

**INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION, BARRIERS IN
DISCLOSURE AND FACILITATORS OF SEXUAL ABUSE
EXPERIENCE AMONG FEMALE STUDENTS IN TERTIARY
INSTITUTIONS IN DELTA STATE**

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates interpersonal communication barriers and facilitators related to the disclosure of sexual abuse experiences among female students in tertiary institutions in Delta State. Through a structured questionnaire, the research examines the prevalence of abuse, barriers to disclosure, and the effectiveness of support systems. The study employed a quantitative approach to elicit data through surveys with selected students from Delta State University, Abraka and College of Education, Warri. Findings revealed a high prevalence of sexual abuse, with significant barriers to disclosure identified, including a lack of trust in institutional authorities and fear. The study revealed that many cases of abuse go unreported, perpetrators often being fellow students, and alcohol and substance abuse a contributing barrier to the disclosure of sexual abuse experiences by impairing memory and emotional clarity, making it hard for victims to articulate and tell their experiences. Cultural beliefs and socioeconomic status were less influential than anticipated, while ineffective institutional policies and religious beliefs emerged as significant factors discouraging disclosure. The effectiveness of current support systems was rated poorly, with respondents indicating that support services and counselling are inadequate. Recommendations include enhancing institutional policies to provide clear reporting mechanisms and support services, improving the accessibility and effectiveness of support systems, and implementing campaign programs to address stigma and build trust between students and authorities. This study highlights the urgent need for comprehensive reforms in institutional responses to sexual abuse and calls for a supportive environment to facilitate open communication and reporting among students.

Keywords: Interpersonal Communication, Barriers, Disclosure, Sexual Abuse, Institutions

INTRODUCTION

The issue of sexual violence is neglected and has become prevalent in Nigerian tertiary institutions, and society at large. Egbo (2012) stated that stories on sexual abuse hardly make news headline as 75% of 183 articles analysed were published on inside page. Nwabueze & Oduah (2014) support the fact that sexual abuse cases are not treated with priority. This issue burdens the females as patriarchal values are deeply ingrained in the society. While stigma and blaming discourages sexual abuse victims from reporting and seeking help. Balogun et al., (2013) defined sexual abuse as an act committed without the consent of the other party. An involuntary sexual act in which a person is threatened, coerced or forced to engage or forced to engage in any sexual touching a consented. Sexual abuse is recognized worldwide as a public health issue. Delta State of Nigeria constitute several tertiary institutions, like Delta State

University, Abraka, College of Education, Warri and among others. These institutions attract a diverse students' populations from different parts of the globe and offers an in-depth exploration of the complex dynamics surrounding sexual abuse disclosure among female students. This research addresses an important issue as it sheds light on the societal and psychological factors that influence students' willingness and ability to disclose experience of sexual abuse despite the importance of interpersonal communication in addressing these barriers such as fear of stigma, victim-blaming, and a lack of trust in institutional support systems (Oladepo et al., 2019). Interpersonal communication is a process of exchanging information, feelings, and meaning through verbal and non-verbal messages. It is a two-way process that involves both sending and receiving messages. Effective interpersonal communication requires not only the ability to convey messages clearly but also the ability to listen and respond appropriately (Berger, 2018). In the context of sexual abuse, effective communication can facilitate disclosure, provide emotional support, and promote healing and recovery (Akinlabi & Olatunji, 2020). However, the dynamics of interpersonal communication are influenced by several factors, including cultural norms, social expectations, and individual psychological factors. In Nigeria, cultural norms and societal expectations often discourage open discussions about sexual abuse. This is particularly true for women, who may face additional societal pressures and stigmatization (Akinlabi & Olatunji, 2020). The fear of being blamed or judged, coupled with a lack of faith in the justice system, further exacerbates the reluctance to talk about sexual abuse experiences (Nwogu et al., 2020). The non-disclosure of sexual abuse among students has significant implications. It hinders the provision of timely and appropriate support; it exacerbates the psychological trauma experienced by victims and perpetuates a culture of silence and impunity. Research indicates that victims of sexual abuse who do not disclose their experiences are more likely to suffer from long-term mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Collin-Vézina et al., 2019). Recent studies have highlighted the need for comprehensive interventions that address these barriers. Such interventions should aim to create an enabling environment that encourages open communication, provides accessible and sensitive support services, and ensures that perpetrators are held accountable (Oladepo et al., 2019). Educational programs that promote awareness about sexual abuse challenge harmful cultural norms, and equip students with effective communication skills are also crucial (Smith & Huntoon, 2020). Also, by fostering an environment of trust, support, and accountability, tertiary institutions can play a pivotal role in addressing the scourge of sexual abuse and promoting the well-being of their students.

Statement of Problem

Despite the prevalence of sexual abuse cases, which has become a significant concern globally, many victims often face barriers in disclosing their experiences due to fear of being blamed or judged and social stigma coupled with societal norms that discourage open discussions on issues like sexual abuse. Institutional environments may lack sufficient structures that encourage safe, confidential disclosure. This creates gap in addressing and responding to sexual abuse, therefore leaving victims without the support needed to process and heal from their experiences. Since the critical role of interpersonal communication in fostering emotional support and well-being, is influenced by various social, cultural and psychological factors. These factors create complex barriers to openness and trust, further complicating the ability for females to disclose abuse experiences. Additionally, the culture of silence perpetuates the prevalence of sexual abuse, as perpetrators are not held accountable, and preventive measures remain inadequate. Understanding the unique cultural, social, and institutional factors that influence students' willingness to disclose sexual abuse is crucial for developing effective strategies to combat this issue.

Objectives of the Study

This research seeks to identify the interpersonal communication barriers that hinder the disclosure of sexual abuse and to evaluate the effectiveness of existing institutional support mechanisms.

Research Question

- i. What is the prevalence of sexual abuse among undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Delta State?
- ii. How do cultural norms impact sexual disclosure among female students in tertiary institutions in Delta State?
- iii. What are the perceived barriers to effective interpersonal communication that influence students' decisions not to disclose sexual abuse experiences?
- iv. How effective are the existing support systems in facilitating the disclosure of sexual abuse among students?

Literature Review

Sexual abuse in tertiary institutions is a pervasive issue worldwide, affecting students in various educational contexts. According to a meta-analysis conducted by Fedina, Holmes, and Backes (2018), the prevalence of sexual violence among college students globally ranges from 10% to 40%. These figures highlight the significant variation in prevalence rates, influenced by factors such as cultural attitudes, reporting practices, and institutional policies. In the United States, the National College Health Assessment (NCHA) consistently reports increased rates of sexual violence among college students. The 2019 NCHA survey found that 13% of female students, 5% of male students, and 21% of non-binary students reported experiencing non-consensual sexual contact since enrolling in college (American College Health Association, 2019). Similarly, a study by Cantor *et al.* (2019) at 33 major U.S. universities found that 26.4% of undergraduate women and 6.8% of undergraduate men experienced some form of sexual assault.

Prevalence of Sexual Abuse in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

Sexual abuse in Nigerian tertiary institutions is deeply troubling and has various effects on the students and society. Research findings have shown that the prevalence of sexual abuse in Nigeria stood at 36.7% in the southeastern part of the country (Ogbonnaya *et al.*, 2011). About 22.2% and 6.6% were recorded from the two universities in northern Nigeria (Eliyahu *et al.*, 2011). In Nigeria, the prevalence of sexual abuse in tertiary institutions is a critical issue, exacerbated by various forms of sexual harassment, assault, and coercion. Previous studies indicate that a significant number of students in Nigerian universities have experienced sexual abuse, particularly female students (Okeke *et al.*, 2019; Akinlabi & Olatunji (2020). According to Okeke *et al.* (2019), approximately 25% of female students in Nigerian universities reported experiencing sexual violence, including harassment and assault, during their academic programme. Similarly, Akinlabi & Olatunji (2020) found out that 30% of girls in selected universities in Nigeria had been sexually assaulted, with many cases involving faculty members. The issue of sexual abuse in Nigerian universities is compounded by power dynamics, institutional weakness, culture of silence and societal factor, victim-blaming, and inadequate legal framework which discourages victims from reporting incidents. The underreporting masked the true extent of the problem and hampered efforts to address it

effectively. Disclosing sexual abuse experiences is complex and deeply stigmatised issue. Many barriers can prevent victims from disclosing their experiences, and these barriers may be personal, societal or institutional, and they contribute to underreporting and the silencing of victims, indicating a persistent trend of withholding sexual abuse disclosure. McElvaney (2015), in a comprehensive review, stated that high prevalence of delayed partial and nondisclosure in childhood.

Personal Factors: Emotional and Psychological Impacts (Shame, Guilt, and Fear of Retribution). One of the most significant personal barriers to the disclosure of sexual abuse is the emotional and psychological impact on the victim. Feelings of shame, guilt, and fear of retribution are pervasive and can be debilitating.

Shame and Guilt: This feeling is compounded by societal attitudes that stigmatise victims of sexual abuse (Feiring, Simon, & Cleland, 2019). Self-blame may be a significant barrier to disclosure, as survivors may feel they will not be believed or will be judged harshly (Feiring et al., 2019).

Fear of Retribution: Fear of retribution is another critical barrier. Survivors may fear physical harm, social ostracism, or academic and professional repercussions if they disclose the abuse. This fear is particularly pronounced in cases where the abuser holds a position of power or authority over the victim, such as a teacher, employer, or family member (Smith, Wilkes, & Parrish, 2018). The perceived or real threats of retaliation can create an environment where silence seems safer than disclosure (Feiring et al., 2019).

Victim's Mental Health and Self-Perce

Survivors of sexual abuse often struggle with mental health issues that can impede their ability to disclose. Depression and anxiety can lead to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, making it difficult for survivors to take the steps necessary to disclose the abuse and seek help. PTSD, characterized by flashbacks, nightmares, and severe anxiety, can also prevent survivors from speaking out due to the overwhelming stress associated with reliving the trauma (Latalova et al., 2018).

Self-Perception; Survivors may feel worthless or undeserving of help and support. This negative self-perception can be a significant barrier to disclosure, as individuals may believe that their experiences are not valid or that they will not be taken seriously (Feiring et al., 2019). Additionally, some survivors may internalise societal messages that downplay the severity of their abuse, leading to minimisation of their experiences and reluctance to disclose (Holland, Cortina, & Freyd, 2018).

Social Factors

Peer Pressure: Survivors may fear that their peers will not believe them or will blame them for the abuse. In some cases, peers may explicitly or implicitly pressure the survivor to remain silent to protect the reputation of the perpetrator, particularly if the perpetrator is well-liked or holds social power within the peer group (Holland, Cortina, & Freyd, 2018).

Social Influence - A culture that values secrecy and discretion may discourage open discussions about sexual abuse, leading survivors to keep their experiences hidden (Holland et al., 2018).

Cultural Norms and Societal Expectations - In societies where women are expected to be submissive and chaste, disclosing sexual abuse can lead to severe social repercussions, including loss of social status and marriage prospects (Akinlabi & Olatunji, 2020)

Societal Expectations - Sexual abuse is heavily stigmatised; victims may be reluctant to tell abuse due to fears of being blamed or judged (Akinlabi & Olatunji, 2020). Additionally, societal expectations about the appropriate response to sexual abuse, such as seeking justice through legal channels, can also influence disclosure. In contexts where the legal system is perceived as corrupt or ineffective, survivors may see little benefit in disclosing their abuse (Babalola et al., 2021).

Stigma and Victim-Blaming Attitudes - Survivors of sexual abuse often face stigma, which can manifest as social exclusion, discrimination, and judgment. This stigma can be internalised by survivors, leading to feelings of shame and unworthiness and deterring them from disclosing their abuse (Link & Phelan, 2019). These attitudes can come from various sources, including family, friends, and the broader community.

Support Systems Available

Hotlines and Helplines: These services involve trained volunteers or professionals who can offer confidential support, information, and referrals to other resources (Ward et al., 2018).

Reporting Mechanisms: Tertiary institutions often have reporting mechanisms in place to allow survivors to report incidents of sexual abuse to appropriate authorities. These mechanisms may include anonymous reporting options, formal grievance procedures, and dedicated offices or personnel responsible for handling reports of sexual violence (Ward et al., 2018).

Theoretical Framework

Communication Privacy Management Theory

Sandra Petronio introduced the Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPMT), which explores how individuals manage the boundaries of private information, including decisions about what to disclose and to whom (Petronio, 2002). CPMT is grounded on the notion that individuals consider private information personal property and exercise control over its dissemination.

Relevance to Interpersonal Communication and Disclosure

CPMT is particularly relevant in the context of sexual abuse; victims often grapple with the fear of negative consequences, such as being disbelieved, judged, or ostracised, which may outweigh the perceived benefits of disclosing. This underscores the importance of establishing clear communication rules and ensuring that confidants respect the privacy boundaries set by the discloser (Petronio, 2013).

METHODS

The study employs a quantitative research design to examine interpersonal communication, barriers to disclosure and facilitators of sexual abuse experiences among female students in

tertiary institutions in Delta State. A cross-sectional survey approach was used to enable the collection of data from a broad sample of participants, identifying the factors influencing disclosure of sexual abuse experiences and allowing facilitators to support

Population of the study

The population of this study consists of undergraduate students from Delta State University, Abraka, Ethiope East LGA, and the College of Education, Warri (located in Warri South LGA). The population was selected purposively to be 26,000. Delta State has 20,000 undergraduate students, while the College of Education, Warri has 6,000.

Data Collection

A face-to-face Structured questionnaire containing a close-ended question and Likert-scale items was used as an instrument for data collection. A self-administered questionnaire was distributed.

Data Analysis

The collected data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The descriptive statistics, frequencies, percentages, mean, and standard deviation were calculated to describe the main variables and examine the interpersonal communication patterns, barriers to closure, and facilitators.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the study, ethical consent was obtained from participants, ensuring they understood the purpose of the study, guaranteed confidentiality of their responses and right to withdraw at any time.

Sample Size Determination

The Yamane sample size formula was used to determine the sample size for this study

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

Where:

n = required sample size

N = population size

e = margin of error (0.05 for a 95% confidence level)

Using this formula;

$$n = \frac{26,000}{1 + 26000 (0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{26,000}{1 + 26000 (0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{26,000}{1 + 65}$$

$$n = \frac{26,000}{66} = 394$$

Sampling Technique

The sample size 394 was stratified proportionally across different strata is:

The sample size for each stratum (n_i) =

$$\left(\frac{\text{Stratum size } (N_i)}{\text{Total Population } (N)} \right) \times \text{Total Sample size } (n)$$

Where:

n_i = Sample size for each stratum, N_i = Sample size (Population of a particular faculty or department), N = Total Population, n = Total sample size (394)

Delta State University, Abraka

The total sample size allocated to Delta State University was 236 (Table 1). To determine the number of students to be sampled from each faculty, the following calculations were made:

Faculty of Social Sciences (Mass Communication):

$$n_1 = (7966/20000) \times 236 = 94 \text{ students}$$

Faculty of Arts (Theatre Arts):

$$n_2 = (7033/20000) \times 236 = 83 \text{ students}$$

Faculty of Basic Medical Sciences (Pharmacology):

$$n_3 = (5000/20000) \times 236 = 59 \text{ student}$$

Table 1: Sample distribution for Delta State University

Faculty	Department	Level	Age	Percentage	Number
Faculty of the Social Sciences	Mass Communication	100-200	15-20	40%	94
Faculty of Arts	Theatre Arts	100-200	15-20	35%	83
Faculty of Basic Medical Science	Pharmacology	100-200	15-20	25%	59
Total				100%	236

College of Education, Warri

The total sample size allocated to the College of Education; Warri was 158 (Table 2). The number of students to be sampled from each faculty was calculated as follows:

Faculty of Education (Guidance and Counselling):

$$n_4 = (4215/6000) \times 158 = 111 \text{ students}$$

Faculty of Science (Biology):

$$n_5 = (1785/6000) \times 158 = 47 \text{ students}$$

Table 2: Sample distribution for College of Education Warri

Faculty	Department	Level	Age	Percentage	Number
Faculty of Education	Guidance and Counselling	100-200	15-20	70%	111
Faculty of Science	Biology	100-200	15-20	30%	47
Total				100%	158

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 3: Research Question 1: What is the prevalence of sexual abuse among undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Delta State?

Statement	No.	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision
Sexual abuse is a prevalent issue among undergraduate students in my institution.	394	3.56	1.12	Agreed
Many cases of sexual abuse among students are unreported in this institution.	394	3.72	1.15	Agreed
Perpetrators of sexual abuse in this institution are often fellow students.	394	3.45	1.07	Agreed

Power dynamics between students and faculty contribute to sexual abuse incidents.	394	3.88	1.08	Agreed
Alcohol and substance abuse can affect individuals' mental health and impairs disclosure of sexual experiences.	394	3.62	1.14	Agreed

Regarding the widespread and contributing factors of sexual abuse (Table 3), respondents generally agreed that sexual abuse is a significant issue within their institutions, with a mean score of 3.56. Many believed that such cases often go unreported (mean = 3.72), and perpetrators are frequently fellow students (mean = 3.45). Power dynamics between students and faculty are seen as contributing to sexual abuse (mean = 3.88), and alcohol and substance abuse were recognized as significant factors (mean = 3.62). These responses highlight a broad consensus on the seriousness of sexual abuse and its contributing factors.

Table 4: Research Question 2: How does cultural norms impact sexual disclosure among female students in tertiary institutions in Delta State?

Statement	No.	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision
Cultural beliefs encourage the open discussion of sexual abuse in my community.	394	2.11	0.80	Disagreed
Fear of stigma prevents students from disclosing sexual abuse experiences.	394	4.05	1.12	Agreed
Socioeconomic status influences a student's likelihood of reporting sexual abuse.	394	2.55	1.13	Disagreed
Institutional policies are ineffective in addressing sexual abuse cases in this institution.	394	3.63	1.09	Agreed
Religious beliefs within the community play a role in discouraging the disclosure of sexual abuse.	394	3.75	1.10	Agreed

The impact of cultural norms on sexual abuse disclosure (Table 4) reveals that few of the respondents disagreed that cultural beliefs encourage open discussion of sexual abuse (mean = 2.11). This may suggest that cultural stigma around sexual abuse discussions might discourage individuals from openly disagreeing with cultural beliefs, especially if they fear judgment or social repercussions. Nwogu et al. (2020) assert in support of this finding that fear of being blamed or judged, coupled with a lack of faith in the justice system, further exacerbates the reluctance to talk about sexual abuse experiences (Nwogu et al., 2020). Socio-economic status significantly influences reporting (mean = 2.55). However, respondents from different socio-economic background may have varied experiences in reporting abuse. Additionally, fear of stigma is seen as a major barrier to disclosure with a mean of 4.05. This suggests a strong level of agreement among respondents that fear, stigma plays a crucial role in disclosure of sexual abuse experiences. Also, respondents agreed that institutional policies are ineffective with a mean of 3.63. This shows inconsistent in enforcement of policies to protect sexual abused victims. Religious beliefs also contribute to discouraging disclosure (mean = 3.75). This suggests respondents have the fear of being stigmatized and judged if they disclose their abuse experiences because religious community sometimes carry strong moral exceptions. This is in

line with Akinlabi and Olatunji (2020) findings that sexual abuse is heavily stigmatized, victims may be reluctant to tell abuse due to fears of being blamed or judged.

Table 5: Research Question 3: What are the perceived barriers to effective interpersonal communication that influence students' decisions not to disclose sexual abuse experiences

Statement	No.	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision
There is a lack of trust in institutional authorities regarding the handling of sexual abuse cases.	394	3.93	1.09	Agreed
Students feel reluctant disclosing sexual abuse experiences.	394	4.08	1.14	Agreed
The fear of being blamed discourages students from disclosing sexual abuse.	394	4.02	1.11	Agreed
Support groups and counselling services are accessible and effective in this institution.	394	2.11	1.06	Disagreed
Clear and open communication between students and staff is encouraged in this institution.	394	2.89	0.88	Disagreed

Barriers to effective interpersonal communication (Table 5) show that respondents believed there is a lack of trust in institutional authorities (mean = 3.93). This score indicates that most respondents perceived ineffectiveness in addressing abuse cases. More so, students feel reluctant to disclose sexual abuse experiences with a of (mean = 4.08) due to fear of retaliation from the abusers. Again, fear of being blamed is also a significant deterrent (mean = 4.02). This might make respondents worry about reporting abuse because it could lead to social ostracism, bullying or other consequences which make students hesitant to disclose abuse. A mean rating of 2.11 on the statement that support groups and counselling services are accessible and effective in the institution indicates that respondents generally disagree, suggesting that they find these services to be lacking in either availability, accessibility or quality. A mean of 2.89 recorded suggests that there is disagreement about the encouragement and clear communication between students and staff (mean = 2.89). These findings point to critical areas where communication and support systems need improvement.

Table 6: Research Question 4: How effective are the existing support systems in facilitating the disclosure of sexual abuse among students?

Statement	No.	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision
The existing support systems in this institution addresses the needs of sexual abuse survivors.	394	2.56	1.02	Disagreed
There are adequate reporting mechanisms for sexual abuse in this institution.	394	3.72	1.15	Agreed
Students are aware of the procedures to follow when reporting sexual abuse in this institution.	394	3.45	1.07	Agreed

Improvements in the current support systems would encourage more students to disclose sexual abuse.	394	3.88	1.08	Agreed
Educational programs on sexual abuse and communication should be introduced to enhance awareness.	394	3.62	1.14	Agreed

The effectiveness (Table 6) of support systems and recommendations for improvement indicates that current systems are not fully meeting the needs of sexual abuse survivors (mean = 2.56). Although reporting mechanisms are viewed as adequate (mean = 3.72) and students generally know the reporting procedures (mean = 3.45), improvements in support systems could encourage more disclosures (mean = 3.88). Additionally, there is a call for educational programs to raise awareness and improve communication (mean = 3.62). Overall, while some aspects of support are functioning, significant enhancements are needed to better address and support sexual abuse survivors

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate a consensus among respondents that sexual abuse is prevalent among female students with many cases unreported. The mean scores for statements related to the prevalence of sexual abuse ranged from 3.45 to 3.88, signifying agreement in the existence and extent of the problem. The high mean score for the perception that perpetrators are often fellow students highlights the importance of peer interactions in the dynamics of sexual abuse. The result indicates that power dynamics between students and faculty contribute to sexual abuse incidents (mean = 3.88), which supports the findings of previous studies that link hierarchical relationships with increased vulnerability to abuse (Smith & Williams, 2018). The high mean score for the impact of alcohol and substance abuse on sexual abuse cases (mean = 3.62) reflects similar findings in the literature, which suggest that substance abuse is a contributing barrier to non-disclosure of sexual abuse experiences because it impairs memory, making it harder for sexual abuse victims to tell experiences. The study examined the impact of cultural norms on sexual abuse disclosure, revealing that (Table 4) few of the respondents disagreed that cultural beliefs encourage open discussion of sexual abuse (mean = 2.11). This may suggest that cultural stigma around sexual abuse discussions might discourage individuals from openly disagreeing with cultural beliefs, especially if they fear judgment or social repercussions. Also, fear of disclosure, given the sensitivity of the topic, respondents might feel uncomfortable sharing their true opinions, especially if they fear that their responses could be linked back to them. Nwogu et al. (2020) lend support to this study, finding that fear of being blamed, coupled with a lack of faith in the justice system, further exacerbates the reluctance to talk about sexual abuse experiences. Socio-economic status significantly influences reporting (mean = 2.55), but respondents from different socioeconomic backgrounds may have varied experiences. The high mean score recorded for the fear of stigma preventing disclosure (mean = 4.05), supports existing literature that identifies stigma as a significant barrier to reporting sexual abuse. The perception that institutional policies are ineffective (mean = 3.63) aligns with research indicating that inadequate institutional responses often hinder effective management of sexual abuse cases (Baker, 2020). The result that religious beliefs discourage disclosure (mean = 3.75) is consistent with this study that religious and cultural norms can contribute to non-disclosure. These results emphasise the need for institutions to address stigma and improve policies to facilitate more effective communication and reporting. This finding related to barriers and facilitators of effective interpersonal communication reveals significant challenges. Respondents agreed that a lack of trust in institutional authorities (mean

= 3.93) and fear of not being believed (mean = 4.02) are major barriers to disclosing sexual abuse. The high mean score for discomfort in disclosing abuse to authorities compared to peers underscores the need for building trust and creating safer reporting mechanisms within institutions. Support groups and counselling services are not perceived as effective or accessible (mean = 2.11), suggesting a significant gap in the infrastructure support. Generally, clear communication between students and staff is lacking (mean = 2.89) further supports the need for improved communication channels to facilitate better interactions and support for victims. The evaluation of the effectiveness of support systems revealed a general dissatisfaction with existing mechanisms. The mean score for the effectiveness of current support systems (mean = 2.56) indicates that respondents do not believe these systems adequately address the needs of sexual abuse survivors. The perception that improvements in support systems could encourage more disclosures (mean = 3.88) highlights the importance of enhancing these systems to support victims better and promote reporting. Also, findings that there are adequate reporting mechanisms (mean = 3.72) and that students are aware of the reporting procedures (mean = 3.45) suggest that while reporting structures exist, there may still be barriers to their effectiveness. The introduction of educational programs on sexual abuse (mean = 3.62), aligns with previous works advocating for increased awareness and education to improve reporting rates and support for victims (Johnson & Lee, 2022).

Conclusion

The study underscores the complex interplay of factors that affect the disclosure of sexual abuse—buttressing the fact that many students face significant barriers that prevent them from openly disclosing their sexual abuse experiences. However, the study also identifies key facilitators that can promote disclosure, such as supportive relationships with peers, the presence of trusted authority figures and the establishment of safe, non-judgmental spaces. Barriers that hinder effective interpersonal communication and deter victims from seeking help can exacerbate their psychological impact on them. Therefore, addressing these barriers and strengthening these facilitators could lead to better psychological and social outcomes for female students who experienced abuse. Overall, the study highlights the urgent need for tertiary institutions to implement comprehensive survivor centred policies that prioritize safe communication and disclosure channels for affected students.

Recommendations

The study provides valuable insights into enhancing institutional policies, developing and implementing comprehensive policies to address sexual abuse, including clear reporting mechanisms, support services, and preventive measures. Institutions should ensure these policies are well-communicated and accessible to students. However, several research gaps remain that future studies could address cross-cultural comparisons. This study would be beneficiary to explore if the barriers and facilitators identified are similar across different cultural regional or institutional contexts. Research in other states could highlight unique cultural factors influencing disclosure.

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