

PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND DRIVERS OF REPORTING IN TWO HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN BULAWAYO, ZIMBABWE

Thulani Dube, Siphilisiwe B Ncube & Simon Mlotshwa,

ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment in institutions of higher learning is recognized as a violation of the right to life, liberty and equality for women. This study investigated the knowledge and perceptions of sexual harassment by female students in two higher learning institutions in Bulawayo. The study assessed the understanding of the concept of sexual harassment, the experiences of female students with sexual harassment, and how they respond to sexual harassment offences perpetrated against them. The study also focused on the drivers of reporting amongst victims of sexual harassment at the targeted institutions. The study adopted a mixed methods approach in data collection involving a structured survey questionnaire, key informant interviews and focus group discussions targeting both male and female students in the targeted study sites. The study established that female students are more likely to experience sexual harassment than male students. The study also established that the definition of the concept of sexual harassment was often problematic for uninformed victims. This, and other factors led to low levels of reporting of sexual harassment and the continued perpetration of this vice. We recommend a raft of measures to address emerging issues from this research.

Keywords: Sexual Harassment, Universities, Colleges, Reporting, Knowledge, Attitudes

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment in institutions of higher learning is recognized as a violation of the right to life, liberty and equality for women (Pololi et. al, 2020; Swedish Research Council, 2018; Numhauser-Henning & Laulom, 2012; McGolgan, 2004). The negative effects of sexual harassment are diverse and include feelings of insecurity. Sexual harassment can also discourage women from participation in institutions of higher learning (Keplinger, Johnson, Kirk & Barnes, 2019; Cortina, & Berdahl, 2008; Houle et. al, 2011). It makes women feel insecure, and therefore, it discourages their participation in institutions of higher learning and workspaces (AHRC, 2017). This adversely affects their economic and social progress in life (Bala, 2016). Besides the fact that sexual harassment is a serious act of misconduct in the workspace, it is important to note that sexual harassment also has a negative impact on the company brand and reputation if not properly handled (Bala, S., 2016). It is therefore essential that measures are taken to eliminate sexual harassment in workspaces and institutions of higher learning. This study investigated the perceptions of sexual harassment and its reporting by female students in two selected institutions in Bulawayo. The two

institutions had their names anonymized in order to protect their identity. The study assessed female students' understanding of the concept of sexual harassment, and how they determined the question of whether or not to report the offender. Literature that examines the experiences of women on sexual harassment in Zimbabwe is mostly antiquated (see Chireshe & Chireshe, 2009; Shumba & Matina, 2002). Much of that literature was published over a decade ago and can no longer account for rapidly changing gender perceptions (Zindi, 1994). There is a general dearth of literature on sexual harassment in Zimbabwe and the global south in general, and thus making gender planning and policy making difficult (Quick & McFadyen, 2017).

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

- i. What is the knowledge, attitudes and perceptions of students about sexual harassment in higher learning institutions in Bulawayo?
- ii. What is the prevalence rate of sexual harassment in the targeted higher learning institutions?
- iii. How can sexual harassment be characterised in higher learning institutions?
- iv. What are the factors that determine the reporting or non-reporting of sexual harassment in higher learning institutions in Bulawayo?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Definition of Sexual Harassment

The conceptualisation of sexual harassment has been diverse across the various disciplines and contexts. The way that people define sexual harassment is very important because it determines what is perceived as sexual harassment, and ultimately what is reported (Uggen & Blackstone, 2004 in Minnottee and Legerski, 2019). Some studies have found out that the definition people hold about sexual harassment determines how they react when they are sexually harassed (Minnottee and Legerski, 2019). Paludi et. al (2006) have argued that asking direct questions about sexual harassment often elicits wrong answers because individuals have a different understanding about sexual harassment really is. They argue that individuals typically do not understand what sexual harassment is. Furthermore, some studies have gone further to argue that our personal social standing in institutions and our level of awareness of human rights is also an important determinant of our responses (Holland & Cortina, 2013 in Minnottee and Legerski, 2019). Some studies have therefore concluded that knowledge levels on sexual harassment determine the levels of sexual harassment reporting in institutions (Minnottee and Legerski, 2019).

The challenges that come with the definition of the notion of sexual harassment has led to much energy being expended by researchers on arguing about the definition of sexual harassment more than on other issues that pertain to the subject (Quick & McFadyen, 2017). Some researchers have therefore argued that it is necessary to train university students and workers in different workspaces about what really constitutes sexual harassment in order to enable them to report it when they encounter it (Paludi et. al, 2006). These recommendations stem from research findings that show varying perceptions globally about sexual harassment with some cultures defining it only in terms of unwanted touching while others also recognize unwanted utterances, whereas

others also acknowledge more subtle innuendos. This failure to define sexual harassment has led to the 'hidden nature' of the phenomenon in college and university campuses (Paludi et. al, 2006).

These arguments breed the question whether or not there is need at all to try to reach a global consensus with regards to the definition of sexual harassment given the broad array of definitions and views that are affected by contexts and form of exposure, amongst other factors. It has been argued that it is important to understand context when investigating the definition of sexual harassment (Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020). The various definitions which are largely influenced by context have led to a situation where there is no single widely accepted definition of sexual harassment (Quick & McFadyen 2017).

The United States Department of Education's Office on Civil Rights recognizes two different types of sexual harassment in academic institutions. The first one is termed *quid pro quo*. The second one is defined as a *hostile environment*. *Quid pro quo* sexual harassment is when sexual favors are demanded in return for some type of educational benefit or favor including higher grades or participation in an academic programme.

Quid pro quo sexual harassment involves an individual with organizational power who either expressly or implicitly ties an academic or employment decision or action to the response of an individual to unwelcome sexual advances. Thus, a teacher may promise a reward to a student for complying with sexual requests (e.g., a better grade, letter of recommendation for college or a job) or threaten a student for failing to comply with the sexual requests (Paludi et al, 2006:113).

Hostile environment sexual harassment involves the creation of an environment, through sexual conduct, that is so severe as to limit a student's ability to participate in and benefit from educational activities. This could include a persistent sending of unsolicited sexual images to a classmate's phone or email (Klein and Martin, 2019).

Hostile environment sexual harassment involves a situation where an atmosphere or climate is created by a professor, staff, or other students in the classroom, or other area on campus that makes it difficult, if not impossible, for a student to study and learn because the atmosphere is perceived by the student to be intimidating, offensive, and hostile (Paludi et. al, 2006:113).

In an earlier study Fitzgerald et al.'s (1988) identified a three-factor definition that has been broadly used in sexual harassments studies. The definition provides an exhaustive classification scheme in sexual harassment cases. According to this model, behaviours indicative of sexual harassment fall into three groups, namely gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion. Gender harassment, the most common type of sexual harassment, involves verbal and non-verbal behaviors which are derogatory and hostile to women. Unwanted sexual attention involves such issues as repeated requests for dates that are not wanted. Finally, sexual coercion entails 'quid pro quo' behaviours that often come with work or academic related benefits claimable upon accepting sexual cooperation (Butler and Chung-Yan, 2011: 732).

A widely used legal definition was generated by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) (2007) which stated that sexual harassment is;

unwanted or unwelcome physical and verbal behaviours of a sexual nature''. These behaviours include, inappropriate touching, displaying offensive pictures or posters, making lewd jokes or remarks, and making improper sexual requests or suggestions (OHRC, 2007 cited in (Butler and Chung-Yan, 2011: 731).

Prevalence of Sexual Harassment – General and Global

In spite of sexual harassment being an issue that violates constitutions of many countries, it remains an active problem everywhere globally in workspaces and in institutions of higher learning (Minnote and Lergeki, 2019). Some researchers have described sexual harassment as 'a chronic occupational health problem, denoting the fact that the phenomenon is widespread globally (Quick & McFadyen, 2017). It is notable that the bulk of sexual harassment research that has been conducted was mostly done on white European women. There are still gaps that exist in understanding the notion of sexual harassment in other cultures, including in African cultures (Quick, & McFadyen, 2017).

According to the UN Women (2019) (cited in Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020), one in approximately 33% of women globally are exposed to physical or sexual violence from another person. These statistics were higher in the European Union where it was estimated that between 45% and 55% of women had been exposed to sexual harassment during their working lives. The study by Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020) also noted that nine out of ten countries globally have laws against sexual harassment in general. However, six out of ten countries globally lacked adequate laws against sexual harassment in higher learning institutions and schools. Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020) further argue that certain groups in society that are already marginalized have a higher risk of being sexually harassed. In the context of the European Union these groups include students who are race typed as non-white, or students with functional disabilities and those who are lesbian or bisexual.

Some studies have suggested that sexual harassment is so rife in workspaces that it is projected that one in every two women will experience sexual harassment during their working lives (Butler and Chung-Yan, 2011:729). They also argue that although female employees who would have been harassed are often encouraged to report their harassers, reporting is usually not done due to a number of reasons. Some scholars have attributed this under reporting to fact that victims fear threats to their esteem, as well as the fear of secondary victimisation (Keplinger, Johnson, Kirk & Barnes, 2019). This study sought to interrogate the challenges that victims of sexual harassment may encounter in trying to report their harassers in the Zimbabwean context.

Prevalence of Sexual Harassment in Higher Education

Studies globally have shown that sexual harassment is a major problem in Universities and higher learning institutions (Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020; Pololi et. al, 2020). Keplinger, Johnson, Kirk & Barnes (2019) assert that 'awareness about the sexual harassment of women over the last

two years has stunned the world'. A national study conducted in the United States of America in 2005 found out that the majority of students had experienced sexual harassment (Hill and Silva cited in Paludi et. al, 2006). Approximately one third of the respondents indicated that they had been forcibly touched, grabbed or made to do something sexual against their will. The study also established that both men and women were equally likely to be victims of sexual harassment albeit in different ways. In another study conducted by Aycock et. al (2019) in male dominated fields of study, the prevalence was even higher. Three quarters of the female students reported to have experienced at least one form of sexual harassment.

In a study conducted by Pololi et al (2020) amongst students studying medicine in the United States, observing the high levels of sexual harassment, they concluded that;

It is chilling to realize the widespread extent of this unprofessional behavior among physicians in medical training programs. In our institutions of healing, learning, and discovery, gender bias and harassment must be eliminated (Pololi et al, 2020)

The study established that students studying surgery had a mean of 12% of females reporting that they had suffered some form of sexual harassment. The study also established that there was an association between sexual harassment and distress amongst the affected students. It must be noted that this study was based on students studying medicine only.

Impact of Sexual Harassment

Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020:8) have argued that there is general agreement amongst researchers that the impact of sexual harassment has many dimensions and the impacts are quite serious regardless of whether we look at employees in working life or students in institutions of higher learning. Houle et. al (2011) assert that the impact of sexual harassment can stay with the victim for over a decade after the event. There are several reasons why the issue of sexual harassment should be taken seriously by companies and institutions of higher learning. McLaughlin, Uggen & Blackstone (2017) calculated that in 2015 alone, sexual harassment charges that were filed with the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission cost firms and the people responsible for harassing approximately \$46 million. This amount excluded monetary damages that were awarded through litigation processes. These figures are an underestimation of the total costs that could be incurred since most harassment incidences go unreported with a number of them being settled out of court. Besides the economic losses that accrue to the firm and the harasser, major losses also occur to the victims of sexual harassment. McLaughlin, Uggen & Blackstone (2017) have argued that, because many of the victims fail to report the harasser, they may decide to quit the job or their studies instead which results in dire personal economic consequences that go unreported.

Victims of sexual harassment in higher institutions of learning often face difficulties in successfully completing their academic programs which are the gateway to successful employment and earning an income (AHRC 2017). Further to these challenges, they may also experience emotional and related physical health challenges (Klein and Martin, 2019). Research has generally shown that these career related psychological challenges can transform into physiological

challenges as well. Basic challenges emerging from sexual harassment may include but are not limited to decreased morale, lower grades and a dissatisfaction with career. Some students may have sleep disturbances and eating disorders (Paludi et. al, 2006; Quick & McFadyen, 2017). Other studies have argued that students who suffer sexual harassment are more likely to suffer psychological distress and to abuse drugs including alcohol (Klein and Martin, 2019). Furthermore, even if these students complete their academic programmes, they tend to have trouble in getting references for new jobs (McLaughlin, Uggen & Blackstone, 2017).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. The study utilized a survey questionnaire to collect data from both male and female students at the selected higher learning institutions. Data gathered from students included information on knowledge, attitudes and practices about sexual harassment and their reporting behaviour. A total of 494 respondents were reached with the students' questionnaire, equally divided between the two higher learning institutions that were selected. The identity of the two higher learning institutions has been concealed in order to protect the respondents and their institutions. One of the institutions was a University and the other institution was a Diploma awarding college. The sample of students in both cases was focused on conventional students. It did not include visiting students or students studying through other modes. Of the total sample, 254 were females and 240 were males. The respondents were selected using a stratified random sampling approach. Stratification targeted different fields of study as well as the year of study.

Key informant interviews were held with purposively selected respondents who had significant knowledge or were involved with addressing issues of sexual harassment in higher learning institutions. These included Officers in charge of students' welfare at higher learning institutions. Selected student leaders were also interviewed as key informants, together with some class representatives. A total of 18 key informant interviews were held.

Focus group discussions were held in each of the tertiary institutions that were targeted. Two focus group discussions were targeted for each study site, one for females and one for males. The separation of sexes was done in order to prevent an intimidating environment especially for female participants. In all cases, focus group participants ranged between 7 and 8 per group. The focus group discussions were used to collect data with group perspectives on the definition of the concept of sexual harassment, its characterization and response decisions taken by victims of sexual harassment.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Perceptions about the Meaning of Sexual Harassment

The study established that for students in the institutions that were studied, defining sexual harassment was not a straightforward task. Respondents understood sexual harassment differently. Some respondents believed that sexual harassment occurs when someone has been physically

touched or attacked by the aggressor, whereas some respondents believed that sexual harassment could occur without physical aggression and contact. The latter group noted that sexual harassment could be any incident related to sex and sexuality perpetrated by an offender that made the victim feel uncomfortable. As one respondent indicated;

‘Sexual harassment happens when someone forces you to indulge in sexual activities, or passes comments of a sexual nature that makes you feel uncomfortable. Things like touching your private parts without your consent.’ (Participant from a College Female Students Focus Group Discussion).

Sexual harassment is something happening to one with sexual connotations without their consent, for example you will hear sexual comments here at college like ‘you’ve got nice legs’, ‘Are those hips not too heavy for you?’, ‘Are those hips all yours?’ (Participant from a University Female Students’ Focus Group Discussion2)

Data gathered through focus group discussions and through key informant interviews showed that verbal sexual harassment was by far the most common type of sexual harassment. It would appear that physical sexual harassment was mostly committed by individuals who had a certain level of relationship with the victim. It was notable that some respondents noted an increasing incidence of same sex sexual harassment especially amongst the ladies. Sexual harassment has traditionally been perceived as an issue happening between males and females. However, there was an increasing realization amongst respondents that sexual harassment was happening between the members of the same sex.

The challenges in defining and identifying sexual harassment were highlighted by one key informant who noted that:

The problem with sexual harassment is that it depends a lot on emotions sometimes. Two people can start off tolerating each other because there is limited understanding of what is going on. Then it can dawn years later that what was actually happening to me was sexual harassment. Things have changed a lot since the days some of us started working. When you look back you can see what happened to you in the past and that it was completely unacceptable. But when it happened then, you probably thought it was acceptable, but when you look back now you see that it was not. . So, there are cultural and time dimensions to the issue (Key Informant – College Student Welfare Officer).

Data from the structured student’s questionnaire indicate a curious trend with regards to how individuals perceive sexual harassment. When simply asked if respondents had ever experienced sexual harassment, only 53 out of 494 students answered ‘Yes’. However, when the question was asked differently, the findings indicated that over 50% of the respondents had suffered sexual harassment. When respondents were asked such questions as whether or not someone had continuously asked them for a coffee date, or passed comments of a sexual nature, or looked at them in a sexually suggestive manner, amongst other questions; it was established that 53% of the respondents had experienced at least one of these acts of aggression. Overall, when

experiences from all the student respondents were analysed, it was concluded that 256 students out of the sample of 494 had experienced sexual harassment where they attend college or University. These findings are in agreement with those of Paludi et. al (2006) who argue that asking direct questions about sexual harassment often elicits wrong answers because individuals have a different understanding about sexual harassment really is.

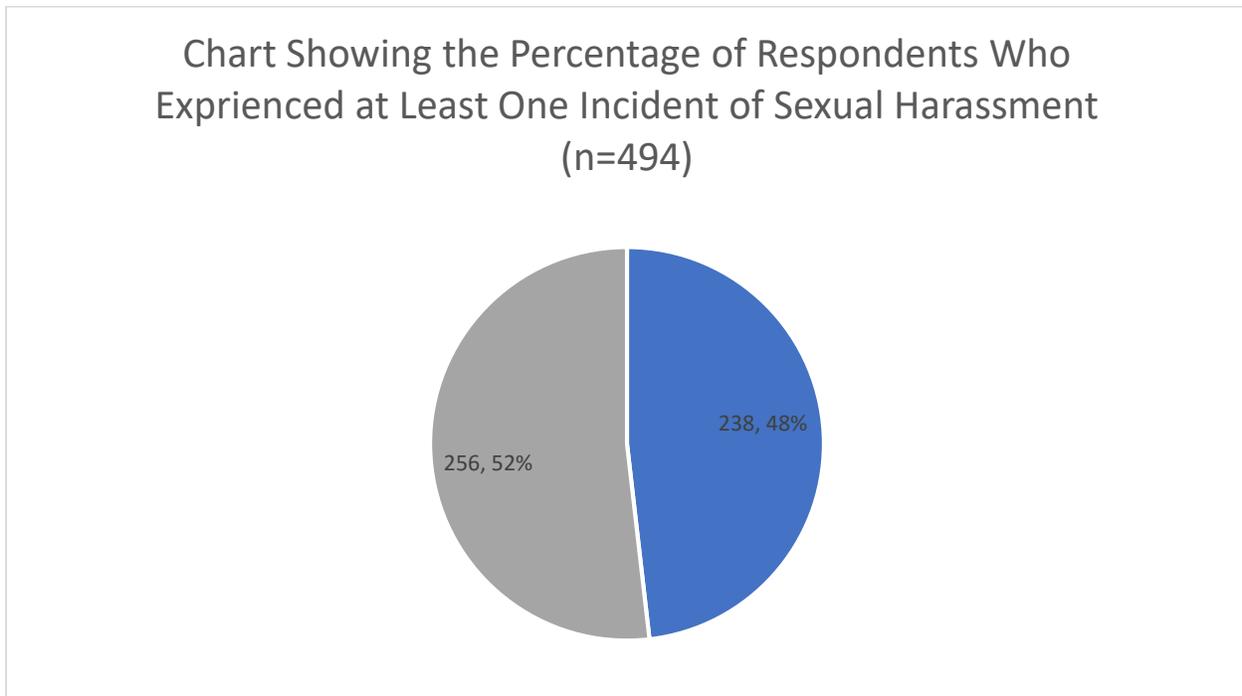


Figure 1
Source: Survey Data

The Real-World Complications in Defining Sexual Harassment

Some respondents indicated that sometimes they were confused about what sexual harassment really was. As one respondent noted;

Sometimes you get confused whether its sexual harassment or not and the line is quite blurry because now you will not be knowing what the intentions of the other person really are. So, a lecturer will tell you, 'talk to me nicely otherwise you will fail'. So, eventually when some students fail, you wouldn't know if someone really failed or it's because of something else. (Participant in a Ladies FGD from the College).

The emphasis of the respondents here was the fact that even when you suspect that you might have been failed because of sexual harassment reasons, sometimes it is difficult to tell if you really failed or you were being punished for not cooperating with the perpetrator. The same view

was noted from female students at University. It was very difficult for students to know if they genuinely failed or they were failed due to sexual harassment related reasons.

Prevalence of Sexual Harassment in Institutions of Higher Learning and Workspaces in Bulawayo

Respondents at both institutions of higher learning that were investigated indicated that sexual harassment existed and it was quite prevalent within the institutions. They indicated that although sexual harassment was known to be happening and prevalent, the challenge was that a lot of it went unexposed due to the many challenges that victims have to face if they want to report the problem. It was noted that the predominant type of sexual harassment was verbal where offenders regularly passed sexual comments like “wow you are sexy” (College Female Students FGD). It was noted that such comments were mainly passed by male students on female students. However, there was a reported growing trend where female students were also passing such comments on other female students. It was further noted that some lesbian ladies would go on to comment about other ladies’ body shape and to even fondle them. Male students at both the College and the University were reportedly notorious for whistling and passing comments such as “*you are hurting me*” or “*this one is so beautiful; she should just be made pregnant to stay at home*”. (College Students FGD2)

Major Perpetrators of Sexual Harassment at Higher Learning Institutions

Respondents were asked to indicate the perpetrator of the sexual harassment incident that they had mentioned earlier in the questionnaire. The graph below indicates the frequency of responses. It will be noted that University students are by far the biggest perpetrators of sexual harassment. A total of 137 respondents from the University said that they had experienced sexual harassment from another University student, compared to only 40 students from the College who experienced the same.

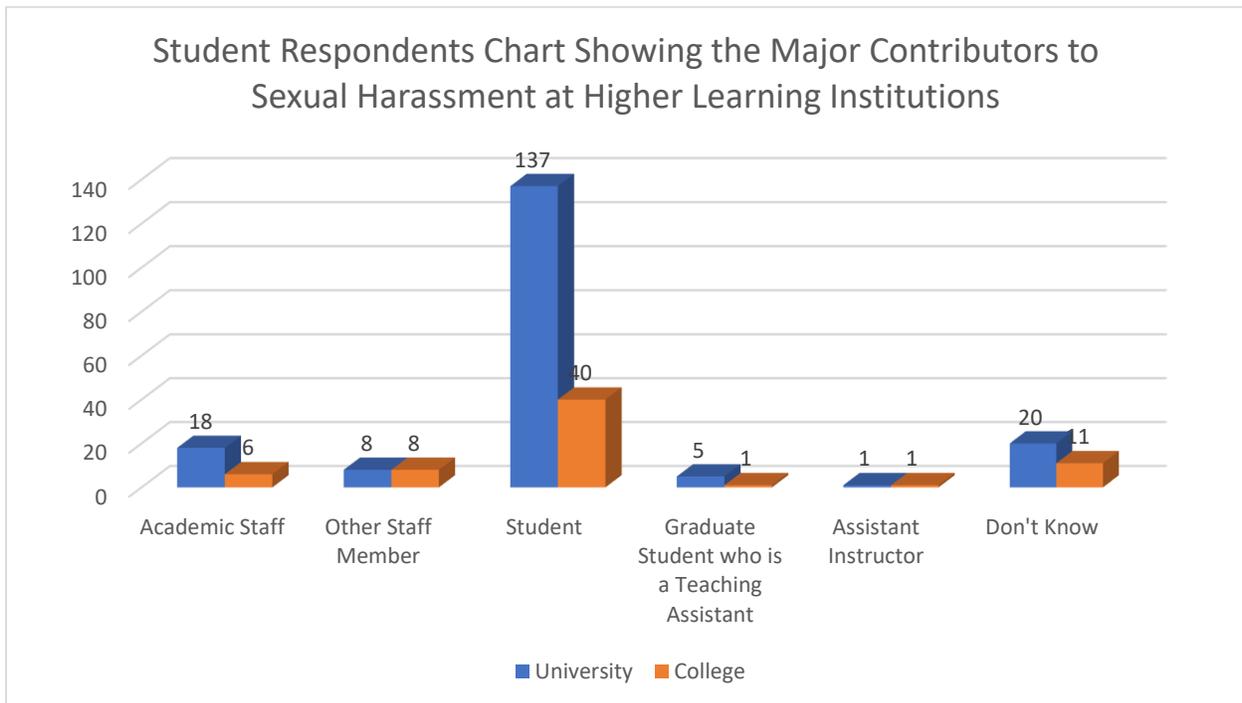


Figure 2
 Source: Survey Data

Where does sexual harassment take place?

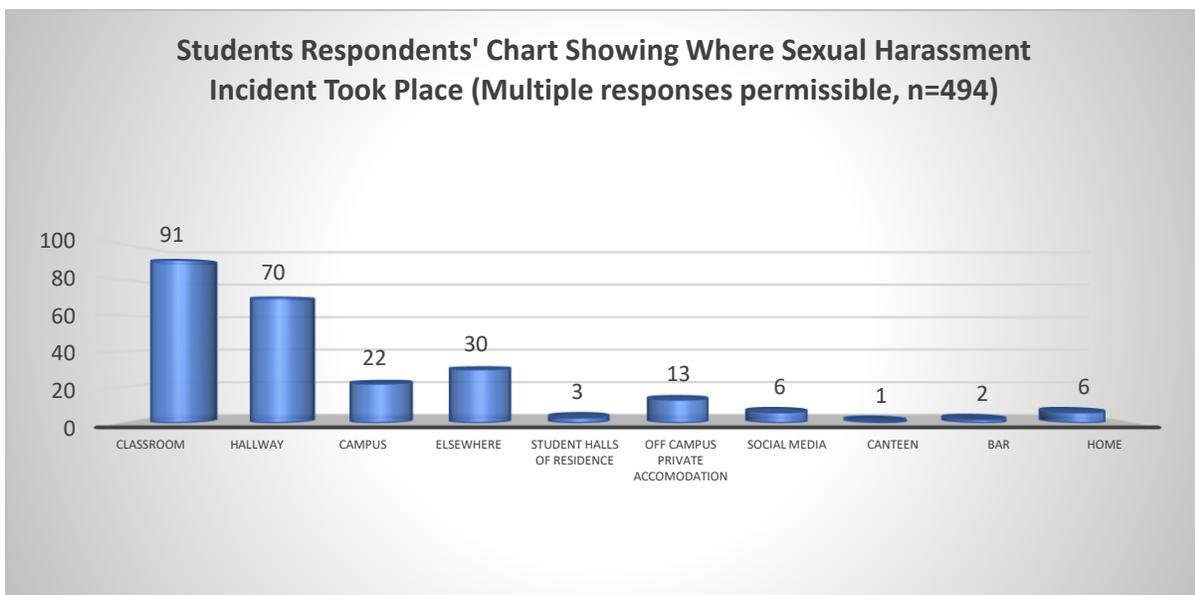


Figure 3
 Source: Survey Data

Sexual Harassment During Industrial Attachment

Students flagged industrial attachment as a major challenge with regards to the issue of sexual harassment. It was noted that industrial attachés in companies were looked upon as cheap fodder for sexual harassment by the employees of the organizations where they were attached. The situation was aggravated by the fact that these new attachés were being harassed by all levels of employees within these organizations including managerial employees. Although this challenge was noted across the board, students in the hotel and catering industry particularly noted that the challenge had reached alarming proportions in their field of study. Hotel and Catering students mentioned that new attaches were referred to as *fresh meat* by employees in the industry. It was indicated that sexual harassment came from a variety of stakeholders including guests. Guests whose advances had been turned down would reportedly give negative recommendations about the student on attachment. Sexual rumours in the workplace were reported as another form of sexual harassment during industrial attachment whereby an employee would claim to have had sex with an attaché and even describe graphic scenes about the act in order to cause embarrassment. Some students are also forced to have sexual relations with the managers in order to secure a job. These findings are in congruence with findings elsewhere including the United State of America where it has been noted that sexual harassment is a particularly rife phenomenon in the hospitality industry, although little attention has been placed on studying the experience of interns (attaches) about sexual harassment (La Lopa, & Gong 2020). The findings speak to the need to develop support programmes for students who proceed on industrial attachment (internship) to prepare them to handle sexual harassment at the workplace.

Female students at both the College and the University noted that one main source of sexual harassment for them was female lecturers. Female lecturers were reportedly harassing students because they would complain about the student's skirts as being a source of harassment for male lecturers and male students. They would pass comments pass like 'why are you walking with your breasts showing? Or "your pants are too tight for comfort". Female student respondents argued that they had the right to wear what they feel comfortable in without being judged. They argued that it was unfair for anyone to comment on their body shape because some students have big bodies.

Reporting and Responding to Sexual Harassment

The study established that there was a variety of ways that victims of sexual harassment used to respond to the perpetrators action. A number of female respondents reportedly managed to stand their ground and refuse to be sexually harassed. This was done either by either slapping or jabbing the offender or simply telling them to stop their act. As one respondent indicated "I was so furious to an extent that I gave him a slap' (University Respondent on Questionnaire). However, a number of responses also showed that the respondents failed to reason with the offender to stop their behaviour and they eventually succumbed because they did not have the physical power to fight the offender off. One of the responses from the respondents that tried to defend themselves one stated that "I tried to refuse but the person seemed to be overwhelmed by his feelings' (University Student Questionnaire Response).

Fifty percent (50%) of the female student respondents indicated that they ignored the perpetrator because they felt that such mindsets were a cultural issue that was hard to change. This was despite the fact that they were feeling uncomfortable and finding such behaviour unacceptable. Some respondents indicated that they did not respond to such behaviour due to the fear of reprisal by the perpetrator, other students and other staff members after making the incident public. One of the respondents said that “I would keep it to myself due to the fear of how I would be treated afterward if I open up”.

It is also notable that even though some female respondents were affected, they indicated that they ‘smiled’ at the offender and they did not feel offended in any way because they took it, as one respondent stated, ‘as a friendly gesture from a peer’. Similarly, most male respondents highlighted that they did nothing and dealt with the issue ‘**like a man**’. It is not clear what this means, but it suggests that they decided to handle the issue without reference to outside help. It was evident from most male responses that it seemed culturally unacceptable to report sexual harassment from a female. Most males either just ignored the harassment or positively responded to it. Male respondents seem to have acted calmly to the behaviour even though they felt uncomfortable. One stated that “I laughed so that I do not show disappointment”. It is evident that cultural expectations had a big role in the response patterns of males especially.

Reasons for not Reporting Cases of Sexual Harassment

A plethora of reasons were given concerning why victims of sexual harassment were not reporting the issue. One reason that was raised was the fear of being humiliated, as already discussed above. Most respondents indicated that they did not report because they wanted to maintain peace. They indicated that they were avoiding conflicts. Students who had been on work related learning platforms feared that they would have lost internship if they reported. These findings are also consistent with findings by Keplinger, Johnson, Kirk & Barnes (2019) elsewhere in Europe that the fear of secondary victimization (emanating from retribution after reporting) was the main reason that victims of sexual harassment were not reporting. There is need to develop strong reassuring institutional structures to confidentially handle sexual harassment cases.

Most respondents indicated that they did not report because they felt it was not necessary because sexual harassment was common occurrence. Some respondents considered sexual harassment as normal behaviour and they enjoyed the experience, especially the males. Some respondents indicated that they were discouraged to report because it was difficult to raise convincing evidence against a perpetrator. They were of the view that the system was not functional enough to protect them. There were no known previous cases of sexual harassment that had been successfully reported and processed. This was a discouraging factor for any students who might want to report. One student commented that “reporting changes nothing except that it only serves to place me as a target”.

The protection of personal identity was a major cause for concern for some respondents as they felt that if they reported the issue their identity would not be protected. They feared the stigmatization that would accompany such reporting if people did not believe their version of the story. As one student pointed out the reason, they did not report was “I simply wanted to avoid gossip behind my back” (Focus Group Discussion – College Female Student).

Some respondents indicated that they did not report the matter because they cared about the person and they hoped that their behaviour would change over time. Reporting was often not done because of the understanding of the dire consequences that the individual would have to suffer if found guilty. Students indicated that they did not want to disrupt fellow students from studying since their careers were dependent on their successful completion of studies. One student explained that ‘I believe we all came to school with one goal which is to learn so I would not want him to miss class due to suspension or expulsion’. Some students indicated that the level of relationship they had with the perpetrator made it difficult to report. For example, one student noted that ‘I could not report him because he was my friend and he used to help me a lot in my academic work’ (Key Informant Interview – Female College Student).

DISCUSSION

These findings of this study show that the problem of sexual harassment in higher and tertiary education is problematic in Zimbabwe as it reflects the trend identified elsewhere in the world. The findings of the study reiterate what authors like Bondestam & Lundqvist (2020) and Pololi et. al (2020) have described as stunning levels of sexual harassment in higher learning institutions globally. This study established that the issue of sexual harassment often does not just affect students in higher education institutions. However, it often transcends and becomes an occupational health problem as well. This is consistent with findings by Quick & McFadyen (2017). This study adds value to studies on sexual harassment in that it is one of the few studies that have done on sexual harassment on students in Africa. It has been observed by some researchers that the majority of sexual harassment studies that have been done to-date were mostly done on Caucasian women in Europe (Quick, & McFadyen, 2017). This study therefore plugs some gaps that exist in understanding the notion of sexual harassment in other cultures, including in Zimbabwe.

The findings of this study show that sexual harassment levels in Zimbabwe remain quite high when compared with global trends. A study by the UN Women (2019) (cited in Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020), showed that one in approximately 33% of women globally are exposed to physical or sexual violence from another person. These statistics were higher in the European Union where it was estimated that between 45% and 55% of women had been exposed to sexual harassment during their working lives. The findings of this study in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe show that at least 50% of the responds had experience some kind of sexual harassment which is much higher than the global average cited by the UN Women (2019).

It would appear that since early studies were done on sexual harassment in Zimbabwe’s institutions of higher learning by Zindi (1994), there has been very little change in the way sexual harassment is handled in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe. In Zindi’s (1994) students indicated a strong fear for reprisals because they did not believe that they would be protected by institutional administration if they reported sexual harassment. A strong 64% of the students in Zindi’s study indicated that they would not be eager to report. In the current study, the majority of female students who did not report sexual harassment also indicated that they feared reprisals as they did not feel protected by the administration system. This echoes the findings of some scholars like Keplinger, Johnson, Kirk & Barnes (2019) who have attributed of this under reporting of

sexual harassment to fact that victims fear threats to their esteem, as well as the fear of secondary victimisation.

CONCLUSION

The study set out to investigate the perceptions of students about sexual harassment, their knowledge, attitudes and practices and reporting patterns of the incidence of sexual harassment within chosen institutions. The study established that, within the selected institutions, defining sexual harassment was a challenging task. There were various levels of understanding about what actually constituted sexual harassment. Some respondents believed that sexual harassment would have occurred if someone was physically touched or attacked by the aggressor, whereas some respondents noted that sexual harassment needed not to become physical. It can be concluded that the understanding of what really constitutes sexual harassment is very low amongst students in higher learning institutions. The study established that some sexual harassment cases go unreported because the victims are not clear how to define sexual harassment. It was clear that some respondents had suffered sexual harassment, but they had never classified it as such because of lack of knowledge about what constitutes sexual harassment. The study also found out that, contrary to the common belief that only men commit sexual harassment on women, there was an emerging trend of lesbian women attacking other women. There were also reported cases of women committing sexual harassment on some men, although these were not the norm.

The study established that (approximately 53%) students had suffered sexual harassment while at their study institution. When we consider female students only the percentage of students who have suffered harassment drastically goes up because male students were far less likely to have suffered an incident of sexual harassment. Students flagged industrial attachment as a major challenge with regards to the issue of sexual harassment. It was noted that industrial attachments in companies were looked upon as cheap fodder for sexual harassment by the employees of the organisations where they were attached.

It is important to note that the protection of personal identity was a major cause for concern for some respondents who feared that their identity would not be protected if they reported cases of sexual harassment. They feared the stigmatization that would accompany such reporting especially if people did not believe their version of the story. Respondents indicated that they did not want the gossip that would result from the report. The paper recommends the following steps to be taken to reduce the risk of sexual harassment in institutions of higher learning:

- i. Higher learning institutions and all workspaces must be required by law to craft and approve an anti-sexual harassment policy at every institution.
- ii. Stakeholders, including government and CSOs should institute programmes to raise awareness about sexual harassment, its consequences and how to deal with it in higher learning institutions.
- iii. Higher learning institutions should establish programs to protect students are the subject of sexual harassment at institutions where they are attached for industrial attachment.

REFERENCES

- Andrea M. Butler & Greg A. Chung-Yan (2011) The influence of sexual harassment frequency and perceptions of organizational justice on victim responses to sexual harassment, *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 20:6, 729-754, DOI: 10.1080/1359432X.2010.507351
- Australian Human Rights Commission (2017) Change the Course: National report on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment at Australian Universities, AHRC, Sydney
- Aycock L. M., Hazari Z., Brewster E, Clancy K. B. H., Hodapp T. & Goertzen R. M (2019) Sexual Harassment reported by undergraduate female Physicists. *Phys. Rev. Phys. Educ. Res.* 15
- Bala, S (2016), Gender Dimensions at Work and Employment: A Case of Sexual Harassment; NLI Research Studies Series No. 115/2016, V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, NOIDA, Available from www.vvgnli.org on 09 March 2020
- Chireshe, R., & Chireshe, E. (2009). Sexual harassment of female students in three selected high schools in urban Masvingo, Zimbabwe. *Agenda*, 23(80), 88-96.
- Houle, J. N., Staff, J., Mortimer, J. T., Uggen, C., & Blackstone, A. (2011). The impact of sexual harassment on depressive symptoms during the early occupational career. *Society and mental health*, 1(2), 89-105.
- Jenner S. C., Djermester P., & Oertelt-Prigione S. (2020) Prevention strategies for Sexual harassment in Academic Medicine: A Qualitative Study. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 00(0), 1-26
- Kabaya, GT. (2017), 'Sexual Harassment in the workplace and the law' Accessed from <http://www.zwla.co.zw/media-room/news/sexual-harassment-workplace-and-law>, on 23 April 2020
- Klein, L. B., & Martin, S. L. (2019). Sexual harassment of college and university students: a systematic review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 1524838019881731.
- La Lopa, J. M., & Gong, Z. (2020). Sexual Harassment of Hospitality Interns. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education*, 32(2), 88-101.
- Fredrik Bondestam & Maja Lundqvist (2020): Sexual harassment in higher education – a systematic review, *European Journal of Higher Education*, DOI: 10.1080/21568235.2020.1729833
- Minnotte, K. L., & Legerski, E. M. (2019). Sexual harassment in contemporary workplaces: Contextualizing structural vulnerabilities. *Sociology Compass*, 13(12), e12755.
- Paludi, Nydegger, DeSouza, Nydegger & Dicker, K. A. (2006). International perspectives on sexual harassment of college students: the sounds of silence. *Ann. N.Y. Acad. Sci.* 1087: 103–120 (2006). doi: 10.1196/annals.1385.012
- Quick, J. C., & McFadyen, M. (2017). Sexual harassment: Have we made any progress? *Journal of occupational health psychology*, 22(3), 286.
- McLaughlin, Uggen & Blackstone (2017). The economic and career effects of sexual harassment on working women. *Gender & Society*, 31(3), 333-358.
- Pololi, L. H., Brennan, R. T., Civian, J. T., Shea, S., Brennan-Wydra, E., & Evans, A. T. (2020). Us, too. Sexual harassment within academic medicine in the United States. *The American journal of medicine*, 133(2), 245-248.

- Shivakumar K. (2019), Prevention of Sexual Harassment in the workplace – Can Training Help? *SAMVAD, SIBM Pune Research Journal Vol XIX ,1-11*
- Shumba, A., & Matina, A. E. M. (2002). Sexual harassment of college students by lecturers in Zimbabwe. *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning*, 2(1), 45-59.
- Updated and Approved SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, <https://genderlinks.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/ADOPTED-REVISED-PROTOCOL-ON-GAD.pdf>
- Welsh S. & Nierobisz A., (1997), How Prevalent Is Sexual Harassment: A Research Note on Measuring Sexual Harassment in Canada, *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* Vol. 22, No. 4(Autumn, 1997), pp. 505-522, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3341695>
- Zindi, F. (1994). Sexual harassment in Zimbabwe's institutions of higher education. *Zambezia*, 21(2), 177-186.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

THULANI DUBE

Department of Development Studies,
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Lupane State University
thutsdube@gmail.com

SIPHILISIWE B NCUBE

Centre for Evaluation Science,
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Lupane State University
sbncube@lsu.ac.zw

SIMON MLOTSHWA

Centre for Evaluation Science,
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Lupane State University
smlotshwa@lsu.ac.zw