

Awareness and prevalence of sexual violence among female undergraduate university students in Ilorin

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Abstract

Sexual violence is any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act unwanted sexual comments or advances or acts to traffic and otherwise directed against a person's sexuality, using coercion by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim in any setting including but not limited to home and work.

The harm caused by sexual violence can last a lifetime and span generations with serious adverse effects on health, education, employment, and on the economic wellbeing of individual families' communities and societies. This study assessed the awareness and prevalence of sexual violence among female students of the University of Ilorin

The study was a descriptive cross sectional survey of female students of full time undergraduate female students in the University of Ilorin, Nigeria. A multistage sampling technique was used to recruit 400 participants from the faculties, departments and level of study.

Ninety three (23.2%) students have experienced sexual violence of which 80 (86%) had between 1 to 3 episodes. Respondents' friend/fellow students were the commonest perpetrators for sexual advances 31 (33.3), unwanted body contacts 52 (56.0), forced to have sex 20 (56.0). The study recommends that school authorities develop/ reinforce policy statement on sexual harassment in schools and establishment of telephone hotlines for counselling and prompt response for vulnerable students.

Keywords: Sexual violence, Gender, Undergraduate, University, Ilorin

Introduction

Sexual violence can be defined as any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act unwanted sexual comments or advances or acts to traffic and otherwise directed against a person's sexuality, using coercion by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim in any setting including but not limited to home and work. Coercion may encompass varying degrees of force blackmail threats; or psychological intimidation.¹ Forced sexual contact can take place at any stage of a woman's life and include a range of behaviours from forcible rape

to non-physical forms of pressure that compels girls and women to engage in sex against their will.²

Sexual harassment in the education system is a burning issue globally.³ Tertiary institutions and universities are by conception, knowledge dissemination centres where knowledge is both brought in and taken out by students as well as teachers and it further inculcate moral values that will influence positive behaviour change to students in the course of training.⁴ Sexual violence is becoming rampant with female students being most at risk which both male students and lecturers take undue advantage to abuse. True incidences of sexual violence are not known because of the fear of stigmatisation, reject, embarrassment among colleagues and society and this

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leads to underestimation of the magnitude of the problem.⁴

The prevention of sexual violence in tertiary institutions should be seen as an educational challenge. The focus is shifting from avoidance of liability to the need to educate students and lecturers on the effect of sexual violence, the myths surrounding it and the role that culture plays in the perception of sexual violence.

Sexual violence is a serious public health and human right problem globally that affects millions of women. It is one of the prevailing grossly underreported social problems globally and Nigeria. Because of their nature, the occurrence and impact of intimate partner violence and sexual violence are frequently 'hidden' resulting in a significant underestimation of the real level of harm caused.⁵ Worldwide, it is estimated that 300 000 women are raped and 3.7 Million women are confronted with unwanted sexual activity annually.⁶ In Africa, sexual violence is not only widespread but also socially acceptable in many settings, this is largely due to the belief that men are superior and that women with whom they are in relationship or contact with are their subordinate.⁷ In Nigeria every woman can expect to be a victim of sexual violence at some point in her life. Girls and women at every stage of their lives are often victims of sexual violence. Current estimates of gender based violence indicates that 8-70% of women worldwide have been physically or sexually assaulted by a male partner at least once in their lives.⁸ In the United States of America nearly 1 in 4 women may have experienced one form of sexual violence at some point in their lives.⁹ Studies from around the world, including Africa, South Asia, Europe and America, have documented that substantial proportions of girls report experiencing sexual harassment and abuse in school and university premises, including classrooms lavatories and dormitories, by peers and by teachers. In the United States of America nearly two-thirds of college students experience sexual harassment.³ In a study done in the United Kingdom on prevalence of sexual harassment in tertiary institution over 68% of respondents have experienced some kind of verbal and non-verbal harassment in and around their institutions, majority of perpetrators were students.¹⁰ In a study done in University of Maiduguri Nigeria among female students 51.3% of respondents reported to have been sexually assaulted.¹¹

Sexual violence is a profound health problem that saps women's energy compromise their physical and mental health, erodes their self-esteem. In addition to causing injury, sexual violence increases a woman's long term risk of developing a number of other health problems including chronic diseases, drug and alcohol abuse, sleep difficulties, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, miscarriages, suicide behaviours, and suicide.⁹

Tertiary institutions are peculiar such that though both males and females are educated at the same environment, the social environments they inhabit differ significantly. Female students are usually the victims of rape sexual assault and harassment on campus and in most institutions nothing is put in place to measure the incidences of these crimes. Sexual violence and harassment in universities has been understood as the exercise of power by specific individuals and has been dealt with via insufficient policies and grievances procedures. Sexual harassment by university lecturers of their female student is a fact of campus life and the silencing thereof is part of the reason for the historical invisibility of the problem.³ The problem of sexual violence is so severe in some universities that it limits women's academic excellence. For example fear of studying in the library at night or even attending seminars because they fear they might be raped or sexually harassed if they venture into campus alone.¹²

The harm caused by sexual violence can last a lifetime and span generations with serious adverse effects on health, education, employment, and on the economic wellbeing of individual families' communities and societies. In spite of the profound consequences of sexual violence in tertiary institutions in Nigeria there are no targeted efforts to reduce the menace. Tertiary institutions have no anti sexual violence policies, no designated security units specialised in combating sexual violence and no telephone hotlines for help. This study assessed the awareness and prevalence of sexual violence among female students of the University of Ilorin

Material and Methods

Study design

The study was a descriptive cross-sectional survey of female students of full time undergraduate female students. In order to obtain uniform academic levels for

all programmes, the 500L and 600L students were excluded. Also excluded were students on suspension of study for any reason.

Setting

The University of Ilorin, sometimes known as Unilorin, is a Federal University in Ilorin, Nigeria. It is located in Ilorin, Kwara State, and north central Nigeria. The Campus currently houses the Faculties of Science, Communication and Information Sciences, Engineering & Technology, Agriculture, Education, Law, Arts, pharmacy, veterinary medicine Business and Social Sciences. The university has a counselling and human development centre. Altogether, there are over 60 academic departments in the existing fourteen faculties. Undergraduate degree programmes run for 3, 4, 5, or 6 years, depending on entry qualifications and discipline. The staff and student populations were 3,040 and 25,084 respectively. The total number of female students in the University of Ilorin is 11,473.¹³

Sample size

Percentage of female students who have experienced sexual violence in a previous study (53.1%),¹¹ degree of accuracy usually set at 0.05, expected response rate of 90%; 400 female students were selected using a four stage random sampling technique based on the faculties, departments and academic levels in the school.

Simple random sampling by balloting of four faculties from the fourteen faculties in the institution. Equal number of 100 female students from each faculty was selected from the calculated sample size of 400. Selection of 4 departments from each faculty using simple random sampling by balloting. Respondents were proportionally allocated based on the total number of female students per departments.

Pretested semi structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data on socio demographic characteristics, awareness, perception, perceived risk factors and knowledge of prevention of sexual violence among female students of the University of Ilorin. A pre-test of the questionnaire using 10% of the sample size equivalent to 44 female students was done at the Al Hikmah University Ilorin.

Statistical methods

The proportion of respondents who correctly answered 5-10 questions on knowledge of sexual violence would be considered good knowledge while respondents who

answer 0-4 questions would be considered poor knowledge. The analysis was done using SPSS frequency table. P value of less than 0.05 was considered significant at 95% confidence level. Informed consent was obtained from the respondents and the nature of study was explained.

Results

Majority of the respondents 371 (92.8%) were between 16-25 years of age. None was less than 16 years and only 3 (0.7%) were above 31 years. A high number 260 (65%) of respondents stays away from home, 389 (97.2%) of the respondents were single. **Table 1.**

Table 1: Distribution of socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristics (N=400)	Frequency	Percentage
Age group in years		
16-20	181	45.3
21-25	190	47.5
26-30	26	6.5
≥31	3	0.7
Mean age(±sd)21.0(±2.8)		
Place of Residence		
Campus Hostel	102	25.5
Private Hostel	158	39.5
Home	140	35.0
Academic Level		
100L	114	28.5
200L	104	26.0
300L	92	23.0
400L	90	22.5
Religion		
Christianity	232	58.0
Islam	168	42.0
Marital Status		
Single	389	97.2
Married	11	2.8
Family Type		
Monogamy	287	71.7
Polygamy	113	28.3

Almost all the respondents 395 (98.8%) were aware of what sexual violence. Majority of the respondents 369 (92.2%) considered being forced to have sex as a form of sexual violence, 267 (66.8%) and 224 (56.0%) agreed that request for sex in return for scores and request for sex in return for money respectively were forms of sexual violence. **Table 2.**

Majority 369 (92.3%) of the respondents were aware that sexual violence is a public health problem in Nigeria. **Table 3.** Many 93(23.2%) of respondents had experienced at least one form of sexual violence in the past. Most 80 (86.0%) of the respondents who have been victims have experienced between one and three forms of sexual violence. **Table 4.**

Table 2: Awareness of respondents on the true definition of sexual violence

Awareness on sexual violence (N= 395)	Frequency (%)
Forced to have sex	369 (92.2)
Request for sex in return of scores	267 (66.8)
Request for sex in return for money	224 (56.0)
Touching one's breast	216 (54.0)
Unwanted kiss	198 (49.5)
Buying a drink for someone	32 (8.0)
Pictures of sexual dealings to encourage one to have sex	195 (48.8)
Unwanted embraces	147 (36.7)
Unwanted comments or talks suggesting initiation of sex	139 (34.7)

Multiple responses

Table 3: Awareness of respondents on sexual violence as a public health problem in Nigeria

Awareness of sexual violence as a public health problem	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	369	92.3
No	31	7.8
Total	400	100

Table 4: Respondents experience and numbers of time of sexual violence

Experience of sexual violence	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	93	23.2
Numbers of times		
1-3	80	86.0
4-6	10	10.8
7-9	3	3.2

Among the respondents who have experienced sexual violence 35 (37.6%) of them have experienced unwanted comments suggesting initiation for sex, another 35(37.6%) have been forced to have sex, 32 (34.4%) have experienced unwanted kiss, 26(28.0%) unwanted

embraces, 26 (28.0%) touching of breast while only 13(13.9%) and 9(9.7%) have been offered money and scores in return for sex respectively. **Table 5.**

Table 5: Forms of sexual violence ever experienced by the respondents

Forms of sexual violence (N=93)	Frequency (%)
Unwanted comments or talks suggesting initiation for sex	35 (37.6)
Forced to have sex	35 (37.6)
Unwanted kiss	32(34.4)
Unwanted embraces	26(28.0)
Touching one's breast	26(28.0)
Pictures of sexual dealings to encourage one to have sex	19(20.4)
Request for sex in return of money	13 (3.3)
Request for sex in return of scores	9(9.7)

Multiple responses

Table 6: Perpetrators and forms of sexual violence experienced by the respondents
N = 93, Frequency (Percentage)

Perpetrators	Sexual advances	Unwanted body contacts	Forced to have sex
Friend/fellow students	31 (33.3)	52 (56.0)	20 (56.0)
Family member/elderly known person	8 (8.7)	1 (1.1)	6 (6.5)
Lecturer	3 (3.2)	1 (1.1)	1 (1.1)
Stranger	6 (6.5)	6 (6.5)	5 (5.4)
Boy friend/Fiancé	0 (0.0)	6 (6.5)	0(0.0)

Multiple responses

Table 7: Age at first sexual violence experience by the respondents
N=93

Age	1-10 Years	11-20 Years	21-30 Years
Forms of sexual violence	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)
Unwanted sexual advances	3(3.2)	47(50.5)	14(15.1)
Unwanted sexual body contacts	9(9.7)	57(61.3)	11(11.8)
Forced to have sex	10 (10.8)	21 (22.6)	2 (2.2)

The commonest form of sexual violence was unwanted sexual body contacts 66(71.2%). Commonest perpetrators of unwanted sexual advances were their friends/fellow students with 31(33.3%) unwanted sexual body contacts 52(56.0%) and 20(21.5%) forced to have sex respectively. **Table 6.** The age at first sexual violence experience between 11-20 years has the highest perpetration of unwanted sexual advances 47(50.5%), unwanted sexual body contacts 57(61.3%) and episodes of being forced to have sex 21(22.6%) respectively. **Table 7.**

Discussion

Most 92.8% of the respondents were within the age group of 16-25 years. A high number 65% of respondents of respondents stay away from home and parental guidance. The age group of the respondents, their single status and their residence away from home is a reflection of a young and sexually active population who are free to experiment relationships especially male searching and dating, all of which are linked to risk taking behaviour with regards to sexual relationships, alcohol and drug consumption, cohabiting before formal marriage, multiple sexual partners etc that are associated with instances of sexual violence among women.

Majority 58% of the respondents were Christians. Most 71.7% were from monogamous homes which agree with the marriage pattern of most Christian homes.

Majority 98.8% were aware of what sexual violence means, which is in keeping with a study done in a tertiary institution in Osun state where 97% of respondents were aware of sexual violence¹⁴ and the study in University of Port Harcourt where there was good knowledge of what sexual violence means.¹⁵

Although majority (92.2%) of respondents were aware that forced sexual intercourse was a form of sexual violence, the awareness of other forms of sexual violence varied. The result shows that though the awareness of sexual violence is high, the respondents were not aware of the complete definition of sexual violence and the continuum of acts that encompasses sexual violence. The implication of this is that an individual may be exposed to a progression of perpetration from attempt to act, which could have been nipped in the bud if identified early and prompt action and help is sought.

The study showed that 23.2% of the respondents have experienced at least one form of sexual violence. Which means approximately one in every five female students had experienced sexual violence. This finding agrees with other studies done in tertiary institutions in Nigeria that show that sexual violence is a common problem among their study population, though the prevalence vary^{11,15}

Majority (86%) of respondents had experienced between one to three forms of sexual violence. This shows that one previous experience of sexual violence is a risk factor for another especially if it is not identified as such by the victim. Most victims were also between the ages of 11-20 years which is within the age group with the highest number of people living with HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases which are some of the consequences of sexual violence.¹⁵

The commonest form of sexual violence experienced by the respondents were unwanted comments or talks suggesting sex (37.6%) and forced to have sex (37.6%). In a study done in Osun State, the commonly reported sexual violence were rape (75%), unwanted physical contact (15%), offer of sex for marks (10%).¹⁴

In the past, it was believed that sexual violence was perpetrated mostly by strangers; recent researches have shown that most perpetrators are acquaintances of the victims which range from friends, lecturers, and fellow students. In a study done in Maiduguri, 75.1% victims were previously acquainted with the perpetrators, boyfriend (33.2%), classmates (14.6%), lecturers (16.1%), strangers (23.9%).¹¹ In this study, among respondents who have experienced sexual violence the highest frequency of perpetrators were friends followed by family members and strangers. These imply that sexual violence is no longer a 'stranger in the bush phenomenon' but are perpetrated mostly by those known to the victims.

Conclusion

The study assessed the awareness and prevalence of sexual violence among female students of the University of Ilorin. The study revealed that although majority of female students of University of Ilorin were aware of what sexual violence means and majority know that forced sexual intercourse is a form of sexual violence, they were not aware of the complete definition and the

various acts that encompass sexual violence. The study also showed that respondents have experienced varying forms of sexual violence and most common perpetrators were acquaintances of the victims. This study calls for the need to address sexual violence in its entirety with a shift from criminal justice perspective to public health perspective. It is also important to educate everyone on the comprehensive definition of sexual violence and the role of every individual in the fight against sexual violence.

Recommendations

The study recommends that school authorities develop/reinforce policy statement on sexual harassment in schools and establishment of telephone hotlines for counselling and prompt response for vulnerable students.

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