

Article

Experience of sexual harassment at work by female employees in a Nigerian work environment

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Among the prominent issues bothering on the work experience of female employees is that of sexual harassment at work. This paper is an empirical study on this issue. The study seeks to uncover perceived experience of sexual harassment among female employees in a Nigerian work setting. Questionnaire was the main research instrument adopted to gather important data for the study. It found that majority of the respondents have experienced sexual harassment of one kind or the other usually from their male superiors. Socio-cultural factors dictated their varying responses ranging from concealment due to fear of shame to ignorance of channel of legal redress. Suggestions are made towards improving enlightenment campaign to female workers on their rights to legal redress if they were sexually harassed by their male boss, the formation of Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) to protect rights of female workers and the active involvement of trade unions in efforts meant to reduce the incidence of sexual harassment at the workplace.

Key Words: Female Workers; Gender Inequality; Patriarchy; Sexual Harassment; Society.

INTRODUCTION

The bulk of discussions about gender inequalities at work focus on various ways in which female workers are unnecessarily underprivileged in the workplace in terms of low pay, lower status job, restriction from certain jobs as well as confinement to sex-type jobs (Mackinon, 1979; Schaefer, 1989; Haralambos and Holborn, 2000). However, while these aspects are important, the issue of sexual harassment at work seems to attract little attention. Many reasons could be attributed to this situation, first among which is the socio-cultural constraints which restrict discussion about sex in many societies. Closely related to the above factor is the refusal of most victims of sexual harassment to freely discuss or even disclose their experience. In addition, many of the victims are also constrained to report their experience for fear of further discrimination.

According to Stanko (1988), sexual harassment is, unwanted sexual attention. Its behavioural forms are many and include visual (leering), verbal, (sexual teasing, jokes, comments or questions); unwanted pressures for sexual favour or date; unwanted touching or pinching, unwanted pressures for sexual favours; with implied threats of job-related consequences for non-co-operation; physical assault; sexual assault; rape.

Stanko (1988) went further to argue that men back up these types of harassment with their power within organi-

zations. This is because men are usually concentrated at the higher status in the organization where they can hire and fire women employees as they like. The male managers can also take punitive action against these women if they complain. Sexual harassment is also defined as repeated sexual advances, remarks or behaviours that are offensive to the recipient and cause discomfort or interference with job performance.

Sheffield (1987) defined sexual harassment as, any deliberate, repeated or unwelcome verbal comments, gestures, or physical contacts of a sexual nature (p.180). The emphasis here is on deliberate and unwelcome actions which is intended to place the other in an embarrassing situation and not desired by the recipient. Generally, both men and women are potential targets of harassment.

Reskin and Padavic (1994) pointed out that because sexual pressures are typically initiated by those in superior positions against the less powerful, women are more likely than men to be the objects of unwanted attention, especially in the workplace. They further contended that power imbalances facilitate harassment even though women can and do sexually harass subordinates because men usually hold positions of authority, it is most common for men to harass women. The United States courts have identified two types of sexual harassment.

One is 'quid pro quo' in which a supervisor demands sexual acts from a worker as a job condition, or promises of work-related benefits in exchange for sexual acts. The other is the 'hostile work environment' in which a pattern of sexual language, lewd posters, or sexual advances makes a worker so uncomfortable that it is difficult for her to do her job (Reskin and Padevic, 1994).

In the developed countries especially the United States and the United Kingdom, there is a high level of awareness of the problem of sexual harassment and women willingness to report it. However, despite this high level of awareness, scholars have observed that the great majority of women who are abused by behaviour that fits legal definition of sexual harassment and who are traumatized by the experience do not regard what has happened to them as sexual harassment (Paludi and Barickman, 1991).

Ginffre and Williams (1994) have provided some explanations on the reluctance of women to report their experience of sexual harassment in their workplace. According to them, these include that, many still do not recognize that sexual harassment is an actionable offence; victims may be reluctant to come forward with complaints fearing they will not be believed, that their charges will not be taken seriously or that they will be subjected to reprisal; it may be difficult to differentiate between harassment and joking on the job.

Walby (1986) regards workplace sexual harassment as a form of male violence against women. Others in this category include rape, sexual assault, wife beating and child sexual abuse. Like other feminists, she sees violence as a form of power over women. In this way, the use of violence or the threat of violence helps to keep women in their place and discourage them from challenging male dominance of the society. In the broadest sense, feminists regard sexual violence as a means of reinforcing male power (Russell, 1984; Sheffield, 1987). However, from the men's point of view, sexual violence is often perceived as a necessary display of "real masculinity" in a society where only a 'wimp' would let a woman get "out of control" (Kimmel, 1989).

Sociological focus on sexual violence is therefore as an expression of power and control rather than on the sexual aspect. Sexual violence is a learnt behaviour rather than being a result of uncontrollable hormonal influences. Most studies of convicted rapists have shown that their primary motives are anger against women and a need to assert their superiority. Again, many of these men themselves had been victims of violence in their own childhood.

Husband (1992) argues that the meaning of sexual harassment is socially constructed depending on the personal and situational characteristics of the individual making the judgement. He argues further that behaviour is likely to be labeled harassment when there are physical advances, unequal power relation, elicits negative response and is being perceived as being inappro-

priate.

Fitzgerald (1993) developed the sexual experienced questionnaire (SEQ), which measures five types of harassment: gender harassment, seductive behaviour, sexual bribery sexual coercion and sexual imposition. Out of the five categories, seductive behaviour and sexual imposition receive the highest ratings.

Domestic violence has been classified as the most common form of violence against women. It has also been acknowledged that in recent years there are very serious problems with domestic violence. Surveys in some countries have found that more than a third of women surveyed indicated that they are being beaten by their partners (Heise, 1993). However the problem has been discovered to be more serious as those who suffer domestic violence are reluctant to report the abuse.

Apart from the violence against women at the domestic level, women also face violence in other spheres of life, which is as serious as that experienced at the home front. For instance, an estimate made by a US Senate Judicial Committee suggests that at least one woman in five in the United States will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime. Rape and sexual abuse are now known to be more common than the case a few years ago. Generally, a high proportion of those who perpetuate the act are known to their victims while a considerable proportion of the victims are 15 years of age or under (Heise, 1993).

The problem

Women occupy a very strategic position in the society by their reproductive, socialization and emotional roles. In addition to these roles, women also play an important economic role both within the family and the society at large. Women perform several domestic activities meant to cater for the well-being of the family. Many women also combine these home-works with paid job. Paid employment for women enable them to complement the role of men as breadwinners and in several cases, these women are the sole sources of income for their family. In view of the importance of their economic activities therefore, women require conducive work environment. However, practices like sexual harassment constitute a serious hindrance for women in the workplace. The act not only threatens their job security but also render victims to become social lepers by other workmates. The act would then be seen to hinder the effective contributions of women to the society by limiting their economic potentials at work. Any action which hinders women's income earning capacities is detrimental to the interest of the society. Sexual harassment is therefore a major barrier that limits the possibilities of women to work.

Theoretical framework

Patriarchal capitalism theory views women position in the labour market as a product of both the economic relations

of capitalism and patriarchal gender relations. According to Hartmann (1981) segregation by sex and women's sexual exploitation can be explained only by employing the way patriarchy and capitalism work together to form a system that she called patriarchal capitalism. In this social system, male dominant power is based on their control of female labour in both the family and the labour market. Finally, she argued that sexual segregation in the labour market has served to secure male dominance.

This theory then regards sexual harassment of female workers by their male counterparts as a reflection of the male-dominated society and economic system. The import of this theory would be that so long as a society is organized along the patriarchal system, it would tend to condone acts and practices that are discriminatory towards the Female gender.

Marxists conception of gender relations is largely in terms of exploitation and oppression. Sexual oppression is used to denote the many ways in which women are socially and sexually subordinated because of their gender (Pollert, 1985). This situation is believed to be mediated and reproduced through gender relations between men and women. The sexual division of labour brought by the male dominated sexist ideology further strengthens the pattern of women exploitation. Engels (1970) has argued that while capitalism was "progressive" for women in that it threw them into wage labour, but "progressive" in a contradictory way, since it also intensified their oppression by creating the double burden of economic exploitation and domestic labour. Again, in the same way as the theory of patriarchal capitalism demonstrates the interlink between economic relations and women exploitation at the workplace, Marxist theory of gender relations similarly reflects on the exploitation of women which could manifest in sexual harassment.

Adkins (1995) advanced the sexuality theory of gender that explains the differential experiences of women and men in the labour market based on their sex. The theory acknowledges the centrality of sexuality in the labour market as a factor in the work experience of female workers. She based her theory on the tourism industry, which led her to explore how relations of sexuality are central in constructing women and men as different types of workers. She argues that feminists have concentrated on how women's labour is controlled through their exclusion from jobs and wages or via segregation within jobs. He further asserts that the labour market is more gendered than dual systems approach suggests. The labour market is in this regard not only a site of inequality but also where meanings about gender and sexuality are constructed. He notes that jobs in hotels were gender segregated with positions such as receptionist and housekeepers being performed by women and porters and kitchen assistants by men. She emphasizes that the control of women labour in tourism involves sexuality and the compulsion for women to be what she refers to as "sexual workers". Women and men may do the same job,

but they are different kinds of workers, as women's work involves "sexual servicing".

The Marxist theory of sexual exploitation is adopted to guide the attainment of the present research objectives. This is because principally, sexually harassment seems to be a by-product of the capitalist relations of production with its attendant exploitation of various categories of the workers, in this case, female workers.

Objectives of study

The aim and objectives of the study include, to:

- Investigate forms of experience of sexual harassment as perceived by female employees in the study organization.
- Examine factors in the work environment which encourages or discourages sexual harassment at work.
- Find out relationship between personality factors and experience of sexual harassment by female employees in the study organization.
- Make suggestions for reducing the incidence of sexual harassment and providing workers with more conducive work environment.

Method

110 female employees of the Lagos State Civil Service Commission, Alausa, Ikeja, Nigeria were selected as subjects for the study. These subjects were selected with the use of simple random sampling method.

The questionnaire interview was the main data collection method used for this study. However, this method was complemented with personal interview conducted among the subjects. The statistical method adopted for data analysis was simple percentage distribution and chi-square statistics.

RESULTS

The findings of the study are shown in tables 1-6 below.

Discussion of findings

Tables 1 - 10 below show data on varying aspects of our subjects' experience of sexual harassment in their workplace. Table 1 shows that a large proportions our respondents (43.6 percent) are junior employees, with about 33.4 percent being intermediate staff while only 22.8% are in the senior category. Table 2 reflects that a larger proportion of the respondents engage in religious practice either regularly (60.0 percent) or very regularly (38.2 percent). As shown in table 3, the form of sexual harassment commonly experienced by respondents was sexual advance (41.8 percent) only 18.3% indicated that they experienced sexual enticement in their workplace. 16.41% expressed that they experienced sex related gestures while 14.5% indicated that they experienced

Table 1. Respondents' Job Cadre

Job Cadre	No.	%
Junior staff	48	43.6
Intermediate staff	37	33.6
Senior staff	25	22.8
Total	110	100

Source: Author's Field Work, 2006.

Table 2. Respondents' Frequency of Religious Practice.

Frequency of Religious practice	No.	%
Very regular	42	38.2
Regular	66	60.0
Not regular	02	1.8
Total	110	100

Source: Author's Field Work, 2006.

Table 3, Respondents' view on the type of sexual harassment experienced at the work place.

Forms of sexual harassment	No.	%
Rape	—	—
Sexual advance	46	41.8
Enticement	20	18.3
Intimidation	16	14.5
Sex-related gesture	18	16.4
Total	110	100

Source: Author's Field Work, 2006.

Table 4. Sources of sexual harassment

Source	No.	%
Immediate boss	49	34.5
Workmates	30	27.3
Subordinates	13	11.8
Others	18	16.4
Total	110	100

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2006.

intimidation towards sexual advance from men.

On the sources of sexual harassment, table 4 above shows that the largest proportion of respondents (34.5%) indicated that they experienced sexual harassment from their immediate boss. About 27.3% indicated that their experience of sexual harassment was from their work mates, while 16.4% said such experience was with others like non-workers. 11.8% expressed that they experienced sexual harassment from subordinates. On frequency of experience of sexual harassment, table 5 shows that

Table 5. Respondents' frequency of experience of sexual harassment.

Frequency of sexual harassment	No.	%
Always	28	25.4
Seldom	42	38.2
Not at all	22	20.0
Only once	18	16.4
Total	110	100

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2006.

Table 6. Respondents' Perception of sexual Harassment.

Perception of sexual harassment	No.	%
Very Offensive	30	27.3
Offensive	52	46.2
Normal	10	10.1
Not offensive	18	16.4
Total	110	100

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2006.

about 38.2 percent indicated that they seldom experience sexual harassment, 25.4% said they always experience it while 20.0 percent said they never experienced sexual harassment while 16.4 percent indicated that they experienced it only once.

Table 6 demonstrates that female workers have varying perception or attitude towards sexual harassment. While some regard the act as very offensive (27.3%), others see it as merely offensive (46.2 percent) while some regard it normal (10.1%) and a few saw it as not offensive (16.4%). On the issue of respondents' likely reaction if sexually harassed, it is interesting to note that the largest proportion of the respondents (47.2%) indicated that they would rather shun the abuser rather than report him to either management or workmates or take legal action. A very minimal proportion (3.6%) indicated that they would quit their job if sexually harassed. This finding demonstrates the reality of the work environment in most developing countries including Nigeria in which because of the harsh economic climate, workers are willing to stay put in their job even if they have nasty experience like low pay, poor working condition and sexual harassment. This is not due to factor of job commitment, but rather because it is very difficult to secure another job elsewhere.

Lastly, the result of our tested hypotheses (tables 8 – 10) shows a relationship between respondents' job cadre and experience of sexual harassment. On the other hand, no relationship was found between religious practice and perception of sexual harassment on one hand as well as between respondents perception of sexual harassment and likely response to its experience.

Our finding on the connection between job cadre and experience of sexual harassment agrees with other find-

Table 7. Respondents' likely reaction if sexually harassed

Respondents' likely reaction	No.	%
No response	28	25.5
Report to management	06	5.5
Report to workmates	20	18.2
Shun the abuses	52	47.2
Take legal action	—	—
Quit work	04	3.6
Total	110	100

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2006.

Table 8. Relationship between Respondents' Job Cadre and Experience of Sexual Harassment

Respondents' Job Cadre	Freq. of Experience of Sexual Harass.				Total
	Always	Seldom	Not at all	Only once	
Junior Staff	17	24	04	03	48
Intermediate Staff	07	11	10	09	37
Senior Staff	04	07	08	06	25
Total	28	42	22	18	110

$\chi^2 = 37.8$; N = 110; d.f. = 12; $\chi^2_{0.05} = 21.03$; H_0 rejected

Table 9. Relationship between Respondents' Religious practice and Perception of Sexual Harassment.

Respondents' Religious Practice	Perception of Sexual Harassment				Total
	Highly Offensive	Offensive	Normal	Not Offensive	
Very Regular	06	14	05	15	40
Regular	15	26	11	06	58
Irregular	07	02	02	01	12
Total	28	42	22	18	110

$\chi^2 = 9.64$; N = 110; d.f. = 12; $\chi^2_{0.05} = 21.03$; H_0 is accepted.

findings in the literature which demonstrate that female employees at the lower cadre are often the target of sexual harassment by their superiors (Olutayo, 2000). Yusuf (1998) has also argued that women face discrimination at the workplace right from the point of recruitment throughout their work lives.

The result of the personal interview conducted among some respondents reveal certain interesting findings. For instance, when interviewed, a female employee has this to say on whether she had an experience of sexual harassment in her workplace:

I don't understand fully what you mean by sexual harassment as far as I am concerned, no body has ever demanded for sex from me in order to do a favour. However, I mix freely with my male workmates without molestation or fear of molestation.

Another female employee (a junior staff) said,

Sexual harassment is real in this place. There are rumors and stones around about girls who have been their boss and workmates. However, as far as I am concerned I never experienced such act.

Yet, another employee responded,

I once had an advance from my immediate boss which I politely, rebuffed / declined. Fortunately for me the man is an understanding man and he apologized to me and assured me that he would not victimize me on account of the incident.

According to Gamarnikow and his colleagues (1985), a connection exist among men that the world of work was a man's world where women were only just tolerated. Other

Table 10. Relationship between Perception of Sexual Harassment and response to its likely experience

Respondents' Perception of Sexual Harassment	Response to probable experience of Sexual Harassment.					Total
Highly Offensive	08	03	10	06	03	30
Offensive	04	02	07	38	01	52
Normal	06	01	01	02	-	10
Not Offensive	10	-	02	06	-	18
Total	28	06	20	52	04	110

$\chi^2 = 13.63$; $N = 110$; $d.f. = 20$; $\chi^2_{0.05} = 31.41$; H_0 accepted.

studies support this stereotype (Beynon and Blackburn, 1972, Gluckchic et al., 1976). These studies confirm that women's place is in the house and their responsibility for biological reproduction justified sexual discrimination by employers.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study has brought to the fore the issue of sexual harassment at work with a specific focus on the experience of female workers in a Nigeria work environment. As demonstrated in this study, some female workers experienced sexual harassment in their workplace. These include forms like sexual advancement, enticement with sex, intimidation for sex, as well as sexual related gestures. However no respondent reported having experience of rape. We must also note that the prominent source of sexual harassment is the boss. Most respondents prefer to shun the abuser rather than report or take any other measure. No respondent reported that they are willing to take legal action against the abuser. Majority of respondents who indicated that they experienced sexual harassment are junior workers.

The following are recommended as a way of reducing the incidence of sexual harassment in the Nigerian workplace.

Firstly, management should discourage any negative practice in the workplace including sexual harassment. Secondly, because of their status, female employees should be protected by legislation against such acts. Thirdly, non-governmental organizations interested in women issues should provide forum for female workers to bring forward their complaints whenever they experience sexual harassment and other related discriminatory practices against them. As the study has shown, many women who experience sexual harassment are not willing to report. Such avenue would afford such victims of discriminatory practice to voice their complaints.

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