



# Sexual Harassment Experiences and Its Mental Health Consequences among Female Undergraduates: A Case of Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Nigeria

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## **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Introduction:** Sexual harassment is described as unwanted sexual advances, forceful requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conducts of a sexual nature. It is a global threat. This study assessed the sexual harassment knowledge, experiences, factors and its mental health consequences among female undergraduates of Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu Alike Ikwo Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

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**Methods:** A descriptive cross sectional study design was done using semi-structured questionnaires. Multistage sampling was used in selection of 400 students that gave consent for the study. Ethical consideration was dully observed. Analysis were done using the IBM SPSS version 25. The data were presented in tables. Chi square test was used to ascertain association between socio-demographic factors and experience of sexual harassments at significant level of  $p < 0.05$

**Results:** A total of 397 (99.3%) students have heard of sexual harassment. Commonest sources of information were Mass media 329 (82.3%) and social media 328 (82.0%). Majority 260 (65%) have been sexually harassed especially by their casual partners (e.g male friends) and 90 (29.5%) by their lecturers 79 (24.6%). Most sexual harassment 134 (42.5%) occurred during visit to perpetrator with 97 (30.8%) out of violence/force and 69 (21.7%) in course of seeking favour. Common forms of harassment encountered include; 282 (88.1%) deliberate touching and cornering, 269 (82.8%) fondling/grabbing of sensitive body part and 270 (81.8%) actual/attempted rape. Significant Mental health effect include; worries 153 (48.4%), frightened or nervous 77 (24.3%), thought disorder and delusions 71 (22.5%) and phobia 64 (20.3%). There was statistically significant association for marital status for what ( $\chi^2 = 16.987, p < 0.001$ ) though not a predictor.

**Conclusion:** Sexual harassment was high among the female students with residual mental health consequences. It portends danger and should not be trivialized nor dismissed as it emboldens the perpetrators. All stakeholders should lend effort and support to tame this ugly tide.

**Keywords:** Sexual harassment; mental health; fondling; grabbing.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is a global issue. It abounds in higher educational institutions and many workplaces. Sexual harassment in universities and other higher education institutions is not limited to Africa (Prevalence, 2019). The term sexual harassment is not used uniformly across the globe because countries have defined it differently (Janice, 2015). Like most social constructs, sexual harassment is not easy to define, nor does it involve a homogenous set of behaviors. Consequently, prevalence of sexual harassment in educational institutions varies across cultures.

Public awareness on it has increased over the years as it has been receiving considerable attention in research and the media. Sexual harassment provisions can be found in criminal codes, labor codes, health and safety legislation, anti-discrimination and equal opportunity laws, as well as education and licensing statutes (Prevalence, 2019). Some countries, such as Australia, United States and United Kingdom have legislation/policies that specifically prohibit sexual harassment in educational institutions while other countries have sexual harassment legislation that do not include educational institutions (Janice, 2015).

In spite of sexual harassment being an issue that violates constitutions of many countries, it remains an active problem everywhere globally

in workspaces and in institutions of higher learning (Minnotte and Legerski, 2019). Some researchers have described sexual harassment as 'a chronic occupational health problem, denoting the fact that the phenomenon is widespread globally (Quick and McFadyen 2017). According to the UN Women in 2019, one in approximately 33% of women globally are exposed to physical or sexual violence. The study also noted that nine out of ten countries globally have laws against sexual harassment in general. However, six out of ten countries globally lacked adequate laws against sexual harassment in higher learning institutions and schools. The study further argues that certain groups in society that are already marginalized have a higher risk of being sexually harassed. In the context of the European Union these groups include students who are race typed as non-white, or students with functional disabilities and those who are lesbian or bisexual (Fredrik and Maja 2020).

A research reported that sexual harassment in educational institutions is higher in countries with weak educational systems, low levels of accountability, high levels of poverty and gender inequality (Omolola, 2007). Also, it is more prevalent in institutions where educators are poorly trained, underpaid and severely under sourced (Australia Human Rights Commission 2012). An European Union (EU) wide survey undertaken by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) found that sexual harassment was the

most prevalent form of violence against girls and women, across the 28 EU member states. An estimated 83 to 102 million women (45 to 55 per cent in the Member States) had experienced sexual harassment since the age of 15. In year 2015, above 5,500 sexual offences were recorded in United Kingdom schools over a three-year period, including 600 rapes (Magalhaes, 2015). Same study reported that 59% of girls and young women aged 13–21 years faced some form of sexual harassment at school or college in the past year; 22% of young girls aged 7–12 have experienced jokes of a sexual nature from boys (Magalhaes, 2015).

A study found that in Ghana, both the traditional and contra power forms of sexual harassment are prevalent in public universities and professional institutions (Norman, Aikins, and Binka 2012). The study reported that women are 61% more likely than men (39%) to be sexually harassed in medical schools in Ghana. In Zimbabwe, lecturers sexually exploit students (Dhlomo et al. 2012). Sexual harassment in these institutions are tolerated because most of the victims engage in transactional sex with male professors because of the economic pressure to afford university fees (Dhlomo et al. 2012, Beninger 2013). In South Africa, a case study in a higher education institution revealed that 17.3% of the male and 25.5% of the female respondents had personally experienced unwanted touching, 1.3% male and 2.7% female students have been raped while 10.8% of the males and 10.2% of the females had been coerced to comply with a sexual relationship on campus. The study further revealed that both male and female students on campus have experienced different forms of sexual harassment causing the victims to be aggressive towards the opposite sex (Koss et al., 1987).

A study in Edo state, Nigeria reported that the majority of the respondents agreed that sexual harassment is prevalent in these institutions (Omonijo et al. 2013). In Anambra State of Nigeria, 64 percent of the participants had been touched inappropriately by a faculty member, 71 percent had experienced inappropriate gestures directed to them and 80 percent had inappropriate jokes told in front of them (Okeke 2022). A study in three faith-based private universities in the Ogun-State, South-West Nigeria found that the majority of female students experienced sexual harassment on campus, but many did not report it to the institutions (Jason et al. 2011). Similarly, a study in five higher

education institutions in South West, Nigeria involving 2500 students revealed that 97 percent of the respondents were aware of incidences of sexual harassment and of these 98.8 percent were male lecturers sexually harassing female students. The respondents also reported that poverty (55%), provocative dressing (20%), and lust from the male lecturers (12%) were the main reasons for sexual harassment in these institutions (George 1999). Another study enumerated motivation for perpetuation of sexual harassment to include: lust, pursuit of happiness, lack of norm of morality, lack of conscience, pursuit of pleasure, lack of temperance, passion, habit, value, personality disorder, inferiority complex, immaturity, cheapness, abuse of power, and suffering from demonology (Ogunbameru, 2006).

According to a researcher, Sexual harassment has been theorized as a stressor with consequences for the physical and mental health of its targets. A longitudinal survey data from the Youth Development Study, combined with in-depth interviews, confirmed that sexual harassment is a stressor that is associated with increased depressive symptoms (Nwaogwugwu, 2007). A study in Malibu on Sexual harassments, bullying, and school Outcomes for High School girls and boys revealed that sexual harassment was a stronger predictor than bullying of all school outcomes for both sexes especially for girls. This study suggested that sexual harassment, which activates sexist and heterosexist stereotypes, erodes school engagement, alienates students from teachers, and adversely affects academic achievement, to a greater degree than bullying does (CEDAW Shadow Report 2008). To many persons, sexual harassment although inappropriate, is ultimately harmless and does not have a long term impact on the victim. However, the reality is that sexual harassment is dangerous to mental health and has physical effects as well. Victims of sexual harassment may be suffering silently while the perpetrators have no idea of the damage that their behavior has caused (Geidam et al., 2010).

Effects of sexual harassment on women students' access to opportunities and facilities: a case study in the University of Nairobi, Kenya revealed that fear instilled by occurrences of sexual harassment, intimidation and sexual favors make it challenging for some women students to access supplementary sources of income, halls of residence, library and catering facilities (Ekwueme 2020). By extension, sexual

harassment negatively impacts on the national productivity and economic development due to poorly skilled employees who creates problems for the labour market. It has been observed that those who have been harassed before may react more negatively to harassment than first-time targets because past experience diminishes one's ability to cope.

Based on these, this study aimed to assess the perception on sexual harassment, prevalence, types, perpetrators, consequences (mental health effect), as well as circumstances leading to occurrence of sexual harassment among female students of Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu Alike Ikwo Ebonyi State.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1 Study Site

The study site was at Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu Alike Ikwo, Ebonyi State. The School is located in Ikwo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State South East Nigeria. The institution formerly Federal University Ndufu-Alike Ikwo (FUNAI) was established by the Federal Government on February 26th, 2011. It however, started academic activities on 5th November, 2012. It also has 41 academic departments and 57 programmes, with over 10, 000 and 2, 230 students and staff population respectively. It has eleven faculties namely; Agriculture, Basic Medical Sciences, Biological Science, Education, Engineering and Technology, Environmental Science, Humanities, Management Sciences, Law, Social Sciences and Physical Sciences (Glen S).

### 2.2 Study Design

A descriptive cross sectional study design was used in this research to assess the perception of sexual harassment, prevalence, types, perpetrators, consequences as well as places of occurrence of sexual harassment among female students of Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu Alike Ikwo Ebonyi State.

### 2.3 Study Population

Female students of Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu Alike Ikwo Ebonyi State were studied. Student who were absent in school at the day of collection of data were excluded.

### 2.4 Sample Size

This was determined using single formula for descriptive studies  $N = Z^2 pq / d^2$  (Fayankinnu 2004). Prevalence (p) was 55.3% from previous study (Duru et al. 2018) using a marginal error (d) of 5% critical value a confidence level (z) of 95%. the sample size was 400 female students.

### 2.5 Sampling Technique

The study involved the use of a multistage sampling technique. Stage 1. The university has 11 Faculties out of which 3 faculties were selected by balloting. Stage 2 involved the selection of departments from each faculty selected using balloting, Stage 3 respondents who met the inclusion criteria were selected by proportionally allocating an equitable number of students to departments, levels of study and consecutively recruiting the students studied.

### 2.6 Data Collection Tool and Method

A semi-structured self-administered questionnaire was used. The questionnaire was validated by pretesting it at Ebonyi State University among 40 participants. After pretesting errors and omissions were corrected. Significant and no significant was based if it is very frequent or severe enough to affect the persons activity or rest. The final tool was used for data collection. The sharing of the questionnaire was done, with the assistance of a qualified Research Assistant from the University of Study. The respondents were reminded not to indicate their name or any means of identity so that no one could be traced or linked with any response, and that was done to facilitate sincere response from participants.

### 2.7 Data Management

All the administered questionnaires were checked one by one for completeness and accuracy. Serial numbers were assigned to each question for easy identification and for correct data entry and analysis. Analysis were done using the IBM SPSS version 25. The data were summarized using frequency and percentages. It was presented in tables. Chi square test was used to ascertain association between socio-demographic factors and experience of sexual harassments. The results were considered significant if  $p < 0.05$ .

### 3. RESULTS

Table 1 shows characteristics of respondents. Majority of the respondents were within the age category 18-28 years 376 (94.0%). About 373 (93.3%) were single. Most 386 (96.5%) respondents were Christian and 362 (90.5%) of Igbo tribe. About 112 (28.0%) were 100 level students, 86 (21.5%) were 200 level and 87 (21.8%) were 300 level. Most 223 (55.5%) respondents reported staying in school hostel. Majority 381 (95.3%) agreed to sharing room with somebody.

Table 2 shows response on knowledge and sources of knowledge on sexual harassment. Almost all respondents 397 (99.3%) agreed to have heard about sexual harassment. About 346 (89.4%) reported sexual act without consent as their understanding of sexual harassment, 12 (3.1%) view it as sexual act for favour 28 (7.2%), verbal abuse of sexual nature, while 1 (0.3%) sexual act by family member/relative. The commonest sources of information on sexual harassment were Mass media 329 (82.3%)

followed by social media 328 (82.0%) and least was government (24.2%).

Higher proportion of respondents 369 (93.4%) considered actual/attempted rape, assault or kiss as a form of sexual harassment followed by deliberate touching, cornering 351 (88.9%), forced exposure to pornography 320 (81.0%) and pressure for sexual favours 302 (76.5%).

Table 3 shows experience of sexual harassment. Most respondents 260 (65%) reported to have being sexual harassed. Majority 90 (29.5%) reported being harassed by their casual partners (e.g male friends) followed by 79 (24.6%) by their lecturers, 54 (17.2%) by their colleagues and 14 (4.1%) by their spiritual leader. Most sexual harassment 134 (42.5%) occurred during visit to perpetrator, 97 (30.8%) out of violence/force and 69 (21.7%) in course of seeking favour. Common forms of sexual harassment encountered include 282 (88.1%) deliberate touching and cornering, 269 (82.8%), fondling/grabbing of sensitive body part and 270 (81.8%) actual/attempted rape, assault or kiss 223 (71.5%) forced exposure to pornography and 211 (71.0%) penetration with digits.

**Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics**

Characteristics	Frequency (n= 400)	Percent (%)
<b>Age</b>		
18-28 (2 categories from this)	376	94.0
29-39	24	6.0
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	373	93.3
Married	27	6.8
<b>Religion</b>		
Christianity	386	96.5
Other	14	3.5
<b>Tribe</b>		
Igbo	362	90.5
Other	38	9.5
<b>Level in school</b>		
100 level	112	28.0
200 level	86	21.5
300 level	87	21.8
400 level	83	20.8
500 level	32	8.0
<b>Residence</b>		
School hostel	223	55.8
Off campus	145	36.3
Living with family	32	8.0
<b>Sharing room with someone</b>		
Yes	381	95.3
No	19	4.8

**Table 2. Knowledge of sexual harassment (n=400)**

Variable	Frequency N= 400	Percent (100)
<b>Awareness of sexual harassment</b>		
Yes	397	99.3
No	3	0.8
<b>Knowledge and understanding of sexual harassment</b>		
Sexual act without consent	346	89.4
Sexual act for favour	12	3.1
Verbal abuse of sexual nature	28	7.2
Sexual act by family member/relative	1	0.3
<b>Source of information on sexual harassment (multiple responses encouraged)</b>		
School	210	52.5
Parents	173	43.2
Mass media	329	82.3
Public places	118	29.5
Friends	219	54.7
Seminars/Workshop	131	32.7
Social Media	328	82.0
Health Personnel	140	35.0
Non-Governmental Organisation	139	34.8
Government	97	24.2
<b>Forms of sexual harassment (multiple responses encouraged)</b>		
Sexual remarks, jokes, teasing	219 (55.6)	175 (44.4)
Sexual looks, gesture	230 (58.2)	165 (41.8)
Deliberate touching, cornering	351 (88.9)	44 (11.1)
Pressure for sexual favours	302 (76.5)	93 (23.5)
Suggestive letters, calls, materials	172 (43.5)	223 (56.5)
Stalking	231 (58.5)	164 (41.4)
Actual/attempted rape, assault, kiss	369 (93.4)	26 (6.6)
Pressure for dates	172 (43.5)	223 (56.5)
Fondling/grabbing of sensitive body parts	264 (92.2)	31 (7.8)
Forced exposure to pornography	320 (81.0)	75 (19.0)
Penetration with digits	260 (67.0)	128 (33.0)

Table 4 shows response on mental health effect on sexual harassment encountered. Significant Mental health effect include; worries 153 (48.4%), frightened or nervous 77 (24.3%), thought disorder – ideas of reference and delusions 71 (22.5%) and phobia 64 (20.3%). Also 28 (8.9%) suffered post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and 23 (7.3%) personality problems.

Table 5 shows factors that influence or enable sexual harassment. There was statistically significant association for marital status ( $\chi^2 = 16.987$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). It was not a predictor. However, there were no significant for age ( $\chi^2 = 0.703$ ,  $p < 0.402$ ), Religion ( $\chi^2 = 0.067$ ,  $p < 0.795$ ), Tribe ( $\chi^2 = 0.000$ ,  $p < 0.990$ ), Educational level ( $\chi^2 = 6.835$ ,  $p < 0.145$ ), Residence ( $\chi^2 = 0.331$ ,  $p < 0.848$ ), sharing of room ( $\chi^2 = 3.427$ ,  $p < 0.064$ ) and ever heard

about sexual harassment ( $\chi^2 = 0.001$ ,  $p < 0.977$ ).

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The prevalence of sexual harassment was high (65%) far higher than the prevalence found among tertiary institutions in Imo state (15.2%) (Mezie-Okoye and Alamina 2014) and that found in the University of Port Harcourt (46.7%) (Taiwo et al. 2014) all in Nigeria. Awareness of sexual harassment was very high (99.3%). This is in line with result of a study conducted in 5 universities in South West Nigeria that found a high knowledge and awareness of incidences of sexual harassment (97%) (Ogbonnaya 2011). However, this failed to translate to behavioral change, as the practice of sexual harassment is very much still ongoing. In the same light, a

previous study in Ebonyi state revealed 36.7% of female students had experienced sexual harassment (Aditi et al. 2016). This implies that no progress has really been made after 10 years. The high finding in current study may be because it studied sexual harassment from any person and anywhere while most others were harassment from lecturers or the ones that happened in school.

Regarding the perpetrators of the menace, the major perpetrators were casual partners, lecturers and colleagues. This is similar to findings from a university in Osun state, Nigeria where lecturers and casual partners were the major abusers (Ogbonnaya (2011). In most cases, male colleagues were either second to lecturers or the very most prevalent abusers of their female peers (Nwadiani, 2018). This is most likely due to the fact that they have more liberty and freedom among females and as such can easily take advantage to coerce them into sexual acts. A study in Ebonyi State University reported 50.9% of such incidences were

perpetrated by university staff, a little above the percentage accounted for by male colleagues (Schuffer 2000). Men and boys have always been the perpetrators of such sexual harassment. This may be a result of a combination of male dominance, masculinity and moral decadence culminating to uncontrollable lust, and a form of manifestation of unequal power relation and a gender based violence that impacts negatively on human rights (French et al., 1959). Moreover, it has been revealed that lecturers have blamed wearing of revealing dresses by female students for their sexual harassment, arguing that they get them sexually aroused (Nwadiani 2018). This can be explained from the perspective of social power theory which argued that sexual harassers often draw on several bases of power (Popovich and Warren 2010). Based on their social or organizational position; some harassers abuse this "legitimate power" to get away with harassment or believe their higher status gives them the right to sexually harass (Aina-Pelemo et al. 2021).

**Table 3. Experience of sexual harassment (n=400)**

Variable	Frequency N= 400	Percent (100)
<b>Experience of Sexual Harassment</b>		
Yes	260	65
No	140	35
<b>Persons who have committed sexual harassment# (n= 260)</b>		
Casual partner	90	29.5
Lecturers	79	24.6
Colleagues	54	17.2
Relative	51	16.4
Intimate partner	26	8.2
Spiritual Leader	14	4.1
<b>Circumstance of sexual harassment# (n= 260)</b>		
Visit	134	42.5
Violence/force	97	30.8
Seeking favour	69	21.7
Drunk	16	5.0
<b>Forms of sexual harassment encountered before#</b>		
	<b>n(%)</b>	<b>n(%)</b>
Sexual remarks, jokes, teasing	169 (64.9)	91 (35.1)
Sexual looks, gesture	179 (68.8)	81 (31.2)
Deliberate touching, cornering	229 (88.1)	31 (11.9)
Pressure for sexual favours	176 (67.6)	84 (32.4)
Suggestive letters, calls, materials	124 (47.4)	136(52.6)
Stalking	143 (55.0)	117 (45.0)
Actual/attempted rape, assault, kiss	205 (81.8)	55(18.2)
Pressure for dates	119 (38.1)	141 (54.2)
Fondling/grabbing of sensitive body parts	216(82.8)	44 (17.2)
Forced exposure to pornography	186 (71.5)	74 (28.5)
Penetration with digits	185 (71.0)	75 (29.0)

# - Multiple choice

**Table 4. Mental health effect of sexual harassment (n=316)**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Not significant# n(%)</b>	<b>Significant n(%)</b>
<b>Worries</b>		
Whether you tend to worry a lot	163(51.6)	153(48.4)
<b>Anxiety</b>		
Whether you get frightened or nervous	239(75.7)	77(24.3)
Panic attack due to sexual harassment	274(86.7)	42(13.3)
Low level of concentration after the experience	290(91.8)	26(8.1)
Recently feel unhappy or sad	259(82.0)	57 (18.0)
<b>Recent suicidal tendencies</b>		
Felt that life wasn't worth living	283(89.6)	33(10.4)
<b>Present suicidal tendencies</b>		
Do you still think that way	310(98.1)	6(1.9)
<b>Sleep</b>		
Having sleepless night recently	290(91.8)	26 (8.1)
<b>Hypochondriasis</b>		
Worrying about your health or any illness	288(91.0)	28(9.0)
<b>Obsessions/compulsions</b>		
Do you have to check things over and over again; for example, whether you have locked your door	267(84.5)	49(15.5)
<b>Phobias</b>		
Are you afraid of crowds or going out alone or do you have any other fears? (Agoraphobia)	252(79.7)	64 (20.3)
<b>Thought disorder – ideas of reference and delusions</b>		
Do you believe that people talk about you (laugh at you), TV/radio/newspaper referring to you)	245(77.5)	71(22.5)
<b>Psychotic symptoms – auditory symptoms</b>		
What people think or say about you.	304(96.2)	12(3.8)
<b>Alcohol misuse</b>		
Drinking of alcohol too much or having strong desire to drink alcohol every day	304(96.2)	12(3.8)
<b>Drug misuse</b>		
Under drugs not prescribed by a doctor (illicit drugs)	313(99.0)	3(1.0)
<b>Personality problems</b>		
Having psychological/emotional difficulties for a long time.	293(92.7)	23(7.3)
<b>Stressors</b>		
Been in any kind of stress before your problems started	292(92.3)	24(7.7)
<b>Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)</b>		
Did you suffer from nightmares after the stressful event	288(91.1)	28(8.9)

# - None or Not significant

Unfortunately, it is worrisome that only 3.1% considered sex for favour otherwise known as “quid pro quo” as a form of sexual harassment, even though not long ago some Nigerian and Ghanaian lecturers have been convicted for the crime of sex for favours (Eze 2020), Ogunbameru, 2006). The dilemma could be explained by the fact that some female students plagued with academic laxity find it a little easier to seduce male lecturers into the dishonorable

act as a way of getting academic favours in form of grades augmentation and leakage of exam questions. Furthermore, the Nigerian state is razed with economic quagmire culminating to poverty which has also been reported as among major reasons for many females normalizing, initiating or yielding to such sexual advances (Omonijo 2013, Owoaje and Olusola-Taiwo 2010).



**Table 5. Factors that influence or enable sexual harassment (n = 400)**

Characteristics of respondents	Yes(%)	No (%)	χ <sup>2</sup>	p value
<b>Age group (yrs)</b>				
18-28	243(65.4)	133(34.6)	0.703	0.402
29-39	17(73.9)	7(26.1)		
<b>Marital Status</b>				
Single	252(68.6)	121(31.4)	16.987	<0.001*
Married	8(29.6)	19(70.4)		
<b>Religion</b>				
Christianity	251(34.2)	135(34.2)	0.067	0.795
Other	9(69.2)	5(30.8)		
<b>Tribe</b>				
Igbo	235(65.9)	127(34.1)	0.000	0.990
Other	25(65.8)	13(34.2)		
<b>Level in school</b>				
100 level	75(68.2)	37(31.8)	6.835	0.145
200 level	54(64.2)	32(35.8)		
300 level	49(56.8)	38(43.2)		
400 level	62(75.3)	21(24.7)		
500 level	20(61.3)	12(38.7)		
<b>Residence</b>				
School hostel	146(66.0)	77(34.0)	0.331	0.848
Off campus	96(66.7)	49(33.3)		
Leaving with family	19(61.3)	13(38.7)		
<b>Sharing room with someone</b>				
Yes	252(66.8)	129(33.2)	3.427	0.064
No	8(42.9)	11(57.1)		
<b>Ever heard about sexual harassment</b>				
Yes	259(65.9)	138(34.1)	0.001	0.977
No	2(66.7)	1(33.3)		

Sexual harassment could occur anywhere depending on the form it takes, this study found visit as the major circumstance leading to harassment (42.5%), a perpetrator gains total control when he is visited by a female in his place, which provides some form of privacy and dominance against the victim. Sexual harassment occurs in various forms. This study found deliberate touching/cornering as the predominant form of sexual harassment in the institution followed by fondling/grabbing of sensitive body part, actual/attempted rape, assault, and sexual looks/stare. This finding commensurate with that of a study on sexual harassment experiences of female graduates of Nigerian tertiary institutions (2009-2010) which reported that physical touching accounted for the major form of sexual harassment encountered by victims (Okeke 2011). Likewise, the findings in a study among undergraduates in Anambra State of Nigeria revealed that as much as 64 percent of the participants had been touched inappropriately by lecturers and male colleagues (Espelage et al., 2016). With the current trend of

pseudoscientific reports that men who stare at women's breasts are most likely to live longer, it is no surprise that 68.8% of the victims in this study reported sexual stare and suggestive looks as a form of sexual harassment they have experienced (McDonald and Lees-Haley 1995).

Meanwhile 30.8% victims were abused in form of violence and force. This is not surprising especially in an African setting where women are still considered lower in social status and are often objectified as just sexual/birth machines. The objectification of women occurs even in academic settings where some steamy male students and randy lecturers get a false sense of entitlement, that they can take it by force after all no form of investigation and penalty is given to offenders in most cases.

Whereas research on the psychological health effects of sexual harassment were once criticized as "junk science," (Olaigbe and Fagbenro (2021) this research still establishes the presence of severe psychological consequences among

harassed female students in the university. Some of these psychological outcomes of sexual harassment encountered by victims in the university included; worries, anxiety, panic attack, depression, loss of interests, hopelessness, suicidal tendencies, lack of sleep, hypochondriasis, obsessions/compulsions, delusions and fears. This is consistent with the findings of a work that mentioned depression, sleeplessness, fear, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and loss of trust as some of the psychological consequences of sexual harassment (World Federation for Mental Health 2012). Among these psychological consequences, 70.1% and 72.3% of the victims reported to have suffered worry and anxiety. A sexually harassed woman who cannot get justice feels completely hopeless especially when she is continuously tormented by the presence of her abuser. Hopelessness leads to depression, this study found that as much as 68.8% of victims have been recently depressed, with 25.5% severely depressed. Depression is a significant contributor to the global burden of disease and affects people in all communities across the world. As of 2012, depression was estimated to affect 350 million people (WHO 2017). Depression leads to suicide of which this study reported that 24.1% of the abused have thought about suicide and of the 21.4% who have considered suicide, approximately 2% still have relentless suicide plans. This may be another reason for the predominance of depression in the female gender (GBD 2017). Moreover, suicide is the second leading cause of death among those aged 15-29-year (Liu et al. 2013).

The results of American studies suggest that negative cognitive patterns, especially among patients with a history of sexual/emotional abuse episode may trigger the occurrence of negative life events, and thus potentially may increase the risk of depression (Silva and Hill 2005). The mental consequences of sexual harassment are like a cascade, one episode or symptom leads to another more detrimental symptom and worsens their health. From our study, of the 66.8% of victims who experienced delusions, 22.5% still have severe delusions. Delusion fixes false beliefs that conflict with reality in the victim's life. The resultant of which takes toll on the academic performance, social and mental health of the victims and their view on life becomes greatly distorted. The fact is that in Nigeria most if not almost all cases of sexual harassment are trivialized and dismissed. This can be attributed as the major reasons the victims don't find any

meaning reporting the cases to the authority (Ogbonnaya (2011).

Victims undoubtedly are left with this array of psychological symptoms and mental health challenges to deal with alone without treatment or counseling. This is a nightmare to the female gender but an insult to not only the leadership of Nigerian Universities but also the federal government. This possess grave negative effect not only on victim's academic achievement, future sexual relationship particularly in the case of rape (Ogbonnaya 2011) but also on educational and economic growth of the Nigerian community at a long run. Scientifically, it has been established that hopelessness, anxiety, stress, mood disorders and other psychological symptoms lead to a decreased immunity and all of this is inseparably linked with depression (Magalhaes 2015).

In current study, there was an association of age with sexual harassment as females in the age of 18-28 years were more likely to be victims. This is because of the sexual attractiveness of younger females, as well as their vulnerability and active social lives which are important factors in placing them at higher risk for sexual assaults. Additionally, females without a roommate were more likely to be to victims of sexual harassment compared to those with a roommate. This is so because a person without a roommate has more privacy which can be taken advantage of by the perpetrators since no other person would be around to interfere.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The study found high prevalence of sexual harassment among female students which occurred in various forms. The perpetrators of the menace were casual partners, lecturers and colleagues. High proportion of victims have suffered range of mental and psychological stress regardless of the form. Females in the age of 18-28 years were more likely to be victims. Sexual harassment should be seen as a concealed danger and not trivialized nor dismissed as it emboldens the perpetrators. All stakeholders should lend effort and support to tame this ugly tide. Future researchers are needed to explore more on this topic.

## DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models

(ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

## CONSENT AND ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical approval was obtained from Health Research Ethical Committee, University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital, Ituku/Ozalla, Enugu. Permission to carry out the study was obtained from the management of Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu Alike Ikwo Ebonyi State. Informed written consent was obtained from each participant. Voluntary participation and confidentiality were observed.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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