

Schooling Silence: Sexual Harassment and its Presence and Perception at Uganda's Universities and Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Although reports indicate that a majority of students in Uganda are sexually abused while in school, sexual harassment and its impact on educational attainment is a rampant yet understudied problem (The Uganda National Strategic Plan on Violence Against Children in Schools, 2015). While harassment in schools by teachers and students is not the only factor leading to high dropout rates among students, the behavior of teachers and students in school, and the lack of discipline towards their actions is an internal contribution to this effect. This study aims to better understand the perceptions on what constitutes "sexual harassment" in Uganda (specifically sexual harassment in schools), if this conversational definition matches up with what the legal definition currently is, and to also assess the effectiveness of reporting systems on sexual harassment and what can be done to improve what is currently inefficient. Through focus groups with secondary school students and university students (n=13), as well as key informant interviews (n=10), participants were asked how they defined sexual harassment, how they came to know about it, and the barriers they saw to speaking up about it. Findings indicate that though the perceptions and definitions of sexual harassment are varied, young people perceive this to be a problem of great concern in schools. Despite this perception, schools themselves effectively foster a culture of silence around the topic of sexual harassment, ultimately resulting in ineffective reporting procedures and an environment that shames and mentally disturbs survivors. Recommendations include comprehensive anti-sexual harassment education mechanisms and creation of distinct anti-sexual harassment policies that separate this action from other forms of "bad behavior" that violate schools' codes of conduct.

METHODS

I used a qualitative approach to best understand the language and responsiveness that students had on the topic of sexual harassment. This research was approved by an LRB before I began. Consent and minor assent forms were obtained for all participants.
Focus Groups: 13 focus groups were conducted with 6-10 students each. 6 focus groups were at a secondary school outside of Kampala, and 7 were at Makerere University. Focus groups were separated by gender. In total, I spoke to 50 university students, and 47 secondary school students.
Surveys: Surveys were distributed to all focus group participants to provide information that they did not feel comfortable sharing with the group. I received 72 complete surveys.
Key Informant Interviews: I conducted 10 key informant interviews with secondary school teachers, university professors, and experts in the field of sexual violence.
Scope: I framed my methodology within the Ugandan Ministry of Education's The National Strategic Plan on Violence Against Children in Schools and the definitions used within this report.

FINDINGS

- Understanding the perceptions**
 - Students had very ranged definitions which came from a very wide range of sources, from peers to media.
 - While most students recognized that women are harassed more, men believed that they were being harassed by women and their way of dress. They believed that their consequent catcalling or harassment was an original effect of the woman's harassment
 - Students identified "sex for marks" and teachers as a major problem in schools.
 - Students believed that because of the widespread knowledge of the problem, that those who were violated should have known better than to to put themselves in these situations
 - 71% of students surveyed in this study thought that sexual harassment was "extremely common" in their school.
- Understanding that sexual harassment is a problem**
 - Regardless of their definition, all student believed that sexual harassment as they defined it was a problem, and a common one at that.
 - Many students used the language "psychological torture" to explain the psychological impact, and could identify mental health effects
 - Students identified sexual harassment as a barrier to education through teen pregnancy, STIs, mental health, and fear.
- The barriers to reporting**
 - I did a mapping exercise using the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) method with students, in figure 2.1, to track their barriers to reporting.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

- To better understand the perceptions on what constitutes "sexual harassment" in Uganda (specifically sexual harassment in schools) and if this conversational definition matches up with what the legal definition currently is.
- To study the effects of sexual harassment by teachers and fellow students on educational attainment in Uganda, particularly that of girls.
- To assess the effectiveness of reporting systems on sexual harassment and what can be done to improve what is currently inefficient.
- To compile recommendations on how to develop the assessed reporting systems based on the data received regarding perception of harassment and the barriers students face in reporting sexual harassment or sexual violence.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I compiled a list of recommendations for the schools that I visited to develop sexual harassment policies. There are no secondary schools in Uganda with sexual harassment policies and very few universities have strong ones.

- Comprehensive Education – the sheer number of sources that students got their education on sexual harassment from leads to misinformation about their rights, so at the very least schools should make an effort to develop even a simple education model about what sexual violence is and how to engage with others healthily.
- A Separate Sexual Harassment Policy – schools lump "sexual harassment" in as a behavior equivalent with cutting class on school codes of conduct. I recommend that they develop a separate policy, even if they keep the same consequences, as not to conflate this behavior with other minor things.
- Media Education – schools should use media education and videos if they have the capability to display these lessons
- Student Behavior Survey – in order to track harassment and progress on combatting it, school should mirror the Youth Risk Behavior Survey in the US.

Table 1.1 How students in Uganda define sexual harassment

"Being dragged into something intimate but you don't like it." -Secondary School, Female	"Apart from the sex part of it, to me, I think it's any advances towards sex." -University, Female
"Abusing sexual rights [with] nonconsensual sex." -Secondary School, Female	"Unwanted and unwelcome sexual advances towards any gender." -University, Female
"Forcing someone into sexual intercourse – one of two persons does not want." -Secondary School, Female	"Forced sex – you're forced, you had no intention of having sex with this person." -University, Female
"Trying to forcefully engage someone in a sexual act without consent." -Secondary School, Female	"Unconsented sex. You've not consented to the sex. The real sex is a mutual agreement between two parties." -University, Female
"A man taking advantage of what a woman wants." -Secondary School, Female	"Refers to a physical or a non-physical, a sexual non-physical, way of reacting to someone who is not okay with it." -University, Female
When a "person [is] not willing to have sex – forced into it." -Secondary School, Male	"Being sexual harassment it means you have not agreed to that action." -University, Male
"Forced into a sexual act... not on his or her will." -Secondary School, Male	"Harassment must be the feeling you have not intended, not wanted." -University, Male
"Forceful relationship." -Secondary School, Male	"You're not willing." -University, Male
"Forced into unwanted intercourse." -Secondary School, Male	

Table 1.2 What behaviors students in Uganda think are sexual harassment

When someone is "calling at women who dress badly. They rape you" -Secondary School, Female	"Many forms – like blocking someone's way as someone is moving, persistently asking for debts..." -University, Female
"Rape, defilement" -Secondary School, Female	"To some extent, these girls also harass because they need marks, [so they] try to seduce [their teachers]" -University, Female
"Bad touches" -Secondary School, Female	"Can include the following...for example at campus here, it is mostly the lecturers who have the authority here. You are forcing someone to have a relationship with you and you give conditions. Maybe it is a boy. You also force him or her to have a relationship with you" -University, Male
"Rape, defilement, boys disturbing girls, bad touching" -Secondary School, Male	"There are also things that are not physical ie. Sneering at someone, a lady, calling at her certain things" -University, Male
"Uncomfortable gestures or words" -Secondary School, Male	
"Indecent dressing" -Secondary School, Male	
Sexual harassment can also be in "writing and verbal" -Secondary School, Male	

Table 2.1 Student Recommendations for Anti-Sexual Harassment Policies

"Tell [students] about their rights." -Secondary School, Female	"Education should start from these young kids, sex education ... [we should] train kids with sex education." -University, Female
"[We need to] form up organizations that speak about [sexual harassment]." -Secondary School, Female	"Always have sessions reminding our rights as students." -University, Female
"Teachers should become more free with students. [Right now] it's very formal." -Secondary School, Male	"Strict measures have to be taken against sexual harassment because it is something that is not welcome." -University, Female
"Keep anonymous reporting." -Secondary School, Male	"[The university should have] regular seminars...and maybe conferences...and interactive platforms so we can share [our input on sexual harassment]." -University, Male
"Parents should support children and their safety." -Secondary School, Male	"[The University should organize] a campaign which can make aware the students of their own rights." -University, Male
"Perpetrators should be heavily punished as examples." -Secondary School, Male	"[There should be] guidance and counseling maybe with the students, telling them their rights, how harassment takes place." -University, Male
There should be "guidance and counseling to students to inform them about sexual harassment." -Secondary School, Male	
Schools should "[sensitize] people about effects of sexual harassment." -Secondary School, Male	
"School should conduct research of students about sexual harassment." -Secondary School, Male	

