

# Comprehensive Strategies to Mitigate Sexual Harassment in Nigerian Educational Institutions: Evidence from a Mixed-Methods Study. (A Case Study of Kwara State Polytechnic, Ilorin)

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## ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment in educational settings poses a significant threat to students' learning experiences, emotional well-being, and safety. In Nigeria, deeply rooted cultural norms, power imbalances, and institutional weaknesses discourage victims from reporting while enabling perpetrators. This study investigates the prevalence, types, perpetrators, institutional responses, and student perceptions of sexual harassment at Kwara State Polytechnic through a mixed-methods design. Data from 500 students across six institutes were collected via questionnaires and interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. Findings indicate high incidences of physical (19.4%), verbal (13.2%), and online harassment (8.6%), with perpetrators including lecturers, peers, and non-teaching staff. Many victims refrained from reporting due to fear and distrust in institutional redress mechanisms. Despite existing policies, poor implementation and low awareness limit their effectiveness. The study concludes that sexual harassment in Nigerian educational institutions is systemic and calls for comprehensive approaches encompassing policy reform, accountability, capacity building, and cultural change. Evidence-based interventions and

legislative reforms are recommended to safeguard students and staff.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment remains a pervasive global problem in educational environments and is notably prevalent in Nigeria, where traditional, social, and institutional factors exacerbate it. Institutions expected to foster intellectual growth often become sites of abuse, exploitation, and intimidation. Various studies have documented different forms of sexual harassment, including unwanted touching, coercion, and assault, primarily affecting female students (Ajuwon et al., 2011). These harmful behaviors threaten students' health and academic performance, often leading to mental health issues.

The Nigerian educational system, spanning primary to tertiary levels, has witnessed a rising trend in such incidents, further complicated by a culture of silence, victim blaming, and institutional apathy (Nwadiuwe, 2007). Power imbalances frequently place students at a disadvantage, where lecturers or staff may exploit their positions, offering grades or favors in exchange for sexual compliance (Makama, 2013; Adesuwa, 2020). Inadequate institutional frameworks and fear of retaliation contribute significantly to underreporting.

Although policies like the Anti-Sexual Harassment Bill and university codes of conduct exist, their poor implementation, bureaucratic hurdles, and lack of protection for whistleblowers limit their effectiveness (Onoyase, 2022). International bodies such as UNESCO and UN Women urge proactive measures including education, survivor-centered policies, and confidential reporting. However, Nigeria's institutional efforts remain inconsistent, often lacking trained personnel and effective support systems.

The broader impact of sexual harassment includes PTSD, anxiety, academic decline, and dropout, creating toxic environments deterring women's participation and leadership (Nwankwo et al., 2019). Recent social media campaigns and student protests highlight the urgency of addressing this endemic problem. This study aims to fill gaps in research by examining prevalence, patterns, institutional responses, and socio-demographic predictors across educational levels in Nigeria, proposing data-driven interventions to enhance safety and inclusion.

### Objectives

- i. Examine the forms and frequency of sexual harassment in Nigerian educational institutions,
- ii. identify common perpetrators and obstacles to reporting incidents,
- iii. evaluate the success of institutional responses, and
- iv. Recommend practical measures to prevent and address sexual harassment.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexual harassment is recognized internationally as a violation of rights and a serious barrier to safe learning. Defined by the UN as any unwelcome sexual behavior, it exists at all educational levels. Previous studies reveal high prevalence rates for female students in African institutions (UNESCO, 2019). In Nigeria, verbal, physical, and coercive harassment by lecturers and peers are widespread (Ajuwon et al., 2011; Adesuwa, 2020).

Normalization of harassment, such as accepting sexual advances for academic favor, further entrenches the issue (Nwadike, 2007). Institutional culture and leadership deficiencies also sustain harassment by failing to enforce policies effectively or provide accessible reporting mechanisms (Onoyase, 2022). Fear of reprisal and confidentiality breaches discourage victims from reporting (Okeke-Ihejirika & Salami, 2018).

Online harassment is an emerging concern, with female students subjected to inappropriate digital conduct (Olojede, 2022). Intersectionality shows younger female students in non-STEM fields face higher risks due to perceived vulnerabilities. Support services in campuses are often inadequate or nonexistent, undermining survivor recovery (Makama, 2013). Although policies exist, awareness and enforcement remain limited, underscoring calls for institutional transformation via training, clear procedures, and accountability mechanisms (UNESCO, 2019; UN Women, 2021).

## III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted at Kwara State Polytechnic, Ilorin, sampling 500 undergraduate students across diverse disciplines and academic levels. Data collection employed structured questionnaires capturing demographics, harassment experiences, perpetrators, institutional responses, and suggestions. Qualitative insights were gained through in-depth interviews with students and staff.

Instrument validity was established by expert review; reliability was confirmed via a pilot study (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.82$ ). Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS for descriptive statistics and chi-square tests to examine associations. Thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data to identify key patterns.

## IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The sample was predominantly female (71.4%) and aged 18–27, reflecting a vulnerable demographic segment. Respondents mostly represented mid to late stages of academic programs. Sexual harassment types included physical (19.4%), verbal (13.2%), online (8.6%), non-verbal (5%), and coercion (2.4%). A significant proportion (39.6%) reported other unclassified forms, indicating complexity.

Chi-square tests showed significant relationships between harassment experiences and age, gender, education level, and field of study, with younger females and students in applied sciences and financial management more affected. Perpetrators included fellow students (26%), lecturers (12.6%), non-teaching staff (8.4%), and others (40.6%), implying broad sources of misconduct.

Policy awareness was split nearly evenly; among those aware, less than half found policies effective. Reporting rates were low (21.4%), with many citing fear of victimization or disbelief in

institutional follow-up. Only 17.8% received satisfactory resolutions; intimidation and withdrawal of complaints occurred. Support services like counseling (27.8%) and awareness programs (19.8%) were limited; medical, legal, and support groups were minimal.

Suggested prevention measures emphasized student awareness campaigns (37.8%), faculty training (23.8%), stricter policy enforcement (20%), and clear reporting channels (9.6%). Context-specific strategies included involving traditional leaders and reconstructing gender norms.

## V. DISCUSSION

This study affirms sexual harassment as a multifaceted, systemic issue in Nigerian educational institutions, with high physical and verbal incidence aligning with previous research. The prominence of students as perpetrators challenges assumptions that only authority figures abuse power. Institutional policy gaps, low awareness, and ineffective enforcement perpetuate underreporting and survivor vulnerability.

The weak institutional response is reflected in low complaint rates and limited support services, underscoring the urgent need for survivor-centered, culturally tailored interventions. Age, gender, education level, and field of study significantly influence harassment risk, which complements findings about social and academic determinants. Proposed solutions mirror international recommendations to restructure institutional culture through training, policy clarity, and support infrastructure.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Sexual harassment constitutes a persistent, entrenched challenge within Nigerian educational institutions, compromising student safety and academic integrity. Existing policies are insufficiently communicated or enforced, and institutional responses to complaints are inadequate. Comprehensive, culturally appropriate reforms are imperative to close policy gaps, restore trust, and disrupt societal norms enabling harassment.

## VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Policy Reform and Enforcement:** Review and strengthen policies on sexual harassment to ensure clarity, enforceability, and cultural relevance, widely publicized to all campus members.

2. **Mandatory Training:** Implement continuous training for academic and non-academic staff to challenge harmful gender norms and power imbalances.
3. **Awareness Campaigns:** Conduct regular, culturally sensitive awareness efforts targeting students, informing them of rights, reporting procedures, and support services.
4. **Confidential Reporting Systems:** Establish anonymous online platforms and dedicated gender desks to encourage safe reporting without fear of retaliation.
5. **Expanded Support Services:** Enhance access to counseling, legal aid, and survivor support groups, particularly for female students.
6. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Develop independent oversight mechanisms to assess and improve institutional efforts in preventing and responding to harassment.

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