# 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, it was examined 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 have not fostered a culture of silence around the topic of 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 and age. 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 about sexual harassment without discussing the group. 1,720 total responses were returned.

**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 Uganda Ministry of Education’s The National Strategic Plan on Violence Against Children in Schools and the definitions used within this report.

## FINDINGS

1. **Understanding the perceptions**
   - Students had very different definitions which came from a very wide range of sources, from peers to media.
   - While most students recognized that women are harassed more, more boys believed that they were being harassed by women and their way of dress. They believed that for frequent calling 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 problems that they were violating should have known better than to put themselves in these situations.
   - 71% of students surveyed in this study thought that sexual harassment was “extremely common” in their school.

2. **Understanding that sexual harassment is a problem**
   - Regardless of their definition, all student believed that sexual harassment was as 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 teenage pregnancy, STIs, mental health, and fear.

3. **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.

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### Table 1.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Type of School</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Secondary School, Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Help students who have been sexually harassed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Secondary School, Male</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Encourage students to report sexual harassment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Table 1.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Type of School</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>Secondary School, Female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Provide counseling services for survivors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>Secondary School, Male</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Implement a zero-tolerance policy against sexual harassment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Figure 2.1

A map of barriers to reporting sexual harassment for secondary school girls.

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### Conclusion

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.

1. **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.
2. **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 confuse this behavior with other minor things.
3. **Media Education** – schools should use media education and videos if they have the capability to display these lessons.
4. **Student Behavior Survey** – in order to track harassment and progress on combating it, school should mirror the Youth Risk Behavior Survey in the US.

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### References

- The Uganda National Strategic Plan on Violence Against Children in Schools, 2015.

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<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Type of School</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2024</td>
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<td>Train teachers in recognizing and responding to signs of sexual harassment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2025</td>
<td>Secondary School, Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Establish a clear and accessible reporting system.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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### Figure 2.2

A chart showing the reporting structure of secondary school girls.

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### Table 2.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Type of School</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2026</td>
<td>Secondary School, Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Encourage parents to support their children’s rights.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2027</td>
<td>Secondary School, Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Implement a system that allows for anonymous reporting.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Figure 2.3

A diagram showing the pathways for reporting sexual harassment by secondary school girls.