



## Sexual Harassment and Its Impact on Psycho-Cognitive Well-being of Female Undergraduates in a University in Southeastern Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

This study determined the prevalence, factors, and strategies for intervention for sexual harassment and its impact on the psycho-cognitive well-being of female undergraduates in government universities in Anambra State. This study adopted a Descriptive research design and guided by five research questions. The study sample comprised 442 female undergraduate students drawn using a convenient random technique. A structured questionnaire by the researchers was used for data collection. Face and content validity of the instrument was done by experts in the field of Education. The instrument's reliability was determined using Cronbach Alpha and an alpha coefficient of 0.70 was obtained. The data collected were analysed using Percentages, Mean, and Standard deviation. The findings of this study revealed that sexual harassment is prevalent against female undergraduate students in government universities in Anambra State. It also showed that indecent dressing and immorality among others are contributing factors sustaining the upsurge of sexual harassment against female students. Furthermore, the findings revealed that sexual harassment has a negative impact on both the psychological and cognitive well-being of female students. Finally, it showed that making policies and ensuring prompt implementations among others are strategies for curbing sexual harassment.

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## INTRODUCTION

University education represents the pinnacle of a student's academic career. It includes a wide range of driven people who have set out on a path of learning and self-improvement. Undergraduate and graduate programs offered by universities need rigorous academic work. For students to learn maximally, effectively handle their academic tasks and achieve success, they need a safe environment promoting their psychological and cognitive well-being (Anierobi, Okeke and Daniel, 2022). However, certain factors have been reported to affect the psychological and cognitive well-being of university students and they include stress, anxiety, depression, and lack of motivation (Wondu, 2018), cyberbullying (Ezeonwumelu, Anierobi & Ezennaka, 2022) and possibly, sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment encompasses unwanted sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and further verbal or physical acts of a sexual nature that impact an individual explicitly or implicitly (Nielsen & Weinberg 2017). Inappropriate use of sexualized language, gestures, unwelcome physical contact, and sexual assault are all considered forms of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment could include sexual favours in exchange for good grades or preferential treatment in class. The perpetrators can be students, lecturers, or administrative staff (Tampah-Naah, 2020). Though both male and female students usually witness sexual harassment in society, Nuwabaine (2023) and Anierobi, Etodike, Nwogbo, Okeke and Nwikpo, (2021), opined that women are the major victims of sexual harassment, and they are usually seen as act of sex discrimination due to organizational and patriarchal structure of society.

Previous studies showed that sexual harassment has become rampant in universities (Okeke, Anierobi and Ezennaka, 2021; Olugbenga-Bello et al, 2023). Sexual harassment can affect an individual's self-esteem, and psychosocial adjustments leading to frustration, anxiety, stress, and trauma of victims. Kebirungi (2021) states that poor academic achievement, decreased female student self-esteem, and physical frustration are among the effects of sexual harassment on pupils. Numerous incidents of sexual harassment have been documented, including physical harassment in the form of unwelcome groping and hugs, attempted rape, and actual rape. Verbal harassment in the form of sexual jokes and remarks, as well as non-verbal harassment through body language (Cedeno & Bohlen, 2023; Anierobi, Etodike, Nwogbo, Okeke & Nwikpo, 2021). Given that sexual harassment is a heinous act which is rampant in universities with adverse effects on students, the researchers deemed it necessary to determine the prevalence, factors, and strategies/intervention for curbing sexual harassment and its impact on the psycho-cognitive well-being of female undergraduates in government universities in Anambra State.

### Statement of the Problem

Higher education institutions are home to a diverse range of aspirational individuals who have set out on a path of both personal and intellectual development. Unfortunately, many of them especially female undergraduates are confronted with several challenges that have debilitating effects on the

pursuit of their academic goals and various aspects of their lives. In recent conversations with some female undergraduate students, the researchers noted several unreported cases of sexual harassment of female undergraduate students by male lecturers and male students. The torment of such sexual harassment may hurt the female students' mental and psychological well-being.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to describe the prevalence, factors, and strategies /interventions for curbing sexual harassment and its impact on the psycho-cognitive well-being of female undergraduates in government universities in Anambra State. Specifically, this study sought to determine:

1. The prevalence of sexual harassment against female undergraduates in Southeastern Nigeria.
2. Factors contributing to the upsurge of sexual harassment against female undergraduates in Southeastern Nigeria.
3. The perceived impact of sexual harassment on the psychological well-being of female undergraduates in Southeastern Nigeria.
4. The perceived impact of sexual harassment on the cognitive well-being of female undergraduates in Southeastern Nigeria.
5. The strategies and interventions to remedy sexual harassment against female undergraduates in Southeastern Nigeria.

### **Research Questions**

The study is guided by the following research question:

1. Is there a prevalence of sexual harassment among female undergraduates in Southeastern Nigeria?
2. What factors are contributing to the upsurge of sexual harassment against female undergraduates in Southeastern Nigeria?
3. What is the perceived impact of sexual harassment on the psychological well-being of female undergraduates in Southeastern Nigeria?
4. What is the perceived impact of sexual harassment on the cognitive well-being of female undergraduates in Southeastern Nigeria?
5. What are the strategies and interventions to curb sexual harassment against female undergraduates in Southeastern Nigeria?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview of Sexual Harassment**

Different scholars defined sexual harassment in various ways but all point to unwanted sexual advances against the vulnerable and weak. For instance, Okeke, Anierobi and Ezennaka (2021) defined sexual harassment as any unwanted sexual behaviour that causes offence, discomfort, intimidation, or humiliation. Okeke et al (2021) further assert that sexual harassment encompasses a variety of improper and undesired actions, such as making sexualized comments about someone's looks, attire, and desirability, as well as unwelcome touching, groping, and kissing without consent. According to Makhaye et al. (2023), sexual harassment in schools refers to unwelcome sexual

behaviours that impede victims' ability to learn and make them feel uneasy, scared, or powerless. Weinberg, Jill, Nielsen, and Beth (2017) posit that sexual harassment is unwanted sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical acts that have a sexual connotation that either directly or indirectly harm a person. Contextually, sexual harassment constitutes unwelcome or gender-based verbal or physical sexual advances that create a hostile or intimidating environment for the victim, which violates schools, workplaces, and social norms.

### Overview of Psycho-Cognitive Wellbeing

Positive psychology promotes the emotional and mental health of students. Psycho-cognitive well-being, which is used interchangeably with psychological and cognitive well-being, is defined as a multidimensional psychological state with positive functioning, contentment, and the absence of mental illnesses (Arvind, Tej, Jagmohan & Richa, 2023). García, Fernández, and Gallegos (2019) construed psycho-cognitive well-being as being content, happy, healthy, and prosperous, and it refers to an experience of optimal psychological functioning. García et al. (2019) shared the perspective that psychological well-being is related to cognitive function, personality, self-esteem, and mood and includes positive effects such as vigour, morals, and happiness, as well as negative effects such as, for example, depression and anxiety. Kamrani et al. (2023) posited that having fulfilling relationships, a sense of purpose, and self-worth, as well as the ability to overcome obstacles in life, are all indicators of psychological well-being. Psychological well-being, as further elucidated by Tang et al. (2019), is a multifaceted construct that incorporates an individual's total sense of enjoyment, contentment, and fulfilment in life, exceeding the mere absence of mental illness. Contextually, Psycho-cognitive well-being refers to a state of emotional and mental health that encompasses both psychological and cognitive aspects of a person's life. It involves a sense of overall mental well-being, emotional stability, and cognitive functioning which reflects a person's ability to maintain good mental health, and emotional balance in their daily life.

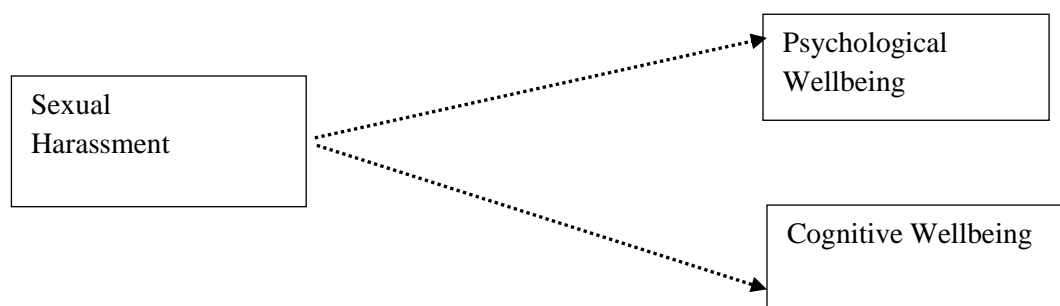


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

The study is anchored on the Intersectionality Theory by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. Intersectionality (or intersectional theory) is a term first

coined in 1989 by American civil rights advocate and leading scholar of critical race theory, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw. The intersectional theory asserts that people are often faced with multiple sources of oppression: their race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and other identity markers. Intersectionality recognizes that identity markers (e.g., “woman” and “black”) do not exist independently of each other and that each informs the others, often creating a complex convergence of oppression. To the study, this theory aligns with the fact that repeated harassment of female undergraduates, especially when it is tied to their identity as females, could lead to poor psychological and mental states.

### **Empirical Studies**

#### *1. Prevalence of sexual harassment against female undergraduate students*

Scholars reported the prevalence of sexual harassment against female students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. In their study, Okeke, Anierobi, and Ezennaka (2021), revealed the prevalence of sexual harassment in tertiary institutions in Anambra State. Okeke et al also reported that sexual harassment is associated with an increased risk of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as diminished self-esteem, self-confidence, and psychological well-being. Again, Olugbenga-Bello et al, (2023) observed the prevalence of sexual harassment against female undergraduates in southwest Nigeria observing that the highest perpetrators of sexual harassment against female students are their male friends. Similarly, Suleiman (2017) examined the prevalence, factors responsible, nature, health, and social implications of sexual harassment identified by female students of tertiary institutions in Northern Nigeria. According to the study, 80% of female students in Northern Nigerian postsecondary institutions reported having experienced sexual harassment. They also showed that academics and administrative staff were the most common perpetrators of sexual harassment. Similarly, sexual harassment can be attributed to a scant clothing code, as demonstrated by Suleiman (2017), while compelling female students to participate in illicit sexual activities is a major source of sexual harassment. Again, in their cross-sectional study with employees and students in a large Swedish university, According to Argahd et al. (2022), sexual harassment is common in university communities, with most incidents occurring during social gatherings associated with student life.

#### *2. Factors contributing to the upsurge of sexual harassment against female undergraduate students*

Scholars (Okafor, Iyeklo & Ajibola, 2023) carried out a study on causes, consequences, and strategies for curbing sexual harassment and showed that the main causes of sexual harassment in tertiary institutions in Kwara state were lecturers attempting to exploit students to pass by all means through sexual harassment, immorality in the society, students who dress indecently, fear of failure of examination, academically poor students and lack of self-control among some tertiary institution staff. In addition, Adigan, Ogunboyo, and Illesanmi (2019) conducted a study to look into sexual harassment among students at Ekiti State University. They found that factors including provocative

clothing, a lack of interest in studying, male lecturers' sexual lust, and a weak system for redress all contribute to sexual harassment against female students in higher education.

3. *Sexual harassment and psychological wellbeing*

Literature is consistent that sexual harassment is among the factors in determining the psychological well-being of victims. Awe (2020) demonstrated in his research that sexual harassment of female students has a significant detrimental impact on the victims' emotional stability. In a similar vein, Okeke, Anierobi, and Ezennaka (2021) found that sexual harassment is linked to a higher risk of anxiety, sadness, and PTSD in addition to a decrease in psychological well-being, self-worth, and confidence. According to Bonsasken et al. (2024), teenagers who were subjected to sexual harassment also displayed worse psychosocial symptoms, such as hopelessness, low self-esteem, and loneliness. In a cross-sectional study with adolescents aged 12 -20 years, Stahl & Denhag (2020) observed that there was a stronger correlation between sexual harassment and anxiety and depression symptoms in women than in men. Regardless of the victim's age, it has been noted that sexual harassment is a significant element undermining the psychological health of female students (Ali & Alwan, 2023).

4. *Sexual harassment and cognitive wellbeing*

Wang, Eklund and Xang (2022), carried out a study on the association between sexual harassment and mental health among Chinese college students. Do gender and social support matters? and demonstrated that, among female students, unwanted sexual attention and gender harassment were inversely correlated with mental health, with no discernible gender difference. Moreover, in a cross-sectional study carried out by Gyaawali (2020), female students who experienced sexual harassment presented poor and unhealthy mental health. Researchers found that teenagers living in southwestern Nigeria who are not in school and who have suffered sexual abuse have poor mental and physical health (Doerr et al., 2023). Similarly, a study conducted with college students showed that all mental health consequences, including anxiety, bulimia, anorexia, depression, insomnia, stress, and suicide, are significantly correlated with sexual violence. (Dilip & Bates, 2021). Rai and Rai (2019) noted that poor mental health, including anxiety, sleep difficulties, acute stress disorder, and preoccupation, is a common occurrence among women who have experienced sexual harassment.

5. *Strategies to curb sexual harassment against female undergraduate students*

Some scholars conducted studies on strategies to curb sexual harassment against students. Obiozor and Osuala (2018) stated in their study that every institution should have a standing Senate Committee to investigate every allegation of sexual harassment and prosecute offenders, as well as publish and publicize their moral code of conduct and make it available to all students. According to Willie, Mboho, and Umanah (2021), there are many potential strategies for reducing sexual harassment against women, including family courts, counselling, public education campaigns, and the creation and enforcement of a national legislative framework shielding women from

domestic abuse. In defending women against abuse. According to Arowolo (2020), this may be achieved by passing practical legislation, such as revising the current legal framework in Nigeria and doing away with objectionable social norms and beliefs that expose women to all forms of assault.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

We employed the descriptive research design in this study to fulfil our goals of determining the prevalence, factors, and strategies for intervention for sexual harassment and the impact that sexual harassment has on the psychological and cognitive wellbeing of female undergraduates in a government university in Anambra State. We analysed the data collected from the respondents using Percentage and weighted Mean presented in Tables. This analytical approach was considered appropriate for describing the situation at hand without manipulating the variables.

### **Research Participants**

Simple random sampling was used in selecting one out of the two government universities in Anambra State. Afterwards, a convenient sampling technique was adopted for sampling female students for the study. We created a Google form questionnaire and distributed it online to all the faculties in the university. We specified that the questionnaires were meant for only undergraduate female students. The questionnaire provided a consent column and required any participant could choose to discontinue at any point in responding to the items on the questionnaire. Four hundred and forty-two (442) undergraduate female students who responded to the Google form questionnaire in different departments in the university formed the study sample for the study.

### **Instrument for Data Collection**

The instrument used for this present study was a structured questionnaire designed by the researcher. The instrument was titled "Perceived Impact of Sexual Harassment on the Psycho-Cognitive Wellbeing of Female Undergraduate Students" (PISHPWFS). The instrument has two 29 sections, A and B. Section A, sought information only on the academic level of the respondents, while Section B has four clusters and sought information relevant to answering the research questions. The instrument contains a total of 19 items (4 each for the variables under study). The instrument is based on a four-point rating scale of always (A), sometimes (S), rarely (R) and never (N) for cluster 1 and strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (D), and strongly disagree (SD) for cluster two to four. All were weighted 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively.

### **Validation of the Instrument**

To ensure the validity of the instrument, we submitted the instrument alongside the title, purpose of the study, scope of the study and research questions to 3 experts in the Department of Educational Foundations at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The experts were requested to examine and scrutinize the items for language clarity, relatedness to the purpose of the

study, contents, relevance, suitability, and coverage of the dimensions of the study. These corrections were affected in the final draft of the instrument.

**Reliability of the Instrument**

The reliability of the instrument was determined using Cronbach's alpha to estimate the internal consistency of the instrument. The analysis gave a 0.70 alpha coefficient for the whole cluster. This was considered high, implying that the instrument was reliable for use.

**Method of Data Analysis**

In analysing the data collected from the respondents, we used Frequency, Percentages, Weighted Mean and Standard Deviation. The responses were organized in Tables according to the research questions. We adopted a decision rule of cut-off mean of 2.50, so that if the mean score of any item is greater than or equal to 2.50, then it will imply that the respondents agreed with the issue raised in the particular item, but if the mean score of any item is less than 2.50, it means that the respondents disagreed with the issue raised in the particular item.

**Ethical Considerations**

In the present study, undergraduate female students from a tertiary institution in Anambra State were involved. The authors sought the consent of the students for participation in the study. The participants were assured that there their responses were strictly for research purposes and that their identity would be confidential. They were informed that anyone of them had the opportunity to discontinue with responding to the questionnaire items anytime they feel uncomfortable about it. This information was provided in the google form links shared with them for filling the questionnaire. With this information, only the willing male students who understood that their responses were for research purposes and their identity kept confidential took part in the study.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Table 1. The Frequency, Percentages, Mean and Standard Deviation of the Prevalence of Sexual Harassment against Female Undergraduate Students in Universities in Southeast Nigeria.

ITEMS	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
How often do you experience sexual harassment as you pursue your studies in the University?	86 (19.5 %)	227 (51.4%)	66 (14.9%)	63 (14.3%)
	Mean:	2.76		
	Standard Deviation:	0.93		
	N:	442		
How often do female Students experience sexual harassment from male lecturers?	174 (39.4%)	206 (46.6%)	41 (9.3%)	21(4.8%)
	Mean:	3.21		
	Standard Deviation:	0.81		
	N:	442		
How often do female students experience sexual harassment from male students?	107 (24.2%)	226 (51.1%)	102 (23.14%)	7 (1.6%)
	Mean:	2.98		
	Standard Deviation:	0.73		
	N:	442		

Grand Mean 2.98

Data in Table 1 show responses of female students' experience of sexual harassment as they pursue their studies in the university: Always = 86 respondents (19.5%); Sometimes = 227 respondents (51.4%); Rarely = 66 respondents (14.9%) and Never = 63 respondents (14.3%). Moreover, the respondents reported experiencing sexual harassment from male lecturers as they pursued their studies in the university as follows: Often = 174 respondents representing 39.4%; Sometimes: 206 respondents representing 46.6%; Rarely: 41 respondents representing 9.3%; and Never: 21 students representing 4.8%. Again, in terms of their experience of sexual harassment from male students, the respondents reported as follows: Always (107 respondents representing 24.2%); Sometimes (226 respondents representing 51.1%); Rarely (102 respondents representing 23.14%) and Never (7 respondents representing 1.6%)

Moreover, Data in Table 1 revealed the mean scores on responses to items on the prevalence of sexual harassment against female undergraduates in a university in southeast, Nigeria. The grand mean of 2.98 obtained is above the criterion mean of 2.50. This implies that sexual harassment is prevalent against female undergraduate students in a university in Southeast Nigeria.

Table 2. The Frequency, Percentages, Mean and Standard Deviation of the Factors Contributing to the Upsurge of Sexual Harassment against Female Undergraduate Students in Universities in Southeast Nigeria

ITEMS	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
As a female student, I perceive that provocative dressing of female undergraduates leads to sexual harassment	153 (34.6%)	231 (52.3%)	41 (9.3%)	17 (3.8%)
	Mean:	3.18		
	Standard Deviation:	0.75		
	N:	442		
Lack of self-control among tertiary institution staff contribute to sexual harassment against female students in the university	158 (35.7%)	297 (63.1%)	5 (1.1%)	0 (0%)
	Mean:	3.35		
	Standard Deviation:	0.50		
	N:	442		
Lecturers attempt to exploit students to pass by all means through sexual harassment	154 (34.8%)	248 (56.1%)	38 (8.6%)	2 (0.5%)
	Mean:	3.25		
	Standard Deviation:	0.62		
	N:	442		
Immorality increase contributes to sexual harassment in higher institution	143 (32.4%)	260 (58.8%)	38 (8.6%)	1(0.2%)
	Mean:	3.23		
	Standard Deviation:	0.60		
	N:	442		

Grand Mean 3.25

Data in Table 2 shows that 153 respondents representing 34.6% strongly agree; 231 students representing 52.3% respondents agree; 41 respondents representing 9.3% disagree; and 17% of the respondents representing 3.8%

strongly disagreed that provocative dressing of female undergraduate’s leads to sexual harassment. 158 respondents representing 35.7% of students strongly agree; 297 respondents representing 63.1% of students agree; 5 respondents representing 1.1% disagreed; and 0% of the respondents strongly disagreed that lack of self-control among tertiary staff may cause sexual harassment to female students in higher institution. Again, 154 respondents representing 34.8% strongly agree; 248 respondents representing 56.1% agree; 38 respondents representing 8.6% disagree; and 2 respondents representing 0.5% strongly disagreed that lecturers attempt to exploit female students to pass by all means through sexual harassment. Finally, 143 respondents representing 32.4% strongly agreed; 260 respondents representing 58.8% agreed; 38 respondents representing 8.6% disagreed while 1 respondent representing 0.2% strongly disagreed that immorality increases contribute to sexual harassment in higher institutions.

Table 2 also shows the mean scores on responses to items on the factors contributing to the upsurge of sexual harassment in higher institutions. The responses yielded a grand mean score of 3.25 which is above the criterion score of 2.50. This implies that factors such as indecent dressing among female undergraduates, lack of self-control among tertiary institution staff, lecturers' attempts to exploit students and increase in immorality in the school are responsible for sexual harassment against female undergraduates in a University in Southeast Nigeria.

Table 3. The Frequency, Percentages, Mean and Standard Deviation of the Impact of Sexual Harassment on the Psychological Well-being of Female Undergraduate Students in Universities in Southeast Nigeria

ITEMS	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Experience with sexual harassment makes female students feel emotionally depressed?	198 (44.8%)	231 (52.3%)	12 (2.7%)	1(0.2%)
	Mean:	3.42		
	Standard Deviation:	0.56		
	N:	442		
Female students develop fears or anxieties as a result of the sexual harassment	164 (37.1%)	252 (57.0%)	26 (5.9%)	0 (0%)
	Mean:	3.31		
	Standard Deviation:	0.58		
	N:	442		
Sexual harassment makes female students feel distressed	200 (45.2%)	216 (48.9%)	21 (4.8%)	5 (1.1%)
	Mean:	3.38		
	Standard Deviation:	0.63		
	N:	442		
Sexual harassment makes female students feel bored coming to school	146 (33%)	243 (55%)	37 (8.4%)	16 (3.6%)
	Mean:	3.17		
	Standard Deviation:	0.73		
	N:	442		

Grand Mean: 3.32

Data in Table 3 shows that 198 respondents representing 44.8% of students strongly agree; 231 respondents representing 52.3% of the students agree; 12 respondents representing 2.7% of students disagree, and 1 respondent

representing 0.2% of the students strongly disagree that experience with sexual harassment makes female students feel emotionally depressed. 164 respondents representing 37.1% of students strongly agree; 252 respondents representing 57% of students agree; 26 respondents representing 5.9% disagree, and 0% of the respondents strongly disagree that students develop fears/ anxieties as a result of sexual harassment. Moreover, 200 respondents representing 45.2% of students strongly agree; 216 respondents representing 48.9% of the students agree; 21 respondents representing 4.8% disagree, 5 respondents representing 1.1% of the students strongly disagree and sexual harassment makes female students feel distressed. Finally, 146 respondents representing 33% of students strongly agree; 243 respondents representing 55% of students agree; 37 respondents representing 8.4% disagree, and 16 respondents representing 3.6% of students strongly disagree that sexual harassment makes female students feel bored coming to school.

Further, Table 3 revealed the standard deviation and mean scores of the respondents on the impact of sexual harassment on the psychological well-being of female students. The responses had a grand mean of 3.32 which is higher than the benchmark mean of 2.50. As a result, it could be inferred that sexual harassment has a negative impact on the psychological well-being of female undergraduates in a University in Southeast Nigeria.

Table 4. The Frequency, Percentages, Mean and Standard Deviation of the Impact of Sexual Harassment on the Cognitive Well-being of Female Undergraduate Students in a Universities in Southeast Nigeria

ITEMS	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Experience of sexual harassment affects student's ability to pay attention in class	196 (44.3%)	239 (54.1%)	7 (1.6%)	0 (0%)
	Mean: 3.43	Standard Deviation: 0.53	N: 442	
I have been absent-minded following the experience of sexual harassment	175 (39.6%)	217 (49.1%)	39 (8.8%)	11 (2.5%)
	Mean: 3.26	Standard Deviation: 0.72	N: 442	
Female students experience disturbing thoughts due to sexual harassment	164 (37.1%)	264 (59.7%)	13 (2.9%)	1 (0.2%)
	Mean: 3.34	Standard Deviation: 0.54	N: 442	
Students experience of sexual harassment affected their academic performance	203 (45.9%)	236 (53.4%)	2 (0.5%)	1 (0.2%)
	Mean: 3.45	Standard Deviation: 0.52	N: 442	

Grand Mean 3.37

Data in Table 4 shows that 196 respondents representing 44.3% strongly agree; 239 respondents representing 54.1% agree; 7 respondents representing 1.6% disagree, and 0% of the respondents disagreed that experience of sexual harassment affects students' ability to pay attention in class. Again, 175 respondents representing 39.6% strongly agree; 217 respondents representing 49.1% agree; 39 respondents representing 8.8% disagree, and 11 respondents representing 2.5% strongly disagreed that they have been absent-minded following the experience of sexual harassment. Moreover, 164 respondents representing 37.1% strongly agree; 264 respondents representing 59.7% agree; 13 respondents representing 2.9% disagree, and 1 respondent representing 0.2% strongly disagree that female students experience disturbing thoughts due to sexual harassment. Finally, 203 respondents representing 45.9% strongly agree; 263 respondents representing 53.4% agree; 2 respondents representing 0.5% of students disagree, and 1 respondent representing 0.2% strongly disagree that students' experience of sexual harassment affected their academic performance.

Moreover, Data in Table 4 revealed mean scores of responses to items on the impact of sexual harassment on the cognitive well-being of female students. The scores have a grand mean of 3.37 which is higher than the criterion mean of 2.50. As a result, it was inferred that sexual harassment has a negative impact on the cognitive well-being of female undergraduates in a University in Southeast, Nigeria.

Table 5. The Percentages, Mean and Standard Deviation of the Strategies to Curb of Sexual Harassment against Female Undergraduate Students in a University in Southeast, Nigeria

ITEMS	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Seminars should always be held to discourage sexual harassment	196 (44.3%)	240 (54.3%)	1 (0.2%)	5 (1.1%)
	Mean:	3.42		
	Standard Deviation:	0.56		
	N:	442		
Students should be encouraged to report cases of sexual harassment	249 (56.3%)	191 (43.2%)	2 (0.5%)	0 (0%)
	Mean:	3.58		
	Standard Deviation:	0.51		
	N:	442		
The university should formulate anti-sexual harassment policies	239 (54.1%)	199 (45%)	2 (0.5%)	2 (0.5%)
	Mean:	3.53		
	Standard Deviation:	0.53		
	N:	442		
The university should ensure strict implementation of policies on sexual harassment	259 (58.6%)	181 (41%)	2 (0.5%)	0 (0%)
	Mean:	3.58		
	Standard Deviation:	0.50		
	N:	442		

Grand Mean 3.53

Data in Table 5 shows that 196 respondents representing 44.3% strongly agree; 240 respondents representing 54.3% agree; 1 respondent representing 0.2% disagree, and 5 respondents representing 1.1% strongly disagree that seminars should always be held to discourage sexual harassment.

0.2% disagree and 5 respondents representing 1.1% strongly disagree that seminars should always be held to discourage sexual harassment. Again, 249 respondents representing 56.3 % strongly agree; 191 respondents representing 43.2% agree; 2 respondents representing 0.5% disagree, and 0% of the respondents disagreed that students should be encouraged to report cases of sexual harassment. Moreover, 239 respondents representing 54.1% strongly agree; 199 respondents representing 45% agree; 2 respondents representing 0.5% of students disagree, and 2 respondents representing 0.5% students strongly disagree that the university should formulate an anti-sexual harassment policy on campus. Finally, 259 respondents representing 58.6% strongly agree; 181 respondents representing 41% agree; 2 respondents representing 0.5% disagree, and 0% of the respondents disagreed that the university should ensure strict implementation of policies on sexual harassment.

Furthermore, Table 5 revealed the mean scores of responses to items on strategies for curbing sexual harassment in the university. The responses yielded a grand mean of 3.53 which is higher than the criterion mean of 2.50. This implies that the respondents agree that having seminars to discourage sexual harassment, encouraging students to report cases of sexual harassment, formulating anti-sexual harassment policies and appropriate enforcement of policies, are some of the possible strategies to remedy sexual harassment against female undergraduates in the university.

The findings of this study showed that sexual harassment is prevalent against female undergraduate students in southeastern Nigeria. This is evidenced by the agreement of 19.5% and 51.4% of the respondents that they always and sometimes respectively experience sexual harassment, 39.4% and 46.6% reported that female students experience sexual harassment from male lecturers often and sometimes respectively while 24.2% and 51.1% reported that female students experience sexual harassment from male students always and sometimes respectively. Moreover, a grand mean of 2.98 is above the criterion mean score of 2.50, thus indicating the prevalence of sexual harassment against female undergraduate students in a government University in Anambra state. Cases of sexual harassment against female students abound with instances of sex-for-grade often reported in universities in Nigeria. This finding supports that of Okeke, Anierobi and Ezennaka (2021) which found that sexual harassment on campus is one of the prevailing challenges facing tertiary education in Nigeria. Similarly, it aligns with Sulieman (2017) who showed that the majority of female students in tertiary institutions in Northern Nigeria have experienced sexual harassment in the institution. This finding validates Olugbenga-Bello et al, (2023) who observed the prevalence of sexual harassment against female undergraduates in southwest Nigeria but disagrees with their finding that the highest perpetrators of sexual harassment against female students are their male friends. The finding equally corroborates with Argahd et al (2022) who revealed that sexual harassment is prevalent in the university community indicating that most of the events took place during social events linked to student life.

The study found that many factors such as provocative dressing, lack of self-control, male counterparts/lecturers taking advantage of the vulnerability of the female students and high rate of immorality are responsible for the upsurge of sexual harassment against female undergraduate students. The university community offers relative liberty to students in ways of dressing. Some female students tend to express their liberty to an extreme by dressing in skimpy and seductive wears to school. This could trigger male lecturers and students of loose character to devise means of taking advantage of the female students through verbal or physical forms of sexual advances. This finding aligns with Okafor, Iyeklo and Ajibola (2023) who found that indecent dressing, fear of failure of examination, lack of self-control by male lecturers and poor academic standing are some of the factors that contribute to sexual harassment against female students in tertiary institutions. In addition, this finding agrees with Adigan, Ogunboyo and Illesami (2019) asserted that provocative dressing, laziness and poor system for redress are all factors contributing to sexual harassment against female students in tertiary institutions.

The present study observed that sexual harassment has a negative impact on the psychological well-being of female undergraduates in Southeast Nigeria. The study showed that experience of sexual harassment makes female students feel emotionally depressed, develop fears/ anxieties, and feel distressed and bored coming to school. The school environment should be serene and free from every form of threat to promote teaching and learning. A school environment laden with sexual harassment deals a great blow to the psychological well-being of the victims. This finding validates Awe (2020) who showed that sexual harassment against female students impacts negatively on the emotional stability of the victims. Similarly, Okeke, Anierobi, and Ezennaka (2021), revealed that sexual harassment is associated with an increased risk of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as diminished self-esteem, self-confidence, and psychological well-being. This finding aligns with Bonsasken et al (2024) who reported that adolescents exposed to sexual harassment had poorer psychosocial symptoms such as depression, low self-esteem and loneliness. This is confirmed in a cross-sectional study with adolescents aged 12 -20 years in which Stahl and Dennhag (2020) observed that sexual harassment correlated significantly with depressive symptoms and heightened anxiety in female students. Ali and Alwan (2023) also supported this finding in their report that sexual harassment is a critical factor contributing to weakening psychological health among female students irrespective of the age of the victim.

The study showed that sexual harassment has a negative impact on the cognitive well-being of female undergraduates in Southeast, Nigeria. The study revealed that the experience of sexual harassment affects female students' ability to pay attention in class, leads to absent-mindedness among the victims following the experience of sexual harassment, makes the victims experience disturbing thoughts and equally affects their academic performance. Sexual harassment cuts deep in the victims especially when the perpetrators could decide the fate of the victim, especially in a university environment.

Suppressing thoughts of sexual harassment could affect the cognitive well-being of the victims. This finding agrees with Wang, Eklund and Xang (2022) who showed that gender harassment and unwelcomed sexual attention were negatively associated with mental health among Chinese college female students. Moreover, it aligns with Gyaawali (2020) who reported that poor and ill mental health were found among sexually harassed girls. Similarly, scholars reported negative mental and physical health among out-of-school adolescents aged between 13-17 years and living in southwestern Nigeria that experienced sexual violence (Doerr et al, 2023). This finding validates the finding of a study conducted with college students which showed that sexual violence has a significant relationship with all mental outcomes such as anxiety, anorexia, bulimia, depression, insomnia, stress, and suicide (Dilip & Bates, 2021). It also supports Rai and Rai (2019) who observed that women who experienced sexual harassment suffer from poor mental health manifesting in anxiety, sleep disorders, acute stress disorder and obsession.

Finally, the finding of this study revealed that some of the possible strategies to curb sexual harassment against female undergraduates in the university include having seminars to discourage sexual harassment, encouraging students to report cases of sexual harassment, formulating anti-sexual harassment policies and appropriate enforcement of policies. Sexual harassment is a vice that is widely frowned upon and should be handled with every sense of seriousness. Evil thrives when it is not brought to the book and handled squarely. Universities no doubt, should be rid of every form of threat, especially of sexual harassment. This finding is in line with Obiozor and Osuala (2018) who reported that each institution should publish and publicise its moral code of conduct and make it available to all the learners and that each institution should have a standing Senate Committee to investigate every case of sexual harassment and punish offenders. The finding also supports Willie, Mboho and Umanah (2021) who reported that counselling, family courts, public enlightenment, establishment, and implementation of a national legal framework protecting women from domestic violence are possible ways of curbing sexual harassment against women. This finding also validates Arowolo (2020) that protecting women from violence could be achieved through functional legislation such as a review of extant Nigerian laws, and the abolition of obnoxious beliefs and societal practices are strategies for protecting women from all forms of violence.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers concluded that sexual harassment against female undergraduates in southeast Nigeria is prevalent. It also concluded that many factors such as indecent dressing, lack of self-control, male counterparts/lecturers taking advantage of the vulnerability of the female students and high rate of immorality are responsible for the upsurge of sexual harassment against female undergraduate students. Moreover, it was concluded that sexual harassment has a negative impact on both the psychological and cognitive well-being of female undergraduate students. Finally, some of the

strategies for curbing sexual harassment against female undergraduates include having seminars to discourage sexual harassment, encouraging students to report cases of sexual harassment, formulating anti-sexual harassment policies and appropriate enforcement of policies.

This study has significant implications for the healthy psycho-cognitive well-being of female undergraduate students in southeast, Nigeria. Sexual harassment has a debilitating impact on the psychological and cognitive well-being of victims irrespective of the level of study. Thus, a serene and threat-free learning environment should be created in universities to put sexual harassment in check. Moreover, female students should be empowered to resist and speak up anytime they experience unwelcome sexual advances from both male lecturers and counterparts alike. Students should also be discouraged from dressing indecently to school and encouraged to channel their energy towards good study habits that could earn them academic success.

### **FURTHER STUDY**

Despite the significant implications of this study, there are limitations to the generalizations of our findings. We used questionnaires alone to collect our data which may be a limitation to our finding. Therefore, we suggest the need for future studies to add an interview method of data collection. Furthermore, responses we got from random respondents through Google form questionnaire may not reflect a true picture of the general experience of other female students if our sample were drawn through an appropriate sampling technique. Finally, the use of a particular university for the study might not represent the opinion of all the university students in Anambra State. Considering the above, caution must be taken in the generalization of the findings.

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