

# Reversed Roles? Sexual Harassment of Male Students by Female Colleagues

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## Abstract

*Sexual harassment of male students by female colleagues is on the rise in institutions of higher learning. This paper explores the various forms of sexual harassment that the male students experience in the hands of their female colleagues. Interviews were held with a selected sample of male students from a university in Kenya. Findings indicate that sexual harassment has shifted from the traditional indecent exposure, to unwanted sexual remarks, forced sexual contact, and sexual messages and pictures sent through phones or even e-mail. There is need for institutions to sensitize male students on what sexual harassment is, and how and where to seek for professional help. Institutions also need to work towards nurturing harassment-free campuses for all.*

**Key words:** Sexual harassment, male student, institutions of higher learning.

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## Introduction

Learning institutions in Kenya have gradually become venues of sexual assault, an indication that institutional cultures as far as sexual harassment is concerned are changing. This is worsened by the growing numbers of unreported sexual harassments in institutions of higher learning, coupled with the lack of proper understanding by learners on the various forms of sexual harassment (Bursik & Geffer, 2011). Ruto (2009) reported that new forms of sexual harassment are on the rise. This is facilitated by the

fast development of information communication technology (ICT). For example, developments of social network sites such as face book are used by individuals in various ways, some of which border on sexual harassment. It is imperative therefore that the society and especially the young people are adequately informed on the various forms of sexual harassment and possible effects on their personal lives.

### **Definition of sexual harassment**

Various forms of definitions of sexual harassment are used by various writers. The Kenya Small and Micro Enterprise Toolkit define Sexual harassment as:

Any unwanted physical, verbal or visual sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other sexually oriented conduct which is offensive or objectionable to the recipient, including, but not limited to: epithets, derogatory or suggestive comments, slurs or gestures and offensive posters, cartoons, pictures, or drawings.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) through the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (Special Survey on Convention No. 111) defines sexual harassment as:

Any insult or inappropriate remark, joke, insinuation and comment on a person's dress, physique, age, family situation, etc; a condescending or paternalistic attitude with sexual implications undermining dignity; any unwelcome invitation or request, implicit or explicit, whether or not accompanied by threats; any lascivious look or other gesture associated with sexuality; and any unnecessary physical contact such as touching, caresses, pinching or assault (ILO 2005, pg. 13).

This definition specifically extends sexual harassment to cover condescending and paternalistic attitudes. The Committee stated that in order to amount to sexual

harassment, the behavior must either “be justly perceived as a condition of employment or precondition for employment or influence decisions taken in this field” and/or “affect job performance” (pg. 13).

From the definitions above, sexual harassment then is seen to encompass all forms of intimidation, bullying or coercion of a sexual nature, or the unwelcome or inappropriate promise of rewards in exchange for sexual favours. Harassment does not have to be of a sexual nature. However, it can include offensive remarks about a person’s sex, the victim and the harasser can be either a woman or a man, and the victim and harasser can be the same sex. While the major focus has been sexual harassment in the workplace, research done elsewhere has shown that sexual harassment among students in institutions of higher learning is on the rise (The American Association of University Women, 2006).

### **Forms of Sexual Harassment**

Sexual harassment takes on two distinctive forms. The first one involves unwanted sexual attention such as jokes, touching, hugging, sending text messages through e-mail or the phone or even demanding for a date. The second one involves sexual coercion in return for some benefits such as demands for a sexual favors in order to pass an exam or get a promotion at work (Meyer, 2008).

According to Meyer (2008), there are also certain behaviours that constitute sexual harassment. The first one is unequal power relations between the perpetrators and the victims, such as a teacher/ student and employer/employee relationship. The person in a position of authority demands sexual favours in return for some benefit such us good grades in the case of teacher/ student, or job benefits in the case of the employer/employee. The second behaviour involves a hostile work environment where

the environment interferes with the satisfactory performance of the employee. In an institution, a hostile learning environment interferes with the learners' academic and social life leading to a low academic achievement and a poor socialization process.

## **Sexual harassment and human rights**

### *International conventions and sex discrimination*

Sexual harassment is treated as a form of sex discrimination and a violation of human dignity by the United Nations conventions under ILO and CEDAW. It is. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly and which Kenya ratified in 1984 states that:

Equality in employment can be seriously impaired when women are subjected to gender-specific violence, such as sexual harassment in the workplace. Sexual harassment includes such unwelcome sexually determined behavior as physical contact and advances, sexually colored remarks, showing pornography and sexual demand, whether by words or actions. Such conduct can be humiliating and may constitute a health and safety problem; it is discriminatory when the woman has reasonable grounds to believe that her objection would disadvantage her in connection with her employment, including recruitment or promotion, or when it creates a hostile working environment (CEDAW, 1979, pg.3).

### **The International Labor Organization**

The International Labor Organization through the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (Special Survey on Convention No. 111) views sexual harassment as a form of sex discrimination against women in employment which undermines equality, damages working relationships and impairs

productivity. It added that sexual harassment may also arise from “situations which are generally hostile to one sex or the other”, thereby including instances of sex-based harassment in addition to those involving sexual behaviour. ILO identifies the elimination of sexual harassment as a priority gender issue.

### **The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights**

The protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the rights of women in Africa (*Article 12 on the Right to Education and Training*) notes that:

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to protect women, especially the girl-child from all forms of abuse, including sexual harassment in schools and other educational institutions and provide for sanctions against the perpetrators of such practices; provide access to counseling and rehabilitation services to women who suffer abuses and sexual harassment; Integrate gender sensitization and human rights education at all levels of education curricula including teacher training.

In Kenya, sexual harassment is an offence under the Sexual Offences Act No. 3 of 2006.

It states that:

Any person, who being in a position of authority, or holding a public office, who persistently makes any sexual advances or requests which he or she knows, or has reasonable grounds to know, are unwelcome, is guilty of the offence of sexual harassment and shall be liable to imprisonment for a term of not less than three years or to a fine of not less than Ksh one hundred thousand shillings (Ksh 100,000) or both. (Sexual Offences Act, 2006, pg 32).

Research has been conducted globally and locally on sexual harassment in institutions of higher learning. The major focus has been on sexual harassment as a major

impediment to equality between men and women. The Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (2011) found that men were largely the perpetrators while the women were the victims. Interventions for sexual harassment majorly rest on the premise that sexual harassment is predominantly a woman's problem because they make up a majority of the complainants. Bunyi (2003) notes that interventions dealing with sexual harassment face complex problems, majorly the male dominance in tertiary institutions which translates often to 'us' vs. 'them'; 'women' vs. 'men'. This leads to delays in enacting relevant policies to curb issues of sexual harassment in these institutions. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, colleges and universities are serving more students than ever, creating a campus climate that is free from bias and harassment is a necessary challenge for the higher education community.

In the recent times, Kenyan media has been focusing on a new phenomenon, husband battery. A men's organization called 'Maendeleo ya Wanaume' in their reports claims that over 460,000 cases of men battering were reported in Central Kenya alone in 2011 (Capital FM News, February 16 2012). Husband battering hit the media headlines from the beginning of the year 2012 in all the major television, radio and newspapers. It is common to see headlines such as:

*Husband battering: Kenyan men to stop eating meals cooked by wives.* (Daily Nation, February 21 2012)

Men battering attributed to harsh economy (*The Standard 14<sup>th</sup> April 2011*).

According to Biddle (2010) this could be an indicator of the changing social cultural environment leaving the men emasculated. Men are stuck in ancient defined gender roles of protector and provider. Biddle (2010) notes that probably much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the archetypal gender roles of marriage were: husband as breadwinner and protector and wife as homemaker and mother. Even if a woman was working, there was an unspoken code about the roles a husband and wife would assume upon being

married. But over the recent couple of decades, due to economic and socio-political changes, that code can no longer be assumed and is in a process of reconstruction. Women have started to question patriarchy as a broad principle of male superiority (Jackson, 2012). The research found no study that explicitly focuses on the sexual harassment of the male by the female in Kenyan institutions. Hartill (2005) argues that studies on sexual harassment have been driven by a 'male perpetrator-female victim' paradigm. In his overview of the literature from social work and therapeutic disciplines, Hartill (2005) concluded that despite claims by Struve (1990) that males are probably victimized just as frequently as females, there is very little research about the sexual harassment of males in comparison to females.

## **Research Approach**

**Study setting:** This paper explored the various forms of sexual harassment that the male students experienced in the hands of their female colleagues. The study was carried out in a large public university. The percentage of male to female students was 55% to 45%. Academic programs in this institution are fashioned after the traditional 8.00 am to 5.00 pm working hours. This accorded the students ample time to interact, either in class or while engaging in co-curricular activities after classes.

**Sampling:** A cross-sectional study design was adopted in this study. A total of 30 male students comprising of leaders of various clubs and societies on campus were purposively. The researcher conducted structured interviews with the selected number of students. Consent to interview the selected respondents were sought from the Dean of Students and from the individual students themselves. They were selected because being leaders, they interacted daily with fellow students hence they would be a rich source of information.

**Instruments:** Individual interviews were conducted during data collection. The interview schedule had 21 items which sought to define sexual harassment and find out the various forms of sexual harassment that were taking place among the students. The items also sought to find out why the female students sexually harassed their male colleagues and how this impacted in the victim's educational experience. Ways in which sexual harassment can be curbed to ensure a harassment free campus were also explored. Data obtained was cleaned, coded, and organized into themes.

## Results

In reviewing the data, a number of themes emerged: (a) Definition of sexual harassment; (b) Prevalence of sexual harassment; (c) Forms of sexual harassment; d) Reasons for sexually harassing behaviour. (e) Impact of sexual harassment on the students' educational experience, and (f) Interventions to curb sexual harassment.

**On Definition:** The study found out that most male college students do not have a clear understanding of what sexual harassment is. They associated sexual harassment with rape, sodomy and defilement. Some of the responses were:

This is where someone coerces or provokes you to have sex with him/ her against your will or without giving it much thought. (*Respondent 1*)

It is any coercion into sexual behaviors including rape and incestuous relationships without consent of those involved. (*Respondent 5*)

It is a way whereby one tries to have sex with someone else while the other party is unwilling to do it. (*Respondent 12*)

Once the students got the clear definition of sexual harassment, 75% of the male students owned up to having experienced some type of sexual harassment from their female colleagues while at college.

**Prevalence of sexual harassment:** Results indicate that sexual harassment of male students by female colleagues is quite common in universities. Eighty percent (80 %) of the male students interviewed confirmed this. The respondents stated:

Sexual harassment is common and goes unreported as the male students are embarrassed about reporting... (*Respondent 15*)

Yes indeed it is common but men would not come outright and say what happens to them because they want to safeguard their ego. (*Respondent 4*)

Out of the 20% who denied that male students are being sexually harassed by their female colleagues, they had a general misconception of what sexual harassment is, as Respondents 18 and 24 put it thus:

Sexual harassment is a way whereby one tries to have sex with someone while the other party is not willing to do it... (*Respondent 18*)

Sexual harassment of male students happens rarely because male students take it as a sign of acceptance by the females... (*Respondent 24*)

**Forms of sexual harassment:** The study findings indicated that sexual harassment of male students by female colleagues has moved away from the traditional indecent exposure, to unwanted sexual remarks, forced sexual contact, and sending of sexual messages and pictures through SMS or/and email. Some of the comments were:

I fear visiting the ladies in their rooms' coz they change their clothes in front of you without any regard to your feelings about this... (*Respondent 7*)

She would use suggestive words... massage you or an unwanted hug... (*Respondent 14*)

Female students dress themselves in an indecent way by exposing their bodies. Some give the male students their assignments in favor of giving them sex later.  
(Respondent 25)

Other forms of sexual harassment that the male students are subjected to by female colleagues includes: touching or pinching, intentionally brushing against one in a sexual way and also spreading sexual rumours about one. The male students explained this in the following ways:

They intentionally brush against someone to raise their sexual urge. (Respondent 16)

She pretended to be talking to me while at the same time she would unbutton my shirt without my consent... (Respondent 20)

**Reasons for sexually harassing behavior:** Regarding reasons why the harassers were engaging in this behavior, the male students felt that the harassers thought it was fun. This was so especially where the harassers worked as a group. Male Students noted that:

Female students will harass the male student due to peer pressure and also group confidence... (Respondent 2)

Females harass the male for sexual gratification... (Respondent 7)

They do it to satisfy their ego... (Respondent 13)

Some do it to find out how the victims would react to the various stimuli presented to them... (Respondent 27)

Some respondents also admitted that alcohol and drug abuse was on the rise among the female students. They noted that some female students sexually harassed their male colleagues under the influence of alcohol.

**Impact of sexual harassment on the students:** All the students interviewed noted that sexual harassment had profound impact on the victims' college life and educational experience. The immediate effect was avoidance of activities that involved meeting with the harassers. This included classes and group discussions. The victim's academic performance hence was affected. In the long run, the victims suffered low self esteem, general hate for women and this affected their socialization process. A Respondent commented that:

Sexually harassed students are stigmatised, embarrassed and confused. This causes mental instability, a condition not suitable for learning. (*Respondent 17*)

**Interventions to curb sexual harassment:** From the research results the respondents/students were all in agreement that sexual harassment should be reported to relevant authorities. They also pointed out that there was need to have a sexual harassment policy, and that offenders should be dealt with in accordance with the law. Students also felt that the enforcement of the students' rules and regulations would greatly reduce incidences of sexual harassment. Appropriate dressing code for all students was also cited as a way to curb sexual harassment. There was need also for awareness on what sexual harassment is to encourage more students to come forward and report any incidences. Male students were especially encouraged to report sexual harassment to the relevant authorities. A respondent said that:

Male students should be empowered to shun the culture of silence and come out openly to voice their concerns so that they can be assisted. (*Respondent 28*)

## Discussion and Conclusions

In this study majority of male college students did not have a clear definition of what sexual harassment is. They tended to associate sexual harassment with coerced sexual intercourse only, leaving out other equally damaging acts such as sexual jokes, gestures or comments; display of sexual pictures or messages on web pages or through the SMS; or even making obnoxious sexual comments.

Female students have moved from the traditional 'victims' role (Bunyi, 2003) to aggressive perpetrators of sexual harassment against their male colleagues. From indecent exposure, spreading sexual rumours about one to intentionally brushing up against a male victim in a sexual manner; the female student is engaging their male colleagues in acts of sexual harassment previously reserved for the male perpetrators.

There are no concrete reasons why female students sexually harass their male colleagues. This agrees with studies conducted elsewhere which showed that most male perpetrators of sexual harassment did it for fun (AAUW, 2006). Some female students harassed their male colleagues to make them notice them, or due to peer pressure. Intoxication on drugs especially alcohol was also cited as a reason why the female students harassed their male colleagues.

Sexual harassment has profound negative impacts on a student's psychosocial wellbeing as well as their educational experience. Most male victims of sexual harassment do nothing about it, since they imagine that reporting such cases would portray them as weak. This attitude acts as a catalyst to fuel the harassment to an extent that the victim's social and academic welfare on campus is affected.

While some colleges and universities have sexual harassment policies in place, sexual harassment continues to have a damaging impact on the educational experiences of

many college students. Male students are now constantly reporting their experiences of sexual harassment to the counseling staff at the Student Affairs Department. However, the number of students reporting cases of sexual harassment is low, compared to the projected numbers that may be facing this form of harassment. This is due to the fact that male students would be seen as weak if they admitted to being harassed by their female colleagues.

## **Recommendations**

There is need for institutions to sensitize students on what sexual harassment is, and how and where to seek for help for those going through it. Institutions also need to come up with innovative strategies for building harassment-free campuses. Further research is recommended to establish the magnitude of sexual harassment of the male students on college and university campuses.

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