

FORMS, RISK FACTORS, AND MEASURES OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT REDUCTION AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN OBOLLO, UDENU LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF ENUGU STATE

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Abstract

This study determined the forms, risk factors of sexual harassment and measures of sexual harassment reduction among secondary school students in Obollo, Udenu LGA of Enugu State. Three research questions guided the study. A descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. The study was carried out in Obollo Girls' Secondary School, and Obollo Boys' Secondary School, Udenu Local Government Area of Enugu State. Population for the study consisted of all the students in the school estimated at two thousand and eighty one (Obollo Girls=954; Obollo Boys'= 1127). Sample for the study was 276, made up of one 138 males and 138 females. Purposive random sampling was used to select 46 respondents (23 males & 23 females) from the six levels (JSS 1-3 & SS 1-3). A questionnaire, well structured by the researchers was developed and used for the study. The questionnaire comprises of three sections (A & B). Section A comprised of personal information on the gender, section B was nine item statements on forms of sexual harassment and efforts towards its prevention. The questionnaire was face validated by three experts in the department of Health and Physical Education. The data generated from the instrument were analyzed and presented using descriptive statistics of frequency and percentages. Furthermore, percentages using Okafor (1997) criteria for describing level of knowledge was adopted to determine the level of various forms of sexual harassment. In this regard, a proportion of 20 per cent or less was considered 'very low'; 21-39 per cent 'low'; 40-59 per cent 'moderate'; 60-79 per cent 'high'; and 80 per cent and above 'very high' level of sexual harassment. The study found out that secondary school students (58%) have moderate mean level of various forms of sexual harassment and low (35.2 %) mean risk factors associated with sexual harassment.

Introduction

Sexual harassment is a public health issue that is endemic in secondary schools and workplaces all over the globe. Almost 80 per cent of students in secondary schools report experiencing sexual harassment at school (Young, Allen & Ashbaker, 2004). At the primary school level it is exhibited differently and thus it may be overlooked. In fact, sexual harassment has become so commonplace that many accept it as something everyone puts up with. However, sexual harassment is unacceptable, causing personal pain and embarrassment, creating a negative school environment, and feeding into more violent behaviours. It is important for teachers, parents, and students to gain an understanding of what sexual harassment actually is, how to respond to it, and how to prevent it.

Sexual harassment is typically defined as a form of unwanted or unwelcome sexual attention, and is considered a form of gender-based violence (McMaster, Connolly & Pepler, 2002). Sexual harassment among secondary school students encompasses acts that are sufficiently severe, persistent, or pervasive to limit a student's ability to participate in or benefit from an education program or activity, or that create a hostile or abusive educational environment (Gruber & Fineran, 2007). Such harassment can take physical forms such as a pulling at clothing, rubbing up against another person, or grabbing/pinching, as well as verbal forms such as sexual comments, jeers, rumor spreading, or sexual jokes. Sexual harassment is a construct that invites controversy because of the wide variation in how it is defined by researchers in the field. As O'Donohue has recently concluded, definitions of sexual harassment agree on only one semantic issue: that sexual harassment is improper behaviour that has a sexual dimension (O'Donohue, Downs, & Yeater, 2009). A universally accepted definition of sexual harassment has been difficult to generate because of the diverse legal, sociological, feminist, and psychological perspectives from which the issue has been examined. In the current study, we use a behavioural-psychological definition of sexual harassment as unwanted sexual attention. This

definition is behavioural in the sense that specific behaviours constituting harassment are defined, and also psychological because the target's perception or interpretation of behaviour is salient.

Sexual harassment is unwanted and unwelcome sexual behaviour. Physical behaviours may include touching that is uncomfortable, embarrassing, and/or offensive (such as unwanted groping, pinching, or patting). Sexual harassment is not limited, however, to physical acts. Using crude or sexually inappropriate language can be considered sexual harassment if it creates an uncomfortable environment for someone else. Sexual harassment may also include offensive jokes, comments, greetings, verbal teasing, or inappropriate name-calling, such as "Hey, babe," "Hot stuff," or "Big hips/boobs" (Young et al, 2004). Students often sexually harass others by calling them "fag," "homo," or other degrading terms that refer to sexual orientation. Additional types of sexual harassment include students starting or spreading sexual rumors, writing sexual graffiti on bathroom walls, sending crude e-mails or letters, and displaying sexual drawings or pornography. A person in a position of power may request sexual favours in return for a starting position on a school team, a higher grade, or access to a popular club or peer group. Individuals who experience sexual harassment feel fearful, intimidated, manipulated, and overpowered (Larkin & Popaleni, 1994).

Identifying sexual harassment is not always easy. A boy may jokingly snap a girl's bra, or a girl may teasingly tug at a boy's pants, and then claim, "I was just teasing" or "I thought they liked it." Even though sexual harassment may not have been the motive, if the target finds the behaviour uncomfortable, embarrassing, or threatening, there is a problem. It is the perception of the individual who is being harassed, not that of the harasser, that weighs most heavily in deciding if harassment has occurred. It is important to consider the individual's age and the context of the situation when identifying sexual harassment. For example, if kindergartners are playing kissing tag and there is a sense of fun and enjoyment for all students, the game is not sexual harassment. If a teacher hugs an injured child, this is most likely not sexual harassment. If, however, the child perceives the touch as uncomfortable or the touching happens repeatedly, it may be sexual harassment. Similarly, if junior secondary students are flirting and the interaction is good natured without a sense of threat or intimidation, the flirting is probably not sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment has been recognized for many years as being a problem in the secondary schools, workplace, university campuses, and military settings, where studies show that about two in five women and one in six men report at least one incident in the past two years (Street, Gradus & Stafford, 2007). Although sexual harassment is gender based by nature, women experience it differently from men. Women are more likely to report being objectified, put down, or treated differently because of their gender (Lindberg, Grabe & Hyde, 2007), whereas men experience vulgar and homophobic comments, presumably to enforce traditional gender role stereotypes (McMaster et al, 2002). Most students also experience some forms of sexual harassment during secondary school, either occasionally or often, with girls experiencing more frequent and severe forms than boys (Young et al, 2004). Even when the timeframe of questions about unwanted sexual behaviours and harassment is narrowed from "ever" (i.e., lifetime prevalence) to the past 2 weeks, 15 per cent of secondary school students report being subjected to unwanted and personally upsetting sexual harassment (Walsh, Duffy & Gallagher-Duffy, 2007).

Despite awareness of the frequency of sexual harassment, there is little available research on the forms of harassment experienced by adolescent boys and girls or how it may affect them differently over time. Although an atmosphere of sexual harassment is unhealthy and alienating, further study is needed to determine the effects of such acts on girls' and boys' interpersonal adjustment, especially over time. In the only longitudinal study of this issue, sexual harassment among grade 8 students predicted adjustment problems three years later (Goldstein, Malanchuk & Davis-Kean, 2007). Younger girls and boys who associated with deviant peers were more likely to be the victims of sexual harassment. Moreover, girls who reached pubertal development earlier were at increased risk for sexual harassment, most likely because of inappropriate attention by others (Wolfe, Jaffe & Crooks, 2006).

It is apparent that some forms of sexual harassment occur in our secondary schools. These forms are associated with some risk factors. It is expedient to carry out this study because virtually of the reviewed literature most were from developed countries; and there is need to ascertain the state of the problem in our immediate environment. In other to fulfill this, the study determined the forms and

the risk factors of sexual harassment, and also provided the measures of sexual harassment reduction among secondary school students in Obollo in Udenu Local Government State.

Research Questions

1. What are the forms of sexual harassment that occur among secondary school students in Obollo?
2. What are the risk factors associated with sexual harassment among secondary school students in Obollo?
3. What are the measures of sexual harassment reduction among secondary school students in Obollo?

Methods

A descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. Best and Khan (2003) recommends this design pointing out that it enables one to capture all pertinent aspects of a situation while employing a group as a unit of the study and investigation. This design sought to obtain information that described existing phenomenon by asking individuals about their perceptions, attitudes, behaviour or values. The study was carried out in Obollo Girls' Secondary School, and Obollo Boys' Secondary School, Udenu Local Government Area of Enugu State. Population for the study consisted of all the students in the school estimated at two thousand and eighty one (Obollo Girls=954; Obollo Boys'=1127). Sample for the study was 276, made up of one 138 males and 138 females. Purposive random sampling was used to select 46 respondents (23 males & 23 females) from the six levels (JSS 1-3 & SS 1-3). A questionnaire, well structured by the researchers was developed and used for the study. The questionnaire, "Sexual Harassment Questionnaire" was administered face to face to the students with the help of form mistresses and masters and some corps members. This was achieved because letter of introduction was submitted to the Principals of the schools prior to questionnaire administration. The questionnaire was developed from literature reviewed, and used to collect data from the respondents. The questionnaire comprises of three sections (A, B & C). Section A comprised of forms of sexual harassment, section B was six item statements on risk factors associated with sexual harassment while section C covered the measures of preventing and reducing sexual harassment. The questionnaire was face validated by three experts in the Department of Health and Physical Education. The data generated from the instrument was analyzed using SPSS. Data analyzed were presented using descriptive statistics of frequencies and percentages. Furthermore, percentages using Okafor (1997) criteria for describing level of knowledge was adopted to determine the level of various forms of sexual harassment. In this regard, a proportion of 20 per cent or less was considered 'very low'; 21-39 per cent 'low'; 40-59 per cent 'moderate'; 60-79 per cent 'high'; and 80 per cent and above 'very high' level of sexual harassment.

Results

Table 1

Forms of sexual harassment (n=276)

S/N	Forms of Sexual Harassment	Present		Absent		Decision
		f	%	f	%	
1	Someone made sexual comments, jokes, gestures, or looks at me	198	71.7	78	28.3	High
2	Someone touched, grabbed or pinched me in a sexual way	176	63.8	100	36.2	High
3	Someone brushed up against me in a sexual way	79	35.1	197	64.9	Low
4	Someone spread sexual rumors about me	125	45.3	151	54.7	Moderate
5	Someone called me a "gay", "fag", "dyke", "lezzie", "queer" or similar terms	81	29.3	195	70.7	Low
6	Someone pulled at my clothing in a sexual way	209	75.7	67	24.3	High
7	Someone showed, gave, or left me sexual pictures, facebook, messages, or notes	253	91.7	23	8.3	Very high
8	Someone made comments about or rated the parts of my body that makes me a boy or girl	143	51.8	133	48.2	Moderate
Total (mean %)			58		42	Moderate

Findings in Table 1 show that more than half of the secondary school students (58%) had moderate mean level of various forms of sexual harassment. Approximately ninety two per cent of the students reported being shown, given or left with sexual pictures, photographs, messages or notes. Sexual pulling of cloths was reported at 75.7 per cent while sexual comments, passes and looks (71.7%) were highly reported. Moderate forms of sexual harassment were reported about comments made about or rated the parts of my body that makes me a boy or girl and spreading sexual rumors (45.3%).

Table 2
Risk factors associated with sexual harassment (n=276)

S/N	Risk factors associated with sexual harassment	Present		Absent		Decision
		f	%	f	%	
1	Suicidal thoughts	54	19.6	222	80.4	Very low
2	Self-harm	87	31.5	189	68.5	Low
3	Maladaptive dieting	131	47.5	145	52.5	Moderate
4	Early dating	90	32.6	186	67.4	Low
5	Substance use	45	16.3	231	83.7	Very low
6	Unsafe at school	176	63.8	100	36.2	High
	Total		35.2		64.8	Low

Table 2 shows moderate mean risk factors associated with sexual harassment (35.2%) by secondary school students in Obollo. Table 2 indicates the priority risk factors that show high risk were being unsafe at school (63.8%). Maladaptive dieting (47.5) show a moderate risk while early dating and self harm were reported low risk factors at 32.6 and 31.5 per cent respectively.

Table 3
Measures of sexual harassment reduction in schools (n= 276)

S/N	Measures of sexual harassment reduction in schools	f	%
1	Designating a person students can talk to	108	39.1
2	Providing online resources (Chat groups)	61	22.1
3	Holding in-class discussions	85	30.8
4	Allowing students to anonymously report problems	157	56.9
5	Enforcing sexual harassment policies and punishing harassers	141	51.1
	Total (mean %)		40.0

Allowing students to anonymously report problems was moderately recommended (56.9%) alongside enforcing sexual harassment policies and punishing harassers (51.1%). Holding in-class discussions was also reported by 30.8 per cent of the respondents.

Discussion

Sexual harassment is part of everyday life in secondary schools. High level of sexual comments, gestures and looks was expected. Hill and Kearn (2011) hold the view that sexual comments are the easiest and commonest of all forms of sexual harassment. Findings on physical harassment in forms of touching and grabbing were highly reported at 63.8 per cent. Gruber and Fineran (2007) stated in their report on the impact of bullying and sexual harassment on middle and secondary school girls is consistent with this finding.

The prevalence of sexual harassment in forms of spreading sexual rumours and calling names like gay (homo) was surprising to the researchers because it is rarely reported. Among students who were sexually harassed, about 45.3 per cent reported the incident of being rumoured about sexually while 29.3 per cent of the students said they were called by names like gay, homo, dyke, etc. Sexual harassment by pictures, Facebook, Whatsapp or notes affected majority (91.7%) of the students. This is

in consonance with Bhat (2008) finding. Interestingly, many of the students who were sexually harassed through cyberspace were also harassed in person in one form or the other.

Findings in Table 2 indicated that harassers and the harassed have high risk factors of no safety in school (63.8%) and moderate risk of maladaptive behaviour (47.5%). These findings were surprising. The findings suggest that prevention efforts need to address risk factors and ways to avoid them. Fineran and Bolen (2006) reported suicidal thoughts and self-harm higher in schools. This is at variance with this finding as suicidal thoughts were reported very low. The setting might be the reason for this variation because cultural norms in Obollo negate suicide.

Findings in Table 3 showed that allowing students to anonymously report problems was moderately (56.9%) reported. This report was expected because observation show that students are more willing to report problems anonymously to avoid victimization from teachers. Hill and Kearl (2011) asserted that this measure is very important for the schools must train their staff and faculty to recognize and respond to sexual harassment, to know how to help students who come to them and to know their obligations if they witness sexual harassment.

Slightly more than half (51.1%) of secondary school students in Obollo reported sexual harassment policies and punishing harassers as a measure of sexual harassment reduction. The submission of Gardin and Hammerstron (2005) was consistent with the view that schools must enact a policy to checkmate sexual harassment. According to them, schools that do not have a sexual harassment policy must create one, and all schools should make sure that the policy is publicized and enforced. School should notify parents of the policy and give them advice on how to discuss the implications of the policy with the students. Many students want this kind of information posted on the schools website and taught to them in workshops and in-class discussions. Students also want to see policies enforced and harassers punished and in anonymous way to report harassers (Hill & Kearl, 2011). Among other reported measures of sexual harassment reduction, holding in-class discussions (30.8%) was reported. This is in line with the assertions of Wolfe, Jaffe and Crooks (2006). Schools must ensure that students are aware and educated about what sexual harassment is; what their rights are; and how to respond if they experience or witness sexual harassment.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn.

1. Secondary school students (58%) have moderate mean level of various forms of sexual harassment.
2. Secondary school students (35.2 %) have low mean risk factors associated with sexual harassment.
3. There was a moderate mean (40%) measure of sexual harassment reduction in schools.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. **Promulgation of Sexual harassment policies in schools.** Each school should have a written policy against sexual discrimination, including behaviours associated with sexual harassment. Each school policy must be made public. The policy should define sexual harassment, clearly state that it is inappropriate, and then identify a procedure for investigating complaints. Although schools typically designate one person who is trained to investigate claims of sexual harassment, it is preferable to assign two people, a male and a female, to accommodate students' possible discomfort with sexual harassment reporting harassment to an adult of the opposite gender.
2. **Investigating reports.** When a student reports harassment, it is important to take the complaint seriously. Legal problems arise when school personnel are aware of an incident of sexual harassment but do not effectively respond. Investigation of claims should follow school policy. Maintaining objectivity and fairness during the investigation communicates respect for all students. Students are more likely to report sexual harassment when they believe teachers care about them and are trustworthy. The students should be assured that he or she will be protected from retaliation. Even if a student chooses not to file a complaint, school administrators must maintain the confidentiality of the student and address the issue.

3. **Constructive consequences.** Although the tendency is to focus on punishment for offenders, implementing a zero-tolerance policy does not address the needs of students who harass. Responding effectively and constructively to offending behaviour poses a challenge to school adults. Harassers must face the negative consequences of their action, even if their intentions were to joke or tease. It is important to move the harasser through the negative consequences or punishment phase and into the constructive phase of generating options for alternative, more acceptable behaviour. These students need to learn positive social skills and have opportunities to practice them in a supportive learning environment.
4. **Training.** Even though developing and posting this policy are appropriate first steps, independently they are ineffective in decreasing harassing behaviours. The policy must be supported by school administrators, teachers, and other school staff who understand their important role in decreasing sexual harassment. All school staff should receive training to help them identify and respond appropriately to sexual harassment and in their role in creating supportive and respectful school environments. For example, adults should not tell sexual jokes or make inappropriate sexual references and innuendos. They should avoid gender stereotyping. When adults model respectful behaviour, students are likely to follow their example.
5. **Preventing Sexual Harassment.** Preventing sexual harassment must be an ongoing priority. Training that occurs over time, across settings, and includes the entire faculty, staff, and administrative personnel will be more effective than a one-time session of training for the teachers. Classes covering civil rights, diversity, or tolerance can include the topic of sexual harassment, and provide opportunities for ongoing discussion about respectful behaviour. In addition to integrating this topic with existing coursework, specific materials about sexual harassment should be available for classroom use. Although a short video clip about sexual harassment may be appropriate to start a discussion, a video in isolation is not as effective as a discussion in changing students' attitudes and behaviours.

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