

Sexual harassment victims in Nigerian universities are being blamed—cyberspace study

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[Sexual harassment](#) encompasses a wide range of inappropriate behavior, from ogling, touching and commenting about body parts, to sexual

proposition, coercion, assault and rape. In other words, it is any form of unsolicited and unwanted sexual attention.

Within the academic environment, there is another dimension too. It is any form of physical or verbal behavior that may tie academic progress to sexual favors. Either staff or students could be victims. It violates the victim's dignity, especially in situations where it [creates an environment of humiliation](#), degradation or hostility.

In Nigeria, sexual harassment is the bane of many students. While it is difficult to put a figure to it, a [2018 World Bank survey](#) said 70% of female graduates from Nigerian tertiary institutions had been sexually harassed in school by their fellow students and lecturers. [A Nigerian study](#) found that 34.2% of the 160 students surveyed said that [sexual violence](#) was the most prevalent form of gender-based violence. There is even a bill which aims to prevent it—the [Sexual Harassment in Tertiary Institutions Prohibition Bill](#)— awaiting presidential assent, passed by the National Assembly.

The effects of sexual harassment may [include](#) loss of self confidence and [self esteem](#), trouble studying or paying attention, and thinking about dropping a class or even leaving the institution.

I'm a scholar of gender, sexuality and communication. I conducted a [study](#) that looked at the perceptions embedded in the online opinion and attitudes of Nigerians towards female victims of sexual harassment.

I analyzed comments uploaded on [Nairaland.com](#), a Nigerian English-language internet forum with over 3 million registered users. These were comments about personal experiences of sexual harassment in Nigerian tertiary education institutions.

The analysis found that the comments contained stereotypical

assumptions and negative attitudes towards victims. Victims of sexual harassment were presented as liars and willing accomplices. The comments suggested that women's behavior instigated the harassment and that they were guilty.

My findings provide insights into the construction of masculinity and femininity in Nigerian cyberspaces. They also show how these spaces reproduce and reconstruct norms about gender and sexuality.

I recommend that education institutions should do more to prevent harassment and to support those who experience it. In addition, a law should be put in place to require institutions to do so.

Comments on Nairaland

The data for my study comprised 500 comments gathered from five selected stories on university sexual harassment downloaded from Nairaland. Nairaland is [the largest Nigerian online forum](#); people post comments there on many topics, ranging from politics to [social issues](#).

Nairaland members cut across different ages, social classes, gender and professions. There are students and lecturers on the forum. Participants can post personal stories as well as stories and news reports from other online forums or news sites. Forum members then deliberate on them.

I chose five stories which generated a lot of comments. Two of the stories were discussions on sexual harassment cases. Three were [personal stories](#) of victims.

My analysis took a descriptive qualitative approach.

In the comments, female victims of sexual harassment were presented as liars who willingly took part in what had happened. The [comments](#)

suggested their actions and what they were wearing had provoked the harassment. Some statements implied that women only claim harassment when they want attention or feel cheated by males. For example:

"The girl is already an ashawo (prostitute) ... she wants to form virgin mary when she is a prostitute already. rubbish ... she is not a virgin so why refuse the lecturer sex. she is just trying to play the victim. "

Some of the commentators said sexual victimization would always occur because men are biologically wired to always want sex. Also, that some female students dressed provocatively, and some were too lazy to pass without favors from their lecturers. Female victims were blamed for putting themselves in a position that made them "harassable"—they were guilty by making themselves available to their harassers.

Negative portrayal of victims

My research also shows how Nigerian society portrays women. The negative and ideological portrayal of the victims stems from a broader perception of women in Nigerian society. It reflects [the patriarchal structure of the society](#), which considers women unequal to men.

Social practices that uphold patriarchy blame females for sexual crimes committed against them by males. Women are seen as flawed and debased, [objects of sexual gratification for men](#).

Men tend to hold powerful and authoritative positions in universities. Since 1960, there have been only [38 women among over 720 vice-chancellors](#) in Nigeria.

The way forward

Sexual harassment can only be curbed if there are measures that encourage early reporting by victims within the university system. Their protection must be guaranteed as this will make them feel safe to report incidents of harassment. In an environment where they are blamed for their own harassment, they are less likely to report it and it is more likely to continue, with negative impacts on individuals' educational progress and health.

Nigerian tertiary institutions should create a gender diversity office that protects the identity of students who report cases of sexual harassment. That way, victims do not have to suffer criticism or stigmatization from society. The University of Ibadan has a [Gender Mainstreaming Office](#) which investigates sexual harassment issues, but it is difficult to gauge its effectiveness. Another, Godfrey Okoye University, [has a similar office](#).

There should be a policy on [sexual harassment](#) in all institutions. Its contents must be widely shared and clear to reflect what constitutes [harassment](#) and what punishment perpetrators can expect to face.

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