



RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE SEXUAL HARASSMENT OF FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AS AN ABUSE AND AN EXERCISE OF POWER IN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

Background: The Sexual harassment of female students by their instructors has long been identified as a significant social problem in universities. While a significant body of research has linked the vice to power, much less research has examined how this power operates. **Objective:** This study sought to examine the sexual harassment experiences of female undergraduate students at a large public University in East Africa. Anchored in the socio-cultural and organizational theories of sexual harassment, the study paid particular attention to how workplace and gendered power facilitate the sexual harassment of female students. **Methods:** The study was purely qualitative and was guided by the case study design. The data was collected by the use of individual interviews. A total of 42 participants took part in the study and the data was analyzed thematically. **Findings:** The findings indicated that a lot of the harassment is of a quid pro quo nature and that the sexuality of female students has been commoditized as something that can be exchanged for academic favours. The findings further indicated that the sexual harassment experienced by students is related to power in multi layered ways and that the very context of higher education provides fertile ground for the vice to thrive as the everyday activities that are synonymous in teacher learner relationships provide opportunities for behavioral deviance and power abuse. **Conclusion:** The sexual harassment of female students is driven by both formal and informal power hierarchies.

INTRODUCTION

The recent *Me Too* movement has galvanized and reminded the world about how women suffer sexual harassment. The sexual harassment of women in the public sphere is a global problem that transcends boundaries and professions (1, 2, 3, 4). It does not only create an unsafe environment but also has a devastating impact on its victims (5, 6, 7, 8) The sexual harassment of female students by their instructors is a global phenomenon that universities are struggling to grapple with (9). Much of it has been attributed to power as faculty have power over their students. Power is therefore central to understanding the phenomenon of sexual harassment (7, 8, 10). It is important to examine how this power operates with some scholars arguing that the term power is sometimes used as “a rhetorical flourish rather than as an integral part of the research” (11.pg 112). In this article, we build on this work by examining the role of power in the sexual harassment of female students by male members of faculty at a large public university in East Africa.

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The decision to focus on the sexual harassment of female students by male faculty was influenced by the unique context of higher education where the asymmetries in power between students and faculty are hierarchical and unchanging (9).

LITERATURE

The sexual harassment of female students has been broadly conceived in the literature as affecting both undergraduate (12, 13) and graduate students (14, 15). Much of it has been attributed to the formalized top down power differentials between students and faculty which is synonymous with hierarchical settings such as universities (16, 17). Scholars have noted that the occurrences of sexual harassment within specific organizational context deserves stronger scrutiny especially in settings that are hierarchical and routinized (18, 19). Higher education is an arena that is rife with hierarchical power relations especially between students and members of faculty (20). It has been noted that these hierarchies may have significant consequences especially for students given their subject position as faculty can abuse their power by sexually harassing them (9).

Power is an important aspect for understanding the relationship between superiors and their subordinates (21). It has been suggested that when it comes to organizations with asymmetrical power relations, responses to sexual harassment are grounded in power as people with little or no power tend to tolerate sexual harassment even in severe forms so that they can continue with their work or assignments (22). Faculty, because of the positions they hold have the capacity to influence those over whom they have control by providing or withholding resources and the administration of punishments (23). The power that they hold gives them authority as per their roles as lecturers, graders, supervisors and recommenders. The dependence on these resources and the threat of punishments reflect the powerlessness of female students (8). However, there is more to sexual harassment than workplace power as not all individuals with workplace power harass. Scholars have argued that the gendered nature of sexuality that positions male sexuality as aggressive and female sexuality as submissive plays an important role in driving the vice (24, 25). Sexual harassment is therefore a part of doing gender and is largely driven by particular constructions of gender and sexuality (26). As reference (22) put it, the feminization and powerless status of women makes them vulnerable to sexual harassment and are therefore more likely to experience sexual harassments in the public domain. Indeed previous studies have shown that men are more likely to be the perpetrators of sexual harassment and women are more likely to be its victims (27). To uncover the gendered dynamics of sexual harassment, scholars have called on researchers to carry out qualitative studies as this may help to capture the important concepts and processes about the gendered nature of sexual harassment (19, 28).

Theoretical Framework: The study was theoretically anchored in the organizational and sociocultural theories of sexual harassment. According to the organizational theory of sexual harassment, incidences of sexual harassment are driven by the hierarchical structures in organizations which create conditions that facilitate the sexual harassment of the powerless by the powerful (17,29,30).The hierarchical structure of organizations ensures that organizations are structured vertically which provides a conducive environment for sexual harassment in such way that it creates and keeps in place asymmetrical power relations as evidenced by the power differentials between subordinates and seniors. The socio-cultural theory of sexual harassment asserts that deviant and conforming sexual behaviour are a product of gender socialization and an abuse of power derived from the social sphere and imposed on the public sphere (1). The theory takes into account the wider social context within which sexual harassment occurs recognizing that it is both a consequence and a cause of the pre-existing gender inequality that exists in society The culturally and socially legitimated power and status that is assigned to men and women begets sexual harassment, the vice is therefore an outgrowth of gender socialization (1). Gender is considered to play a vital role as there are different sexuality standards that are set for men and women with men expected to be sexually aggressive while women are expected to be sexually submissive. It is therefore considered to be a key predictor in determining who is at more risk of sexual harassment (1).

METHODOLOGY

The study was purely qualitative and utilized the case study design which enabled a deep exploration of the phenomenon.

The study included 42 participants. Participants were selected using the purposeful and snowball sampling techniques. Prior to taking part in the study, participants signed consent forms voluntarily agreeing to take part in the study. Given the possibility of revictimising participants through the recounting of sexual harassment experiences, participants were informed of this possibility. Female students who participated in this study were asked about their experiences of sexual harassment while other categories of participants were asked about the sexual harassment experiences of female students. The data was collected by conducting individual interviews and data source triangulation was done by collecting data from different categories of people who included students and members of faculty. The data was analyzed thematically through a process of transcription, coding, the extraction of categories and the emergence of themes.

Findings

Female students described the various ways through which they had experienced harassment from male members of faculty. Sex was used as a prerequisite by faculty to forgive academic dishonesty. A female student who had been caught cheating in an exam by a male member of faculty described how a faculty member proposed to forgive her if she had sex with him:

I was caught cheating in an exam, I had written the answers on my thigh. The lecturer got my paper and told me to sign somewhere on the answer sheet and also include my phone number. After that, the lecturer called me so we could meet outside the university, I went there to meet him and the lecturer told me that if I did not sleep with him, I could retake the paper. Because I did not want to retake the paper, I slept with the lecturer. In the scenario described above, the faculty member threatened the student with punishment if she did not give in to his sexual demands. The choice of submission of the female student could have been determined by the harm she perceived the faculty member could do if she turned him down. Another female student described what she experienced in the course of following up on her missing grades:

I really do not want to talk about it but what I can tell you is that I have never got my grades Whenever I go to his office, he says that he really wants to have sex with me, I try to talk to him about my grades but he tells me about how beautiful I am and how he would like to sleep with me. I have given up on those grades, I think I will retake that paper. The experience described above bears similarities with that of another female student who went through a similar experience as described below;

I have been through a scenario like that, I had a case of missing grades and so I had to go to this lecturer's office and he told me to go back that evening as he was busy at the time. When I went back, he made me sit for a long time and after that he came, put his hand on my thigh and asked me if I really wanted to get my grades, I was very scared. I did not know what to say to him because I wanted to get my grades so I just kept quiet. He told me to go think about it and get back to him. In the two scenarios described above, while the faculty members did not explicitly threaten the students with poor grades if they did not submit to their sexual demands, the threats could have been implicit. The passivity of the female students may be linked to their position as students who need the guidance and approval

of their instructors if they are to complete their university education. Another participant who described her experience further illuminated how veiled the threat of punishment can be if one refuses to comply; When I sat for the exam, he gave me a very low mark, 52, I do not think that I deserved that yet in all the other papers, I had scored very well. He told me, seriously are you going to go with those grades? Are you contented with them? He then started to talk about issues of loving me (sic) and I told him that I could take those grades if that is what I deserved but I cannot accept on condition that he adds me more grades.

The experiences described above may have been enabled by the asymmetrical power relations between students and faculty. They also illuminate the various ways in which quid pro quo harassment manifests itself in universities. These findings depict how faculty abuse the power that is bestowed on them as examiners, guides and evaluators to sexually harass students (9). The passive responses of the participants speak to the powerlessness of students and how individuals who hold power can alter the behaviours of those over whom they have power and control in certain contexts. The power that is held by faculty is not only able to influence others but may also melt away any resistance to authority (31, 32). These findings are in line with a study carried out in Ghana and Tanzania where the findings indicated that transactional sex between faculty and students did happen (16). There were also participants who had not been victims of the vice but were aware of how male faculty sexually harassed female students. Faculty members who participated in this study narrated the ways in which their colleagues sexually harassed female students. A female member of faculty described how female students experienced sexual harassment from a certain male member of faculty as thus:

There was a man here who was known to harass students, a student came to me about her grades and I said, (name withheld), I want the grades for this girl and he promised to look for them. The student had told me that he had told him, the grades were on his table. As deputy dean, I told him, give me the grades for this girl and she got her grades and the girl told me, some of her colleagues had given in and others had repeated a year. A male faculty member also described how female students experienced sexual harassment:

There was a man, a very senior and a very bad man and all the students knew that with him he wants to touch your private parts and give you a good mark. People forget that we are going to meet these students in future. Another female faculty member described how some faculty members linked examination questions in exchange for sexual relations with students:

Two years ago there was a paper which linked out in our department because the lecturer exchanged it for sex. The academic registrar contacted the responsible lecturer but of course he denied. The sexual harassment behaviours described above further point to how members of faculty abuse their power by obligating students to have sexual relations with them and also illuminate the powerlessness of students. Powerlessness ought to be understood in context, female students by virtue of the subject positions occupy are vulnerable to faculty harassment as they depend on them for academic nourishment. Those who chose to resist it suffer

repercussions as the harassers punish them. This was clearly described by a male member of faculty who opined thus;

There is a student who had to give up her degree because there was a lecturer who harassed her for three years and unfortunately when it came to fourth year when she wanted to come and redo the paper, after reporting to authorities higher, that lecturer was now a dean and he was insisting, four years down the road, he was still asking for the same thing. I know her personally, she gave up her degree. The experience described above brings to bear the threat of punishment and the impact that sexual harassment can have on its victims. The findings above are consistent with past studies on sexual harassment in higher education that indeed showed that quid pro quo harassment is common in academia (33, 32, 16, 35). They are also in line with findings from earlier studies on the sexual assault of young women in universities (36).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The power relationships between faculty and students in higher education are largely asymmetrical and unchanging. Relations between students and lecturers are intrinsically unequal as staff members have the power to grade their students, to evaluate them and to make life changing decisions about them. This power stems from the roles entrusted to them by the university as teachers, evaluators and recommenders (9). The sexual harassment of female students could be largely influenced by the status inequalities between faculty and students and the highly asymmetrical nature of higher education. Given the context, victims may be considered to be powerless which may explain why they are targeted by the perpetrators. The harassment described above can be categorized as largely quid pro quo where a benefit is conditioned to academic favours (37, 33). It happens when a person with supervisory authority conditions or withholds benefits to one's submission to sexual conduct (37, 33). Quid pro quo harassment is equally unlawful whether the victim resists it and suffers the threatened harm or submits to it so as to avoid further consequences and victimization (38). Basing on the findings, faculty member are better positioned to alter the behavior of the female students. The findings also reveal how the structured nature of higher education produces a context where it could be incongruous for one to assume that students and faculty can enjoy equal power relationships. The person with power not only enjoys significant privileges over the powerless person but they are also able to behave in a disinhibited way because of their position (23).

However the asymmetries in organizational power may not adequately explain the harassing behaviour of faculty as not all faculty members harass even though they all have power over students. Sexual violence against women through such acts as sexual harassment is used as a patriarchal tool to subjugate women (1). The experiences of the female students and the deviant behaviour of faculty could be linked to gender socialization where sexuality is structured according to gender and thus male faculty may think that they have the right to demand for sexual favours from the female students. This abuse of power it can be argued is sometimes driven by a non-conscious desire to exercise the gendered order of sexuality which presumes that men have a right to women's bodies (10). These findings are a pointer that power has the potential to influence the behaviour of others and that the power of the harasser has a bearing on the choices of the victim as

powerless individuals may more likely agree to persuasive and coercive attempts by authoritative figures to make them do as they please.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These findings call for a multiple interventions model (both preventive and corrective) that takes into account the power differentials between students and faculty as well as the veiled nature of sexuality. University responses to sexual harassment need to move beyond the privatization of sexual harassment experiences where each incidence is looked at in isolation to an examination of the pattern of the sexual harassment experiences and how the very context of higher education allows the vice to thrive.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings are an indication that by default, students are exposed to potential harassers as they go about their everyday activities. Their subject position not only makes them more vulnerable but also increases the opportunities for potential perpetrators to harass them. These findings indicate that the sexual harassment suffered by female students is linked to both workplace and gendered power relations.

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