents 1.2% reported that it rarely occurred in car parks.

**Table 2: Attitudinal and Perceptual Factors as Associated Risk Factors of Sexual Harassment**

Variables	Frequency of sexual harassment			
	Frequently	Rarely	Only once	Test of statistics
Sexual Harassment is offensive Agree Disagree	31(27.0) 139(58.4)	17(14.7) 86(36.1)	67(58.3) 13(5.5)	X ² = 123.410 d= 2 p= 0.000
Women provoke men to Sexually Harass Agree Disagree	105(44.1) 65(56.5)	60(25.2) 43(37.4)	73(30.7) 7(6.1)	X ² = 27.099 d= 2 p= 0.000
Reported incidence of SH to appropriate authority Agree Disagree	75(52.1) 5(2.4)	57(39.6) 46(22.0)	12(8.3) 158(75.6)	X ² = 182.016 d= 2 p= 0.000
Men should be punish for sexually harassing Agree Disagree	70(57.9) 10(4.3)	30(24.8) 73(31.5)	21(17.4) 149(64.2)	X ² = 138.077 d= 2 p= 0.000

Here is a univariate analysis of perceptual and attitudinal factors that are associated with sexual harassment of secondary school girls.

In Model 1, specifically, a greater percentage of girls reported that SH is not offensive and a significant association was found between the attitudes of women who reported that sexual harassment is not offensive and their experience of sexual harassment.

In Model 2, a greater percentage of study respondents agreed that it is girls who provoke men to sexually harass them; the study found a significant association between the women who reported that girls provoke men to sexually harass them.

In Model 3, a greater percentage of the respondent reported that when sexual harassment occurs, they do not report to appropriate authority. A significant association was found between reporting of sexual harassment and the occurrence of sexual harassment.

In Model 4, a greater percentage of study respondents reported that men who sexually harass should not be punished. A significant association was found between girls' attitude of pity for harassers and their sexual harassment.



DISCUSSION

Discussion on Prevalence of Sexual Harassment

The overall prevalence of sexual harassment reveals that a great percentage of respondents had experienced sexual harassment. This is similar to the study conducted in Canada by MacMillan, Nierobisz and Welsh (2000) and Lynn (2009) where 81% to 85% of female participants reported experiencing some form of harassment and many had been subjected to more than one type of harassment. Although the rate is higher than what is reported in literature but it is consistent with reports by Bendixen *et al.* (2017) that sexual harassment occurs in secondary schools. Similarly, this finding is in consonance with the finding of AAUW national survey which indicated that sexual harassment in school is pervasive and a typical experience for students regardless of age (Young, Heath, Ashbaker, & Smith, 2008) and WHO (2012) and Sakellari, E., Berglund, M., Santala, E., Bacatum, C., Sousa, J., Aarnio, H., Kubiliutė, L., Prapas, C. and Lagiou, A. (2022) which reported that sexual harassment frequently occurs in “safe” places, such as schools, and perpetrators include teachers and peers.

It is more worrisome to know that most of the respondents reported that this heinous act occurs frequently and it was revealed that it mostly occurs in unsupervised areas like unused classrooms, etc. Such areas tend to be fertile grounds for such heinous practices since they are not supervised. Furthermore, since adolescence is a period where lasting self-image is formed, the effect of such experience by adolescent girls is enormous; it affects the education of victims. They are likely to fear the school environment as it is unsafe, thereby putting their education in jeopardy. Schools are key sites in which norms are established, including those supportive of a ‘rape culture’ which normalizes and excuses sexual violence (Sweeting, Blake, Riddell, Barrett, & Mitchell, 2022).

Nearly half of the girls reported that sexual harassment occurs frequently. This finding was in line with the finding of Nielsen (2000) and Lynn (2009) that a greater percentage of women agreed to being the victims of sexual harassment which occurs often. One would have expected that with the growing sensitization about sexual harassment, the act would have reduced and would have been reported to occur once or rarely; yet, girls are still being sexually harassed more often. Their attitude of not reporting could be a contributing factor to the lack of or slow decline of sexual harassment.

Discussion on Attitude and Perception as Associated Risk Factors of Sexual Harassment

It was found that girls’ poor attitude and perception is associated with sexual harassment. Girls’ perception of sexual harassment as not being offensive, their perception that women provoke men to sexually harass girls, their poor attitude of not reporting, and their attitude that men who sexually harass should not be punished were all found to be significantly associated with sexual harassment of secondary school girls.

This association is likely true because if girls do not find sexual harassment offensive, they are less likely to frown at such behaviour and the harassment is likely to reoccur, whereas, if such behaviour is found to be offensive and frowned at, the perpetrator is more likely to desist. As explained by Lin, Babbitt, Brown and Sleight (2016), it is the person who receives the offensive behaviour that decides if it is harassment or not. Furthermore, it can be deduced from the above statement that the harasser may not see his or her behaviour as sexually harassing, and when



the person being harassed may not also see such behaviour as sexual harassment, the behavior (harassment) is likely to be repeated.

Also, a greater percentage of the study respondents believed that it is women who provoke men to sexually harass them. With this kind of perception, women are less likely to blame their harassers for sexually harassing them, hence the more reason why men may keep on sexually harassing women in such society and organization. If girls keep on justifying why men harass them, then the harassment is likely to keep on occurring.

It was found that a lot of respondents have a poor attitude of not reporting the incidence of sexual harassment to appropriate authority; they rather prefer to discuss it with friends and fellow students instead of reporting to parents and school management. This finding is similar to the findings of Kullima, Kawuwa, Audu, Mairiga and Bukar (2019) which estimated that only 15% of sexual harassment victims file any type of formal complaint. Friends and fellow students or any other inappropriate authority may not have the power to act or sanction the harasser and so it becomes almost like not reporting; this further explains why this violent act against women is so high because harassers are not being reported and no action is taken that can likely deter men from harassing.

According to Martínez (2018), it may be because schools lack confidential mechanisms to ensure students can report school-related sexual abuse. Students, who are affected by deeply entrenched taboos, stigma associated with reporting sexual abuses, do not get comprehensive sexuality and reproductive health education in schools. Another reason maybe as Doodaaa, Osei-Owusu, Kyeic, Eshun, and Osei-Owusu (2022) reported that many women are hesitant to disclose sexual harassment out of shame or fear of retaliation. However, the findings of this study is supported by the study conducted by Suleiman (2017) which reported that victims' poor attitude of not reporting abuse is factor responsible for sexual harassment.

Most of the study respondents reported that men who sexually harass should not be punished; similarly, this finding is supported by the findings of Kullima *et al.* (2019) which reported that only 6% of victims of harassment take formal action against their harasser. Victims, even when they report to appropriate authority, fail to take formal action against the perpetrators. This may account for the reason why most of the victims do not report sexual harassment whenever it occurs. This is girls having pity for their harassers and the perpetrators (harassers) may continue this violent act (sexual harassment) because they know the victims will continue to pity and forgive them. Perceptions of sexual harassment vary according to some factors: gender, context, and perceiver's ideology. The strategies most commonly used by women to cope with harassment range from avoiding or ignoring the harasser to confronting the harasser or reporting the incident. Some women may believe that women who confront their harasser would be evaluated negatively by men.

CONCLUSION

This study focused on the attitude and perception of secondary school girls toward sexual harassment in Abak. Sexual harassment is prevalent in secondary schools; harassment is more prevalent in unsupervised areas in school compounds and it occurs frequently. Consequently, this harassment may have implications for these adolescent girls most especially since adolescence is a period where lasting self-image is formed; girls may feel unsafe in school



environments which can lead them to abandon school, putting their educational pursuit in jeopardy, and the usefulness of education to girls cannot be overemphasized as they will grow to become mothers in the future.

Adolescent girls' attitude and perception of sexual harassment were poor; this also accounted for the prevalent and frequent occurrence of the harassment. This could be fairly understandable because these girls are actually young; they should be educated to know that it is not their fault that a man harasses them. As such, they should endeavour to report to higher and appropriate authority. Girls should be sensitized to know that it is okay to punish men that harass them as this will in turn reduce the sexual harassment they face frequently and will also have implications in their development and wellbeing.

Knowing that sexual harassment is still a serious issue in the educational sector despite the several efforts to curb the menace, this study sets out to shed more light on how self-concept of students can influence the sexual harassment consequences on its victim. The study therefore concludes that self-concept is associated with sexual harassment of students; those with negative self-concept are likely to be harassed.

REFERENCES

- Agbajor, H. & Alordiah C. (2022). Sexual harassment among secondary school students in Koko Municipal Area: counselling implications For curriculum implementation. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Gender and Women Development Studies*. 4(2).
- American Association of University Women (2001). Harassment at school survey.
- Bendixen, M., & Kennair, L. (2017). Advances in the understanding of same-sex and opposite-sex sexual harassment. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 38, 583–591. doi:10.1016/j.evohumbehav.1017.01.001
- Chatterjee, R. (2018). A new Survey finds 81 percent of women have experienced sexual harassment www.npr.org/sections/two-way
- Cortina, L. & Berdahl, J. (2008) Sexual harassment in organizations: A decade of research in review. DOI: 10.4135/9781849200448.n26
- Doodaaa, V., Osei-Owusu, B., Kyeic, E., Eshun, I. & Osei-Owusu E. (2022). Sexual harassment against female students in senior high schools in the Techiman Municipality of Bono East Region of Ghana. *American Academic Scientific Research Journal for Engineering, Technology, and Sciences (ASRJETS)* Vol 86: 1, pp131-142. <http://asrjetsjournal.org>.
- Kullima, A., Kawuwa, M., Audu, B., Mairiga, A. & Bukar, M. (2019). Sexual assault against female Nigerian students. *African Journal of Reproductive Health*. DOI: 10.1016/S0020-7292(12)60808
- Lin, X., Babbitt, L., Brown, D., & Sleigh, C. (2016). Sexual harassment in the workplace: theory, evidence and remediation.
- Lynn, T. (2009). The relationship of gender-based public harassment to body image, self-esteem, and avoidance behavior a dissertation submitted to the School of graduate studies and research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree doctor of psychology. Indiana University of Pennsylvania.
- Martínez, E., (2018). It's not normal: sexual exploitation, harassment and abuse in secondary schools in Senegal. *Human Rights Watch*. P 85



- Ontario Human Rights Commission (2011). Sexual harassment in education.
- Quick, J., & McFadyen, M. (2018). Sexual harassment: have we made any progress? *Journal of occupational health psychology* 22(3) 286–298. DOI: 10.1177/0098628318816183.
- Sakellari, E., Berglund, M., Santala, E., Bacatum, C., Sousa, J., Aarnio, H., Kubiliutė, L., Prapas, C. & Lagiou, A., (2022). The perceptions of sexual harassment among adolescents of four European countries doi: 10.3390/children9101551.
- Smit, D., & Plessis, V. (2011) Sexual harassment in the education sector. *PER/PELJ*, 6(14). [Doi.org/10.4314/pelj.v14i6.6](https://doi.org/10.4314/pelj.v14i6.6)
- Suleiman, M. (2017). Perception of sexual harassment among female students of tertiary institutions in Northern Nigeria *Ife Social Sciences Review* 25(2) 2017, 80 - 89 www.issr.oauife.edu.ng/journal
- Sun Newspaper (2020). Sexual harassment in Nigeria's institution. Accessed March 2022.
- Sweeting H, Blake C, Riddell J, Barrett S, Mitchell, K. (2022). Sexual harassment in secondary school: prevalence and ambiguities. A mixed methods study in Scottish schools. *PLoS ONE* 17(2): doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0262248.
- Uduma, P., Samuel, E., & Agbaje, O. (2015). Prevalence and forms of sexual harassment of girls by male students of secondary schools in Ohafia LGA, Abia State. *Science Journal of Public Health*, 3(3), 433-444. doi: 10.11648/j.sjph.20150303.30
- Unicef. (2019). Unicef Strategy to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment.
- United Nation. (2015). The fight against sexual violence. Accessed: Accessed June 2023
- Young, E., Heath, M., Ashbaker, B., & Smith, B. (2008). Sexual harassment among students with educational disabilities: Perspectives of special educators. Doi 10.1177/0741932507311635