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Effectiveness of the strategies used by public universities in Zimbabwe to curb sexual harassment of female undergraduate students

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Abstract

This study evaluates the effectiveness of the measures currently in place to curb sexual harassment of female undergraduate students in public universities in Zimbabwe. The study adopted a sequential explanatory research design with the aim of using a mixed research approach. A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed to female students and 40 interviews were conducted with lecturers from three public universities in Zimbabwe. The study revealed that sexual harassment is caused by economic hardships in the country, indecent dressing by female students, intimidation of students by lecturers and the pressure to earn better grades. The study revealed that the challenges faced by public universities in Zimbabwe in curbing sexual harassment of female undergraduate students are that students do not report most of the cases of sexual harassment, perpetrators are very influential and powerful people in the universities and lack of financial support for female students. The measures put in place to mitigate sexual harassment are punitive action against the perpetrators of sexual harassment, education of female students on how to handle the incidents of sexual harassment, availability of defined structures to report sexual harassment cases and students have been encouraged to report sexual harassment. The study further highlighted that the measures in place to curb sexual harassment of female undergraduate students in public universities of Zimbabwe are less effective because continuous indecent dressing by female students has normalised sexual harassment as a way of getting better grades. The study recommends that the university authorities should come up with a dress code policy and that the government should avail scholarships for students.

KEYWORDS: Sexual Harassment, Gender harassment, sexual bribery, coercion.

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Introduction

In every society, there is likelihood of positive or negative sexual-interactions by people of different sexes. However, 'negative' encounters are regarded as harassment. Aluede (2000), Ogunbameru (2006) and Morely and Lussier (2009) view sexual harassment, for instance, as an unacceptable behaviour which involves an aggression directed to another person's psyche or body using sex as a weapon. Studies (Aluede, 2000; Ogunbameru, 2006; Morely & Lussier, 2009) demonstrate that in universities the student-lecturer relationships, often lead to sexual harassment. It is noted that in most cases the female student becomes the victim of sexual harassment.

Morely and Lussier (2009 cited in Onoyase, 2019), view sexual harassment is a global problem affecting the tertiary educational institutions. This implies that in institutions of higher learning, sexual harassment is one of the problems. On the other hand, Mohammed, Karim and Mohammed (2010) agree that sexual harassment in institutions of higher learning is mainly caused by indecent dressing. The authors are of the view that indecent dressing of female students arouses the emotions of male lecturers leading to sexual harassment of female students. Koi, Auka and Kilaha (2018) opine that women are the victims of sexual harassment. Flax (2012) cited in Koi et al. (2018) view men as harassers and women as victims. Chamberlain et al. (2008) state that organisations such as universities have cultural biases and power structures where women are the targets for sexual harassment. I am of the view that in most cases of sexual harassment females are more likely to be harassed as compared to men. Koi et al (2018) are of the view that sexual harassment is a global problem as 24% of sexual harassment happen in learning institutions. This implies that sexual harassment is very common in educational institutions.

Marna and Barnes (2007), Muasya (2014) and Masvawure (2010) view campus life as unpleasant for female students. Research (Marna & Barnes, 2007; Muasya, 2014; Masvawure, 2010) notes that female university students are the mostly affected by sexual harassment. In support, Mungwini and Matereke (2010) state that female students face sexual harassment in tertiary education institutions. Sexual harassment makes it difficult for female students to equally participate with male students in universities (Mungwini & Matereke, 2010).

Ray (2013) states that verbal violence and sexual victimisation are the order of the day in most universities in Africa, and the practice has been normalised. Mosine et al. (2012) contended that female students are vulnerable to sexual

harassment which is caused by university staff and male students. Kanyembe (2018) argues that in African institutions of higher learning, sexual coercion is very common as it is a taboo which is treated with silence. This implies that sexual coercion, sexual harassment and verbal abuse have become the norm in institutions of higher learning in Africa.

To the best knowledge of the researcher, there is little evidence on the effectiveness of measures being put in place by public universities in curbing sexual harassment of female undergraduate students in Zimbabwe. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge the knowledge gap by analysing the effectiveness of measures being put in place by public universities in curbing sexual harassment of female undergraduate students in Zimbabwe. This was done by addressing the following objectives which are to analyse the factors contributing to sexual harassment of female undergraduate students in public universities in Zimbabwe. The other objective is to assess the challenges faced by the public universities in curbing sexual harassment of female undergraduate students in Zimbabwe.

Evaluating the measures in place to mitigate the challenges faced in curbing sexual harassment of female undergraduate students in public universities of Zimbabwe.

Review of Literature

Stanko (2012) states that sexual harassment is an unwanted sexual behaviour which can be verbal, physical and non-verbal. Aluede (2000) defines sexual harassment as unsolicited, unwelcome and unreciprocated sexual overtures from a person to elicit unwanted sexual relationship from another person. Akinade (2005) notes that sexual harassment is unacceptable concept which consists of aggression against another person's body or psyche using sex as a weapon. Flax (2012) argues that men are the perpetrators of sexual harassment and women are the victims.

On the other hand, Gruber (2012) categorises sexual harassment into verbal comments, requests and non- verbal display. Stanko (2012) notes that men most of the time have higher power or positions and they use their power to sexually harass women. Till and Gupta (2010) opine that there are five types of sexual harassment namely seductive behaviour, sexual bribery, coercion, gender harassment and imposition. The author noted that coercion, imposition and

sexual bribery are threats which are made by one person to another in order to get sexual favours.

Factors contributing to sexual harassment

Chamberlian et al. (2008) opine that cultural biases and power structures are the driving forces for sexual harassment of female students. They point out that women are targeted for sexual harassment because they are subjected to discrimination, control by men, intimidation and violence on university campuses. Men are viewed as the perpetrators of sexual harassment. In support of this, Kayuni (2009) points out that students have belief that their academic outcomes are determined by the lecturers and therefore they succumb to sexual harassment. This shows that those who have power can perpetrate sexual harassment in universities. This becomes so given that lecturers have the authority to confer grades and this makes it easier for them to sexually harass students.

Aba (2010) and Imonikhe, Aluede and Idogho (2012) state that students exchanged sex for marks in most of the tertiary education institutions in Nigeria. The authors noted that male lecturers take the advantage that they determine the grades of the student to sexual harass female students. Researchers further note that the non-academic male staff members also perpetuate sexual harassment of female students as they oversee examination, keep records, and are active in student disciplinary committees. Nwadiani (2018) supported Aba (2010) and Imonikhe et al. (2012) by citing a case of Ambrose Ali University in Nigeria where two professors got into sexual relationships with female students in return for good marks. The researchers further note that incidents of sexual harassment of university female students have turned institutions of higher learning into sex or prostitution centres.

Wegge, Vanderbosch, Eggerment and Walruses (2015) point out that technology has contributed immensely to sexual harassment. These researchers were of the view that technology has improved social networks mainly for sexual abuse. Technology allows people to express their opinions, feelings, desires and needs without restrictions. Magee and Jones (2012) note that technology such as video, personal blogs and social network cites have been used as tools of sexual harassment. This implies that technology provides effective channels for sexual harassment as people can interact without restrictions.

Baker and Ricardo (2008) opine that substance abuse results in sexual violence. This view is supported by Pennsylvania National Sexual Abuse Resources (2004) which found that people who consume alcohol are more likely to sexually harass other people. Fisher, Cullen and Turner (2000) contended that many cases of sexual harassment emanate from alcohol consumption. This implies that substance abuse makes people lose morality and end up sexually harassing others.

Bhana and Pattman (2011) posit that poverty is one of the factors which leads to sexual harassment of women. Kanku and Mash (2010) supported this view when they stated that youths in Africa indulge in risky sexual activities due to poverty. Silberschmidt (2001) believes that men with high status and income sexually harass females from poor backgrounds. This implies that poverty forces women to earn a living through sexual activities.

Ogunbameru (2006) and Mohammed, Bala, Adulkarim and Mohammed (2010) point out that indecent dressing by female students is a factor that contributes to sexual harassment of female students. They point out that indecent dressing is the major root cause for the sexual assault of female students in higher learning institutions. Onoyase (2019), Muhammed, Lee and Chan (2007) and Chukwudi and Gbakorun (2011) corroborate this view by stating that female students dress in such a way that they expose sexual body parts and this makes them victims of sexual harassment. Therefore, indecent dressing influences the opposite sex to initiate social interaction which might lead to sexual harassment.

Students access internet browsers which have sexual material. The Internet has resulted in the increase in the exposure of students to sexual material which may arouse their sexual emotions and hence causing sexual harassment (Ashgar et al., 2014). Electronic networks have been used to send pornographic pictures and sexual messages (Richard, 1993). These researchers point that sexual jokes can create a hostile atmosphere. The female students, through this exposure become hostile against their male counterparts and this may affect their academic performance.

Adams-Cutis, Forbes (2004) argue that when activities are carried out in secluded environment this can lead to sexual harassment. The authors stated that in situations where teachers and students, both male and female are permitted to carry out certain tasks in secluded areas, this may trigger sexual harassment.

Challenges faced by universities in curbing sexual harassment

Students accept mistreatment because they fear that they can be victimised for reporting the abuse. Failure to report mistreatment or sexual harassment becomes a way of life which is passed on from one generation of the students to another. The students who report cases of sexual harassment are viewed as troublemakers (Aultman, 2005). This implies that universities may fail to curb sexual harassment of students because victims are afraid of reporting the abuse because they think that they can suffer the consequences of reporting and become negatively judged by other students.

LeRoux, Orleyn and Rycroft (2005) argue that female students are the mostly affected by sexual harassment, as the experience affects their self-esteem. In order to protect their self-esteem, female students avoid reporting cases of sexual harassment. Bennet (2002 cited in Gouws, 2007), note that female students who have been subjected to sexual harassment develop avoidance tactics such as meeting the lecturer in groups and do not report cases of sexual harassment. Gouws (2007) states that low reportage of cases of sexual harassment is as a result of many factors which consist of unwillingness to engage in conflict, threat of development of a sour relationship with an authority figure and fear of revenge from the perpetrator. The victims of sexual harassment end up thinking that if they ignore the issue, the issue will disappear.

Measures to curb sexual harassment of female students

Investigations are very important in eliminating sexual harassment. The educational institutions should conduct thorough investigations and take corrective actions in situations where there is sexual harassment (Gwirayi, 2013). There should be an effective system for the victims to lodge complaints. The university authorities should make sure that the complaints are well founded so as not to give a biased assessment of the situation (Chirwa, 2005). This means that there should be careful studying of the statements from the complaint so as to give a fair judgement on sexual harassment.

There is need to empower students with knowledge so as protect themselves from different forms of sexual harassment (Gwirayi, 2013). Chirwa (2005) and Daka, Chipindi, Phiri, Mulenga, Mvula (2021) are in agreement that teachers and school authorities should inform students about the issues of sexual harassment so that they are protected. This implies that students need to be aware of the issues of sexual harassment.

There is also need to set clear guidelines on how the students use technology and what they can do when they face sexual harassment. Spitali (2012) insists that the relationship between the teacher and the student matters. The author notes that the teachers should have a positive relationship with the learners whilst maintaining a professional distance. This implies that there should be a situation where due to their behaviour, students should be able to see that the teacher is a teacher and is not at the same level with the students. The National Security for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) (2013) noted that teachers should be trained to safeguard themselves and how they should handle incidents when a student discloses sexual harassment incidents. Mathews (2021) was in agreement with NSPCC (2013) that teachers need to be trained on how they should manage sexual harassment.

Clear policies can be used to eliminate sexual harassment. Clear policies are able to prevent and cure sexual harassment. The policies should be aimed at zero tolerance to sexual harassment. Fitzgerald and Sullman (1993) evaluate the effectiveness of the policy stems from its enforcement. This implies that the policies should be effectively enforced so that they can help in curbing sexual harassment. Diech et al (1990 cited in Kuliyyah et al., 2014), state that people should be trained so that they familiarise with policies and know what they can do in situations where they are faced with sexual harassment. Badenhorst (2003) stated that the policies need to be clear and easy to understand.

Owens, Gomes and Morgan (2004) contend that there is need to create awareness, communicate the policies and train people on the policies. Research notes that there is need for the policies to be communicated to everyone at every level and also people should be trained on the policies through workshops and this will help in reducing sexual harassment. Furthermore, there should be notices which discourage sexual harassment. The notices should have names of people to contact if someone faces sexual harassment.

Methodology

Sequential explanatory research design was adopted with the view of using mixed research methods. Purposive sampling technique was used in the study. Data was analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Data from questionnaires was analysed quantitatively, and that from interviews was analysed qualitatively. A total of two hundred and fifty (250) female undergraduate students and forty (40) lecturers from three selected public universities in Zimbabwe were targeted. Questionnaires were administered

to the female undergraduate students and interviews were administered to the lecturers. A pilot test was done so as to ensure effectiveness of research instruments.

Results

This section is about data analysis and results about the effectiveness of the strategies employed by public universities in curbing sexual harassment of female undergraduate students in Zimbabwe. This was done by focusing on the factors contributing to sexual harassment of female undergraduate students, challenges faced by universities in curbing sexual harassment of female undergraduate students and the measures to mitigate challenges faced by universities in curbing sexual harassment of female undergraduate students. Table 1 below is about perpetrators of gender-based violence against female undergraduate students in the public universities of Zimbabwe.

Table 1: Perpetrators of gender-based violence against female undergraduate students

	Frequency	**Percent**
Male Lecturers	97	55.7
Female Lecturers	68	39.1
Other Students	9	5.2
Total	**174**	**100.0**

Source: Primary Data

About 66% of the female students who participated in the study stated that male lecturers are the perpetrators of gender-based violence against female undergraduate students, about 39% of the respondents stated that female lecturers perpetrate sexual harassment of students and about 5% stated that sexual harassment is perpetrated by other students. This implies that the major perpetrators of sexual harassment of female undergraduate students are male teachers, although there is a hand of female lecturers in sexual harassment of female undergraduate students. Kayuni (2009) stated that students have a belief that their academic outcomes are determined by the lecturers and therefore they

succumb to sexual harassment. Given that lecturers have the authority to confer grades it makes it easier for them to sexually harass students.

Table 2: Number of times the students have heard about sexual harassment of female undergraduate students

	Frequency	Percent
None	27	15.5
Once	31	17.8
More than twice	116	66.7
Total	**174**	**100.0**

Source: Primary Data

The statistics in Table 2 imply that the cases of sexual harassment of female undergraduate students are more prevalent in the public universities of Zimbabwe that were under study.

Table 3: Factors which contribute to sexual harassment of female undergraduate students

Factors contributing to sexual harassment of female undergraduate students.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Poverty and economic hardships	62%	18%	12%	8%	0%
Indecent dressing by female undergraduate students.	85%	10%	2%	3%	0%
Technology advancement	40%	10%	30%	15%	15%
The need to earn more marks	87%	11%	1%		1%
Intimidation from lecturers	83%	9%	4%	2%	2%
Cultural and social beliefs	20%	11%	40%	20%	9%

Source: Primary Data

Table 3 shows that the most common factors which contribute to sexual harassment of female undergraduate students are poverty and economic hardships; indecent dressing by female undergraduate students, the need to earn more marks and intimidation from lecturers. This agrees with Ogunbameru (2006) and Onoyase (2019) who opine that female students dress in a way that attracts the attention of male lecturers and supported by Abubakar et al. (2010) who state that indecent dressing is the major root for the sexual assault of female students in higher learning institutions.

Of the lecturers' interviewed, 78% stated that the factors which contribute to sexual harassment are economic prevailing hardships in the country which make female students vulnerable to harassment, indecent dressing by female students and laziness of students which make them to demand cheap marks.

Table 4: Challenges faced by universities in curbing sexual harassment of female undergraduate students

Challenges faced by universities in curbing sexual harassment of female undergraduate students	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
No action is being taken against the perpetrators of sexual harassment	10%	30%	5%	40%	25%
Students do not report cases of sexual harassment	90%	8%	0%	1%	1%
Students feel that reporting es of sexual harassment is embarrassing	87%	8%	1%	3%	1%
Lack of financial assistance of students from the university	80%	10%	1%	2%	3%
Undefined structures for handling case s of sexual harassment.	20%	22%	18%	30%	10%
Students have more access to technology which expose them to Sites where they can be sexually harassed	17%	16%	17%	21%	29%
Perpetrators are very powerful people in the university	76%	12%	4%	3%	5%
Corruption	23%	16%	5%	26%	30%
Cultural diversity	30%	15%	8%	17%	30%

Source: Primary Data

From Table 4, the main challenges faced by public universities in Zimbabwe in curbing sexual harassment of female undergraduate students include failure to report cases of sexual harassment, students feeling embarrassed to report cases of sexual harassment, lacking of financial assistance and the perpetrators being very powerful people in the university. This is in agreement with Aultman (2005) who stated that students accept to be mistreated because they fear that they can be victimised for reporting mistreatment. This failure to report the cases of mistreatment or sexual harassment is passed on from one generation of students to another.

Of the lecturer interviewed, 90% stated that sexual harassment will not end because students rarely report those incidents and they also continue to wear indecently. One of the lecturers said:

> Sexual harassment of female students will remain a challenge because most of the female students do not know how to wear and others do not report out of fear.

Table 5: The extent to which the universities have defined reporting sexual harassment

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	82	47.1
Agree	92	52.9
Total	**174**	**100.0**

Source: Primary Data

About 47% of the students who participated in the study strongly agreed that the universities have defined reporting structures for sexual harassment. About 53% of the reports agreed that the universities have well defined reporting structures for sexual harassment. This implies that the universities have platforms to receive the cases of sexual harassment of female undergraduate students.

Of the interviewed lecturers, 70% stated that the universities have well defined structures of dealing with sexual harassment and they also stated that there is also a code of conduct for lecturers and students which also covers sexual harassment issues.

Table 6: The extent to which students were taught to handle sexual harassment incidents

	Frequency	Percent
Valid Strongly Agree	113	64.9
Agree	61	35.1
Total	**174**	**100.0**

Source: Primary Data

About 65% of the students stated that they strongly agreed with how to handle incidents of sexual harassment and also 35% agreed that the university taught them to handle incidents of sexual harassment. This is in agreement with Diech et al., 1990 cited in Kuliyyah et al., 2014) who stated that people should be trained so that they familiarise with policies and know what they can do in situations where they are faced with sexual harassment.

Table 7: Measures to mitigate challenges faced by universities in curbing sexual harassment of female undergraduate students

Measures in place to mitigate the challenges faced by the university in curbing sexual harassment of female undergraduate students	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Punishment of perpetrators of sexual harassment	82%	10%	2%	6%	2%
There is a platform that allows the victims of sexual harassment to report cases of sexual harassment	85%	4%	5%	2%	4%
Female students have been educated on how to handle the incidences of sexual harassment.	78%	12%	2%	5%	5%
The university have well defined structure to deal with cases of sexual harassment of students.	86%	10%	1%	1%	2%
Students have been encouraged to have courage in reporting sexual harassment cases.	79%	10%	2%	5%	4%

Measures in place to mitigate the challenges faced by the university in curbing sexual harassment of female undergraduate students	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Students have been encouraged to dress decently.	20%	16%	35%	17%	22%
There are scholarships or financial assistance for female students.	23%	6%	22%	31%	18%
Awareness campaigns against sexual harassment of female students.	81%	8%	1%	6%	4%
Students have been allowed to have an input on how to curb sexual harassment.	83%	5%	5%	4%	3%

Source: Primary Data

From Table 7 above, the most common measures that are used by the public universities in Zimbabwe to handle cases of sexual harassment of female undergraduate students are punishment of the perpetrators of sexual harassment, availability of platforms to report cases of sexual harassment of students, education of female students on how to handle the incidents of sexual harassment, availability of defined structures to report sexual harassment cases, students have been encouraged to report sexual harassment, attend awareness campaigns against sexual harassment and being allowed to have an input on how to curb sexual harassment. This concurs with Owens, Gomes and Morgan (2004) who emphasise the need to create awareness, communicate the policies and train people on sexual harassment policies.

Thirty out of forty lecturers (75%) who were interviewed stated that the universities have campaigns against sexual harassment, well defined structures to deal with sexual harassment and also the perpetrators have been punished as the universities take disciplinary action against sexual harassment of female students.

Table 8: Effectiveness of the measures in place to curb sexual harassment

	Frequency	Percent
Not effective	52	29.9
Less effective	122	70.1
Total	**174**	**100.0**

Source: Primary Data

About 30% of the respondents who were female students stated that the measures in place to curb sexual harassments of female undergraduate students were not effective whilst about 70% of the respondents who were female students stated that the measures in place in curbing sexual harassment of students were less effective.

Thirty two out of forty (80%) lecturers who interviewed stating that the strategies in place to curb gender-based violence were less effective because students do not report cases of sexual harassment fearing that they will be made to fail. The lecturers also noted that the students are also the ones who contribute to their being sexually harassed because they wear indecently and also act to lure the attention of male lecturers. On the other hand, one hundred 88% stated that female students develop relationships with lectures so that they earn better grades. One of the students said:

> Most of the students want to get into relationships with lecturers so that they get distinctions. The students are a problem themselves because they are the ones who attract male lecturers. The measures which are put in place by the university are not effective because female students are embarrassed and do not report the cases because they think the perpetrator lecturer will make them fail.

Conclusion

Cases of sexual harassment of female under graduate students in public universities in Zimbabwe are very common because the students have heard about such incidents more than twice. The most common perpetrators of sexual harassment of female undergraduate students are male lecturers. The most common factors which contribute to sexual harassment of female undergraduate

students are economic hardships in the country and indecent dressing of female undergraduate students.

The challenges faced by universities in curbing sexual harassment of female undergraduate students are that students do not report cases of sexual harassment, students feel embarrassed by reporting sexual harassment cases, and perpetrators are influential people in the university and they lack financial support and this makes them to be vulnerable to sexual harassment.

The universities have well-defined structures for reporting of sexual harassment cases and female students have been taught on how to deal with incidents of sexual harassment. This implies that the universities conduct awareness campaigns against sexual harassment of female undergraduate students. The measures in place to curb sexual harassment of female undergraduate students in public universities of Zimbabwe are less effective because most of the female students wear indecently and also some students are lazy and end up succumbing to sexual harassment incidents in order to get higher marks and better grades.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the study and conclusions, the study makes the following recommendations.

1. The government and university authorities should come up with policies which address the issue of the dress code. Students should dress decently so that they do not fuel sexual harassment.
2. Universities, Governments and corporates should come up with financial assistance to students such as bursaries and scholarships so that students from poor family backgrounds cannot become victims of sexual harassment.
3. In university there should be strong campaigns so that the students are encouraged to report cases of sexual harassment.
4. In addition to their well-defined structures to report cases of sexual harassment, the universities should have toll free numbers and the numbers should be displayed in most of the places in campuses so as to encourage the students to report sexual harassment of students.
5. The modules which cover topics on sexual harassment should be mandatory across all universities in Zimbabwe so as to make students aware of sexual harassment issues.
6. The universities should have strong partnerships with law enforcement agents so as to deal with the issues of sexual harassment of students.

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