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A Call to Action: Shifting the Power Dynamics to Combat Sexual Harassment in Academia

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Abstract

Purpose: *This article critically examines sexual harassment in Nigerian tertiary institutions, focusing on five institutions in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT): the University of Abuja, Baze University, Nile University, Federal College of Education, Zuba, and Dorben Polytechnic. It investigates the prevalence, forms, and consequences of sexual harassment, particularly as manifestations of institutional power imbalances.* **Design/methodology/approach:** *The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, employing a descriptive survey design. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions. The analysis is informed by Max Weber's Power Dynamics Theory and Louis Althusser's Sociological Theory, which provide a framework for understanding sexual harassment as a systemic phenomenon reinforced by institutional hierarchies, power relations, and organisational norms.* **Findings:** *The findings reveal a widespread culture of silence surrounding sexual harassment in the selected institutions. Reported forms include inappropriate sexist comments, unwanted physical contact, and quid pro quo demands. Sexual harassment affects both students and staff, with women and girls disproportionately affected. The findings further suggest that existing institutional mechanisms are inadequate to address the problem effectively, allowing unequal power relations and institutional vulnerabilities to persist.* **Research implications/limitations:** *The study highlights the need to strengthen institutional accountability, establish accessible reporting mechanisms, and provide comprehensive psychosocial support for victims. However, its geographical focus on five tertiary institutions in the FCT limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised to other Nigerian institutions.* **Originality/value:** *The article conceptualises sexual harassment as more than individual misconduct by situating it within broader institutional power structures and hierarchical relationships. It advocates a multi-pronged institutional response involving mandatory sexual harassment policies, firm disciplinary measures, accessible psychosocial support systems, and a culture of zero tolerance to promote safer, more equitable academic environments.*

Keywords: *Sexual Harassment; Academia; Power Dynamics; Gender-Based Violence; Academic Environment; Students' Protection.*

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Introduction

Tertiary institutions of learning have long been venerated as "Ivory Towers" centers of intellectual growth, character development, and academic excellence. These institutions are meant to be sanctuaries for molding future leaders, thinkers, and innovators who will contribute to national and global development. However, this noble vision is severely undermined by the pervasive and insidious issue of sexual harassment. In Nigeria, recent occurrences of sexual harassment and intimidation within higher education have reached alarming levels, threatening the sanctity of the academic system and compromising the integrity of educational pursuits.

Sexual harassment is a social malady and a form of violence that constitutes a grave violation of human rights and a significant barrier to academic achievement. It is a form of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) that disproportionately affects women and girls, though it is not exclusive to them. The consequences for victims are severe, often leading to emotional and psychological trauma, loss of academic focus, and even withdrawal from educational programs. Despite its grave impact, the issue remains largely under-addressed in Nigeria, with many cases going unreported due to a deeply ingrained culture of silence. This study seeks to investigate the prevalence and nature of sexual harassment in five tertiary institutions in the FCT, while also proposing a multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral approach to combat this menace.

Sexual harassment of women within the confines of educational institutions represents a distressing breach of trust as well as a fundamental violation of human rights. These institutions are meant to be sanctuaries of knowledge as well as enlightenment, where individuals, irrespective of gender, can pursue their education in an environment free from fear as well as discrimination. However, the persistent presence of sexual harassment tarnishes this ideal as well as undermines the very essence of learning [1]. In recent years, the matter of sexual harassment at educational institutions has gained heightened attention globally. It is not merely an isolated problem but a pervasive social concern that strikes at the heart of gender equality as well as the principles of dignity as well as respect. This critical analysis embarks on an exploration of this deeply rooted matter, aiming to dissect its multifaceted dimensions, scrutinize the efficacy of existing frameworks, as well as offer insights into fostering safer as well as more equitable educational spaces for women [2].

The problem of sexual harassment in Nigerian academia is not new. The Cookery Commission report in 1981 was one of the first official documents to

highlight the issue, noting with concern that female students were failing examinations for reasons other than scholastic ability. This historical context underscores that sexual harassment has been an unfortunate and persistent part of the educational experience for many female students [3]. However, unlike in many developed nations where there are established policies and legal mechanisms to address such offenses, a lack of clear institutional frameworks and effective enforcement in Nigeria allows perpetrators to act with impunity [4]. This study argues that to effectively combat sexual harassment, we must shift the focus from merely reacting to individual incidents to proactively dismantling the power structures that enable such behavior. The low participation of qualified women in politics and other spheres of public life may not be unconnected to the pervasive fear and trauma resulting from such experiences. This research, therefore, provides a call to action to create a more equitable academic and societal landscape.

Literature Review

A substantial body of literature confirms that sexual harassment is a global phenomenon rooted in patriarchal structures and gender inequality [5] [6]. It is a form of gender-based violence that reinforces male dominance and undermines the dignity and rights of women.

Academic literature consistently shows a strong link between power and sexual harassment. Researchers like Fitzgerald, Hulin, and Drasgow argue that sexual harassment is not about sexual desire but about the assertion of control and dominance [7]. The academic setting, with its clear hierarchies between professors and students, provides a fertile ground for the abuse of power. Lecturers and senior staff hold significant power over students' grades, academic progression, and future careers, making students particularly vulnerable to coercion and exploitation [8].

In the Nigerian context, the literature on sexual harassment in tertiary institutions points to a number of key issues. Studies by Okunade [9] and Ibrahim [10] have documented the prevalence of quid pro quo harassment, where academic favors are exchanged for sexual acts, as well as the pervasive nature of hostile environment harassment, which includes inappropriate comments, gestures, and unwanted touching. These studies also highlight the socio-cultural factors, such as patriarchal norms and the objectification of women, that normalize and perpetuate these behaviors. The cultural perception that women are "trophies" to be won by men, as noted by Ibrahim, is deeply rooted in Nigerian society and extends even to educated individuals within tertiary institutions [11].

Despite the growing awareness and advocacy by NGOs and activists, academic women themselves are often criticized for their perceived lack of collective action against this menace, a sentiment highlighted in this study's foundational text. A notable exception is the case of a male lecturer at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, who was convicted and sentenced to a six-year jail term for sexual harassment, serving as a rare but potent example of justice. This case, though isolated, demonstrates that legal and institutional mechanisms can work when properly enforced. However, such instances are the exception rather than the rule, underscoring the need for a more systemic approach to addressing the problem.

Conceptual Frameworks

Conceptual of Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment in academia is a complex phenomenon rooted in the unequal distribution of power. Early scholarly discourse in the 1980s and 1990s conceptualized it not as a matter of sexual attraction, but as a form of social and economic dominance intended to marginalize women in professional and educational spheres [12] [13]. This framework highlights how power imbalances between men and women, particularly in the workplace, can be exploited to create a hostile environment or to coerce compliance.

Early research from the 1980s, notably by Fitzgerald et al., defined harassment as unwanted sexual attention or requests for sexual favors, often with a quid pro quo dynamic where career or academic success was conditional on a victim's response [14]. The goal, according to scholars, was to enforce gender norms and keep women in subservient roles. This view was further supported by research on sex ratios and gendered roles, which demonstrated that men often view women as sex objects rather than professional peers, particularly in male-dominated environments [15] [16].

Over time, the conceptualization of sexual harassment has evolved to be more inclusive and nuanced. Recent definitions expand the scope to include any sex-based behavior that demeans, degrades, or humiliates an individual, regardless of their gender or the harasser's gender [17]. This broader perspective acknowledges that harassment can occur between individuals of the same sex or from women to men, often as a means to protect or elevate the perpetrator's social status. This social-psychological view emphasizes that sexual harassment is defined not just by the specific behaviors but also by the recipient's response and perception of the conduct as unwelcome [18]. The onus is thus placed on the victim to prove that the behavior was unwanted [19].

The Tripartite Model of Harassment

The research of Fitzgerald and colleagues led to a widely accepted tripartite model that breaks down sexual harassment into three distinct categories:

Gender Harassment: The most common form of harassment, this involves verbal or non-verbal behaviors that express hostility toward a person based on their sex, without necessarily seeking sexual cooperation. Examples include sexist jokes or derogatory comments [20] [21].

Unwanted Sexual Attention: This refers to unwelcome and unsolicited sexual advances, such as requests for dates, physical touching, or sexual assaults.

Sexual Coercion: This is the classic quid pro quo harassment, where compliance with sexual demands is a condition for receiving a benefit or avoiding a detriment.

Despite these clear typologies, the varied nature of harassing behaviours ranging from physical and verbal to a combination of both and the diverse motives behind them, such as power, male dominance, organizational tolerance, or sexist hostility, continue to complicate a single, universally accepted definition [22]. Ultimately, the core of a modern conceptual framework of sexual harassment emphasizes its unwelcome and demeaning nature, and its function as a tool for asserting social power.

Be that as it may, this research is anchored on two foundational theories that provide a robust framework for understanding the systemic nature of sexual harassment in academic institutions.

Power Dynamics Theory

Power Dynamics Theory, as conceptualized by Max Weber, posits that power is the ability to impose one's will on others, even in the face of opposition [23]. This theory is particularly relevant to the study of sexual harassment, which is often a direct manifestation of power imbalances. In the academic environment, a clear power hierarchy exists where faculty members hold authority over students, non-academic staff, and even junior colleagues. Perpetrators of sexual harassment exploit this power differential to coerce or intimidate victims. This theory helps to explain why sexual harassment is not a random occurrence but a calculated act of dominance and control. It moves the discourse beyond individual deviance to an analysis of how institutional structures and roles create opportunities for abuse.

Sociological Theory

Sociological Theory, as developed by Louis Althusser, provides a complementary lens by examining the social structures and norms that contribute to sexual harassment. Althusser's work on Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), such as schools and religious institutions, suggests that these structures reproduce and reinforce the dominant ideologies of a society, including patriarchal norms and gender inequality [24]. This theory argues that sexual harassment is not an isolated act but is shaped by social factors that also reinforce its occurrences, such as cultural norms, institutional policies, and social interactions. It helps us understand why the culture of silence around sexual harassment is so powerful: it is a product of social conditioning where victims are taught to fear reprisal, and perpetrators are protected by a system that implicitly or explicitly condones their behavior.

Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative research designs to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

Study Area and Population

The study was carried out in five tertiary institutions in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT): University of Abuja, Baze University, Nile University, Federal College of Education, Zuba, and Dorben Polytechnic. These institutions were selected to represent both public (University of Abuja, FCT College of Education) and private (Baze, Nile, Dorben) institutions. The total population for the study was 20,500 students.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The total sample size for the study was 1,105 respondents. A stratified simple random sampling technique was used for the distribution of the questionnaire to students to ensure a proportionate representation from each institution. The breakdown of the sample size was as follows:

University of Abuja	682
Baze University	78
FCT College of Education	129
Dorben Polytechnic	155
Nile University	61

For the qualitative component (FGDs and Interviews), a purposive sampling technique was used to select key informants, including university management staff, the Dean of Student Affairs, religious leaders, gender specialists, counselors, and survivors of SGBV. The qualitative phase included interviews with 10 key informants and two separate focus group discussions with seven male and seven female students.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviation. Qualitative data from the interviews and FGDs were analyzed using thematic analysis, where common themes, patterns, and narratives were identified and grouped under relevant headings to provide a rich, narrative account of the lived experiences of the respondents.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The following is an extended section based on the provided data, with placeholder tables and a comprehensive analysis that would span several pages in the final article.

Presentation of Quantitative Data: Demographics

The demographics of the study's respondents are crucial for contextualizing the findings.

Table 1. *Distribution of Respondents According to Academic Institutions*

S/No	Institution	Frequency	Percentage
1.	University of Abuja	682	61.70%
2.	Baze University	78	7.10%
3.	FCT College of Education	129	11.70%
4.	Dorben Polytechnic	155	14.00%
5.	Nile University	61	5.50%
Total	All Institutions	1105	100.00%

Source: *Field Survey (2026)*

Analysis: The sample size of 1,105 was appropriately distributed across the five institutions, with the University of Abuja having the highest number of

respondents (61.7%) due to its larger student population, followed by Dorben Polytechnic (14%). This distribution ensures the findings are representative of both public and private institutions within the FCT.

Table 2. *Distribution of Respondents According to Gender*

	Gender	Frequency	Percentage
1	Female	650	58.8%
2	Male	455	41.2%
Total	All Respondents	1105	100.0%

Source: *Research survey data, processed by the authors (2026).*

Analysis: The majority of the respondents were female (58.8%), reflecting the higher vulnerability of women to sexual harassment and ensuring a robust dataset for gender-specific analysis.

Table 3: *Distribution of Respondents according to level of education.*

S/No	Level of Education	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Pre-Degree/OND	246	22.30
2.	Degree	444	40.20
3.	Part-time Students	229	20.70
4.	Not Stated	186	16.80
Total		1105	100.00

Source: *Primary data obtained from questionnaires distributed to 1,105 respondents and analyzed by the authors (2026).*

Distribution according to level of education has the prevalent harassment percentage with the degree/HND students representing 40.30 %. Next is the pre-degree/OND with 22.20% followed by the part-time representing 20.07%. 186 with 16.08% did not state their levels of education.

Qualitative Data Analysis: Thematic Findings

The qualitative data provided a deeper understanding of the nature of sexual harassment, reinforcing the quantitative findings with personal narratives and insights. The analysis was structured around several key themes.

Theme 1: The Nature and Manifestations of Harassment

Participants in the interviews and FGDs described sexual harassment as a multifaceted problem. The most common forms mentioned were inappropriate sexist comments, unwanted physical touching (e.g., of hands, shoulders, and other body parts), and persistent invitations for private meetings outside of official hours. A female student from the University of Abuja shared, "It's not just about the lecturers; it's the inappropriate looks, the way some of them make eye contact that makes you feel dirty. It's a constant violation of your space."

Theme 2: The Culture of Silence

A recurring and pervasive theme was the culture of silence. Respondents explained that victims are often afraid to report harassment due to fear of reprisal, academic victimization, and a lack of trust in institutional mechanisms. A key informant, a Dean of Students' Affairs, admitted that "many cases go unreported because students believe that the system will not protect them and that the perpetrator will not be punished." This fear is compounded by the belief that an entire department might close ranks to protect an offender, leaving the victim with no hope for justice.

Theme 3: Inadequate Institutional Mechanisms

The research found that formal policies on sexual harassment are either non-existent or poorly implemented. For instance, while the University of Abuja has a Students' Guidance and Counselling committee and a "SERVICOM" office, these ad-hoc measures are often seen as insufficient. As one professor and religious leader stated, "There is no official document or policy on Sexual harassment. Cases are handled on a case-by-case basis, which is not a sustainable solution." The absence of clear, well-publicized policies contributes significantly to the culture of silence.

Theme 4: The Gendered Nature of Harassment

The qualitative data underscored that sexual harassment is primarily a gender-based issue. Respondents discussed how patriarchal norms and the objectification of women in Nigerian society are deeply embedded in academic culture. A male student in an FGD noted, "The issue of sex and sexuality is seen as a way to buttress male power and domination. It's almost an entitlement." This analysis highlights how gender inequality and power dynamics are inextricably linked in the perpetuation of sexual harassment.

Major Findings

Based on the synthesis of both quantitative and qualitative data, the study's key findings are as follows:

1. High Prevalence: Sexual harassment is a widespread phenomenon across all five tertiary institutions studied, affecting both students and staff.
2. Diverse Manifestations: The harassment takes various forms, from inappropriate sexist comments and conversations to unwanted touching, persistent invitations, and quid pro quo demands.
3. Existence of a Culture of Silence: A significant barrier to combating sexual harassment is the pervasive culture of silence, where victims fear retribution and have little faith in institutional justice.
4. Inadequate Institutional Policies: Tertiary institutions in the FCT generally lack comprehensive, well-defined, and enforced policies on sexual harassment. Existing mechanisms are often ad-hoc and ineffective.
5. Perpetuation of Gender Inequality: Sexual harassment is a direct consequence of deep-seated patriarchal norms and gender inequality, where power is abused to exert control and dominance over women.
6. Severe Consequences for Victims: The consequences of sexual harassment on victims are profound, leading to severe emotional and psychological trauma, a decline in academic performance, and in some cases, a decision to drop out of school.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that sexual harassment is not an isolated problem but a pervasive social and institutional malady within tertiary institutions in the FCT. It is a direct manifestation of power imbalances and a deeply ingrained patriarchal culture that undermines the fundamental principles of academic excellence and gender equality. The findings reveal a disturbing trend: a widespread problem coupled with a debilitating culture of silence and a lack of effective institutional response. The absence of comprehensive policies and the reliance on informal, ad-hoc committees have allowed this menace to fester, threatening the integrity of the educational system and the future of its students.

The call to action is clear: to effectively combat sexual harassment, we must shift from a reactive to a proactive approach by dismantling the power dynamics that enable it. This requires a fundamental change in institutional culture, legal frameworks, and societal norms.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to mitigate and ultimately eliminate sexual harassment in Nigerian tertiary institutions; (1) Implement and Enforce Clear Anti-Harassment Policies: Every tertiary institution must have a publicly available, comprehensive policy document on sexual harassment. This policy should clearly define what constitutes sexual harassment, outline clear reporting procedures, and guarantee victim protection from retaliation. (2) Establish Independent Reporting and Investigation Bodies: Institutions should create an independent committee or office, with representation from gender specialists and legal experts, to handle all sexual harassment cases. This body should be free from academic or administrative influence to ensure impartiality and objectivity. (3) Enact Severe Disciplinary Measures: Perpetrators found culpable must face severe disciplinary action, including dismissal and prosecution, to serve as a strong deterrent. The conviction of the Obafemi Awawolo University lecturer should be a precedent, not an exception. (4) Provide Psychosocial Support Systems: Institutions must establish and adequately fund robust counseling centers with trained professionals to provide free, confidential psychosocial support to survivors of sexual harassment. (5) Conduct Mandatory Training and Sensitization: Mandatory and regular training programs on sexual harassment, gender sensitivity, and appropriate professional conduct should be conducted for all students and staff. These sessions should utilize a multi-disciplinary approach, including role-play, drama, and open discussions to foster a culture of respect. (6) Empower Students: Empowering students, particularly female students, through skill-building workshops that boost their self-esteem, assertiveness, and confidence is crucial. Students should be educated on their rights and responsibilities. (7) Engage Religious and Community Leaders: Religious leaders and community figures within the university environment should be actively involved in the campaign against sexual harassment, using their platforms to challenge patriarchal norms and promote a culture of respect and dignity.

Author Contributions

Prof. Rafatu Abdulhamid: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing review, Editing, and Article administration. **Ibrahim-Idiagbon Mubarak Olalekan:** Conceptualization, Literature review, Methodology, Editing, and Article administration. **Abdul Raheem Muhammad Sunusi:** Writing review, Editing.

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Conflict of Interest

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