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RESEARCH REPORT

SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN ZIMBABWE'S INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The extent to which sexual harassment takes place in institutions of higher education such as universities, polytechnics and teachers' colleges is investigated in this study. Two thousand seven hundred and fifty-six female students responded to a questionnaire on sexual harassment. After quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data, the study reveals that in almost every institution of higher learning in Zimbabwe there exists a significant number of male lecturers who sexually harass female students. Recommendations on how the situation could be improved in order to create a freer and safer campus environment as well as suggestions for future research are made.

BACKGROUND

IN 1994, DISTURBING press reports (Bonde, Chavunduka, Win, 1994) about the wives of lecturers at Bondolfi Teachers' Training College beating up female students whom they suspected of having sexual relationships with their husbands, brought about this researcher's interest in the whole area of sexual harassment and non-consenting sexual relations, particularly as this relates to lecturers and students in institutions of higher education.

Sexual harassment is often an act perpetrated by men against women but when the issue is widened to include unethical intimacy,[1] there appears to be no reason why women should be excluded from carrying this responsibility equally. However, in the Zimbabwean context, almost all known cases of harassment, including rape, are perpetrated by men. This has something to do with the culture which suggests that males should make the first move when they desire to form a relationship with females.

Although there has been debate on sexual harassment recently by some Zimbabwean religious bodies and other organizations, there are still no policy guidelines published specifically for professionals who deal with trainees on a daily basis. According to a former Chief Justice, Enock

[1] Unethical intimacy is a situation in which one has a close personal relationship with another which however, is not in accordance with the rules, moral values or standards for right conduct or practice, especially those standards (or code of ethics) that ought to be maintained in a given profession. An example would be that of a relationship between a doctor and his/her patient.

Dumbutshena (cited in Taylor and Stewart, 1991, vii) sexual harassment is a legal challenge that must be met by all who pursue human rights in Zimbabwe. The University of Zimbabwe Ordinance has some form of guidelines in disciplinary and ethical codes for staff, but this researcher has never seen or heard of any public example of someone being disciplined for sexual harassment.

Win (1994) describes the relationship between students and lecturers as a David and Goliath situation, where the one in power or authority uses his power to get what he wants. She suggests that institutions must design policies and grievance procedures for those who are sexually harassed. Singer (1989) conducted a study which demonstrates that those institutions that do have a policy designed specifically for sexual harassment and grievance procedures have a significantly higher number of reports of harassment than those that do not.

In the United States, Glaser and Thorpe (1986) conducted research on sexual harassment among psychology lecturers and their female postgraduate students at 16 universities. It was found that postgraduate students, because of their face to face contact with supervisors when seeking advice and supervision in their research studies, were sexually harassed more frequently than those females doing undergraduate courses. In the United Kingdom, Garret and Thomas-Peter (1994) also conducted a survey on sexual harassment in postgraduate colleges as well as in places of employment. Their study reveals that there is a significant number of people in authority, such as lecturers, doctors and employers, who refuse to accept their moral responsibility, but instead exploit the vulnerability of those under them.

In the absence of previous Zimbabwean research data on this issue apart from press reports in *The Sunday Times*, *Parade* and *Moto*, *The Herald*, *The Chronicle* and *Zimrights News*, it seems most probable that the incidence of sexual harassment — that is, unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, unethical intimacy, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature — is under-reported, particularly in those institutions without policies and procedures for dealing with allegations of sexual harassment. It is also known that some people in authority often implicitly make it a term or condition of an individual's progress at work or at college to submit to their sexual advances. Individuals who refuse to submit are often affected by future employment or grade-award decisions. Such conduct has the effect of substantially interfering with an individual's work or college performance, or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive working environment.

There is no doubt that a lot of women, even though they are still under-reporting sexual harassment significantly, experience psychological effects such as fear, anger, depression, distress, stress, anxiety, confusion,

irritability, loss of self-esteem, feelings of humiliation, helplessness, vulnerability, worry and alienation through harassment at work or college.

The relationship between a supervisor and a trainee has parallels with that between a therapist and a patient (Garret and Thomas-Peter, 1994). There is power differential. The doctor-patient issue raises sexuality issues quite frequently and because of the doctor's or therapist's more powerful position, it is he who should exercise self-control rather than exploiting the vulnerability of the patient. Similarly lecturers, employers or supervisors, it would seem, should follow their own code of ethics by recognizing the vulnerability of people under them and avoiding situations of eroticized transferences. Yet a significant number of them seem reluctant to identify these dynamics and pretend that their actions are guided by natural impulses. Consequently, they refuse to accept their moral responsibility in such matters.

Win (1994) argues that even though some of those grown-up or married women appear to have genuinely fallen in love with their lecturers, they are not really in love. They are simply succumbing to the pressures of the more powerful persons.

The initial aim of this study was to address a wide range of issues including peer harassment, alcohol abuse in colleges, violence, date rape, campus safety, student-staff relationships, cultural values and counselling services in institutions of higher education. However, after discovery that there had been a lot of press coverage in 1994 on sexual harassment of female students at several teacher training colleges, the emphasis shifted mainly to the sexual relationships between male lecturers and female students. As a result it was felt that the subject of sexual harassment needed to be addressed more immediately than others of the equally important issues mentioned above. Sexual harassment thus becomes the focus maintained throughout this study.

METHOD

After permission was granted by the Ministry of Higher Education to conduct a study on sexual harassment, a sample of 3 500 female students from 16 institutions of higher education was used to respond to a questionnaire on sexual harassment. All year groups of students at the University of Zimbabwe and at the Harare Polytechnic were sampled while in teachers' colleges it was mainly the first and third-year students who responded to the questionnaire. The study was conducted over four months from August to November 1994 with the help of 11 research assistants. In all 2 756 (79%) usable questionnaires were returned for analysis (see composition of sample, questionnaires distributed and questionnaires used in Table 1 below).

Fifty-four questionnaires which had been left with authorities at one teachers' college were responded to by male students despite clear instructions that the questionnaires were to be distributed to female respondents only. These were excluded from the survey. At another teachers' college, questionnaires received from third-year students were not used because they were considered to be biased after some negative remarks made by one of the authorities during administration. At yet another college only 10 students responded because the authorities were uncooperative.

Table I

COMPOSITION OF SAMPLE, QUESTIONNAIRES DISTRIBUTED AND QUESTIONNAIRES USED

Name of Institution	*No. of Questionnaires Distributed*	*No. of Questionnaires Used*
Morgan Zintec College	120	111
Belvedere Teachers' College	120	118
University of Zimbabwe	1 250	857
Harare Polytechnic	450	439
National University of Science and Technology	120	116
Hillside Teachers' College	120	119
Bulawayo Polytechnic	120	120
United College of Education	120	120
Gwanda Zintec College	120	120
Gweru Teachers' College	150	137
Mkoba Teachers' College	150	150
Mutare Teachers' College	150	75
Marymount Teachers' College	120	107
Chinhoyi Technical College	120	10
Masvingo Teachers' College	150	110
Bondolfi Teachers' College	120	44
TOTALS	3 500	2 756

RELIABILITY

A split-half, odd-even reliability was computed using the scores of the 2 756 subjects against the 27 questionnaire items. The coefficient, corrected by the Spearman-Brown formula, was 0.76 which shows that the method used to collect data was to a great extent reliable.

RESULTS

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data collected were conducted.

Table 2 below shows the students' responses to the 27 questionnaire items.

Table 2
STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO 27 QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS (N=2 756)

Item No.	*Brief Description of Item*	*No. of 'yes' Responses*		*No. of 'no' Responses*	
1.	Has college existing policy?	243	(8,8%)	2 513	(91%)
2.	Has anybody been sexually harassed?	1 755	(64%)	1 001	(36%)
3.	Are culprits dealt with effectively?	201	(7,0%)	2 555	(93%)
4.	Should rival students be failed?	98	(0,03%)	2 562	(94%)
5.	Should lecturers' wives molest student lovers?	203	(7,1%)	2 552	(93%)
6.	Are student/lecturer affairs problematic?	2 005	(73%)	750	(27%)
7.	Would you go out with your lecturer?	36	(1,3%)	2 511	(91%)
8.	Should lecturers ask you about your sex life?	2	(0,007%)	2 754	(99%)
9.	Ever been asked for sexual favours?	499	(18%)	2 066	(74%)
10.	Do most lecturers exploit student vulnerability?	1 756	(64%)	1 000	(36%)
11.	Would you report sexual harassment?	204	(7,5%)	2 550	(93%)
12.	Ever submitted to lecturer's sexual advance?	72	(2,6%)	2 625	(95%)
13.	Do some lecturers interfere with your studies?	1 003	(36%)	1 755	(64%)
14.	Is being touched by a lecturer harassment?	1 890	(69%)	866	(31%)
15.	Would you laugh at sexually suggestive jokes?	1 921	(71%)	725	(26%)
16.	Is sexual harassment adequately reported?	103	(3,7%)	2 639	(96%)
17.	Ever had sexual feelings for own lecturer?	28	(1,0%)	2 728	(97%)
18.	Know any lecturers who exploit students?	2 756	(100%)	0	(0,0%)

Table 2 Continued

Item No.	*Brief Description of Item*	*No. of 'yes' Responses*		*No. of 'no' Responses*	
19.	Should corrupt lecturers be dismissed?	2 638	(96%)	118	(4,2%)
20.	Is society aware of sexual problems?	366	(13%)	2 390	(87%)
21.	Should there be legislation?	2 755	(99%)	1	(0,006%)
22.	Should female students be protected?	2 063	(74%)	495	(17%)
23.	Should all colleges have policy on sex?	2 754	(99%)	2	(0,001%)
24.	Should a Sexual Harassment Office be established?	2 749	(99%)	7	(0,002%)
25.	Know anyone harassed but afraid of reporting?	1 757	(64%)	969	(35%)
26.	Should the government intervene?	1 762	(65%)	966	(34%)
27.	Should students have affairs with their lecturers?	25	(0,009%)	2 728	(98%)

GENERAL COMMENTS (*N*=2 756)

After a qualitative analysis of the data, the general comments commonly made by students from all the 16 institutions were summarized under the following 10 categories:

(a) UNDER-REPORTING

Two thousand five hundred and one students (90%) agreed that incidents involving sexual harassment in colleges are under-reported or not reported at all for fear of victimization by those in authority.

(b) FEAR OF BEING LABELLED

Thirty-seven students (1,3%) said that they would not mind going out with their lecturers for the purpose of gaining favours. The only reason that they have not done so is because of the fear they have of being labelled by other students. They also saw nothing wrong with going out with single (unmarried) lecturers.

(c) CORRUPT AUTHORITIES

One thousand seven hundred and sixty-eight students (64%) believed that most college lecturers including principals are corrupt. The main question asked was: 'How can one report sexual harassment by a lecturer without

the fear of being victimized when the principal or head of department is also involved in the same thing?' They all believed that the police, Ministry of Education or someone who is not in daily contact with the lecturers should be the arbitrators in cases of sexual harassment.

(d) FREEDOM OF CHOICE
Two hundred and thirty-nine (8,6%) students felt that all students over 18 years of age are free to go out with whoever they like including lecturers. It is up to the student, as a grown up and thinking adult to decide, even in cases where the lecturer is a married man.

(e) SPREAD OF AIDS BY MARRIED MEN
Most lecturers, according to 758 (27,5%) students, are married men. Those who sexually harass students are having extra-marital sex at the risk of spreading AIDS to their wives.

(f) VICTIMIZATION
One thousand two hundred and fifty-two (45%) of female students in colleges felt that they were being given low marks (grades) by certain male lecturers after they had turned down their sexual advances or after their 'relationships' had gone on the rocks. Generally, they felt that they were being victimized for saying 'No' to their lecturers.

(g) LOSS OF RESPECT
Almost all the students (2 250, 82%) said that they had no respect for lecturers who go out with their students as this disturbs the whole environment under which serious studying is supposed to take place.

(h) LEAKAGE OF EXAMINATIONS
Five hundred and eighty-six students (21%) surveyed said that they believe that lecturers who have sexual relationships with their students will end up leaking examination papers to them.

(i) LEGISLATION
All the 2 756 subjects (100%) felt that there was need for legislation in order to protect those students who had no interest in pursuing sexual relationships with their lecturers.

(j) EDUCATION
Seven hundred and fifty-three students (27%) strongly expressed the need for female students to be educated on their rights. According to them, some students do not know when to say 'No' to someone in authority and often do not know the difference between a decent proposal and sexual

harassment. They regarded some of the so-called "principals' lectures" as a joke and a waste of time, because, according to them, instead of educating the students, corrupt male principals were taking advantage of this privilege in order to exploit and brain-wash female students. They also felt that only those people with a proven record of responsibility, good moral values, maturity and strong ethics should be trusted to educate students on sexual matters.

DISCUSSION

The above results reveal that there is no doubt that sexual harassment is rife in institutions of higher education throughout Zimbabwe. Looking at item 18 in the questionnaire where female students were asked if they knew any lecturers who 'use their influence to exploit female students sexually', all the 2 756 said 'yes' to this item. If this premise is correct, it means that all the 16 institutions in this study are indeed guilty of harbouring at least one or two lecturers who exploit students sexually. The press seems to have covered only three teachers' colleges in its reports, yet the above study reveals that the practice is prevalent in every college. It seems therefore that three colleges that received negative publicity involving sexual abuse, leakage of examination papers and sex discrimination were just the ones to be caught out first. Without this publicity, however, this study would never have been carried out by this researcher. Item 24 regarding the establishment of a Sexual Harassment Office was also agreed upon by almost all students (2 749 — 99%). This obviously means that almost all female students, including married ones, feel unsafe in colleges.

It is not clear why one teachers' college decided to change the instructions of the survey which stipulated that this initial survey was for female students only by proceeding to distribute the questionnaire among male students. A covering note also copied to the Secretary of Higher Education was sent to the researcher suggesting that his topic 'Sexual harassment' was offensive and should have been entitled 'gender issues'. While the researcher agrees with some of these suggestions, it must be pointed out that since the college was not involved in the original research design, instead of trying to change the rules of this particular study, it should attempt to conduct its own research using all the variables it mentions.

In most teachers' colleges it was the first-year and third-year students who responded to the questionnaire items. Although it would have been ideal to find out if differences existed between the two year groups, it was felt that at this stage the research should focus mainly on the extent to which sexual harassment is apparent. At the University of Zimbabwe all

year groups, first, second and third including some postgraduate students were used. Analysis of results in which responses from individual colleges are compared would have also been ideal as reading through the general comments made by the University of Zimbabwe students, they seem to have slightly different experiences from those of their contemporaries in teachers' colleges. University of Zimbabwe students seem ready to challenge authority in their own right when cases of sexual harassment occur. No similar comments were found in the reports made by female students in teachers' colleges. This phenomenon could be explained by the fact that students at the University of Zimbabwe seem to have a greater freedom of expression than those in teachers' colleges. Another possibility is that due to the large numbers of students at the University, their community is not as closed-in as those in teachers' colleges, where students have daily contact with authorities and are more restricted by rules of conduct.

However, it is important to note that only 499 (18%) of the 2 756 students surveyed said that they had actually been asked for sexual favours by their lecturers (item 9). While sexual harassment is prevalent, it is obvious that not every single male lecturer is guilty of it. The culprits of sexual harassment are actually in the minority as revealed in this study.

What is particularly worrying though is the fact that 93% of the students said that they would not report sexual harassment (item 11) to any authority for fear of victimization or because they do not believe that the present structures are set to protect them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

(i) There is a need for students and their trainees to be educated on what constitutes sexual harassment.

(ii) Proper reporting procedures on sexual harassment in colleges should be set up immediately. These should give students the assurance that there will be no victimization should they make reports about incidents that involve those in authority. At the moment there is under-reporting because of fear of the negative consequences of doing so.

(iii) Strong disciplinary measures, including dismissal, must be taken against lecturers who sexually harass female students.

(iv) Legislation which protects female students from sexual harassment must be introduced as there seems to be an unwillingness on the part of society to recognize the problem.

(v) There is a need for counselling services for students in every college. These should include both experts in the field as well as lecturers and students.

(vi) Any policy seeking to encourage the maintenance of professional, non-exploitative relationships between lecturers and students must include specific reference to propriety and responsibility of lecturers and must provide guidelines for their conduct.

CONCLUSION

All training institutions in Zimbabwe have a responsibility to discourage sexual harassment and unethical intimacy as a matter of explicit policy. There is therefore a need to legislate against such harassment as well as adopting a set of guidelines which raise the consciousness of both lecturers and their trainees about the issue. Offenders such as supervisors of students on teaching practice should either be rehabilitated or excluded from teachers' colleges depending on the seriousness of the offence. This way, it is hoped that those with power over students will in future give this issue a great thought before they act.

Future research on this topic which should include other variables such as peer harassment, college violence, and a comparison of the behaviour of students in different colleges is essential.

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