

**WORKPLACE SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN NIGERIA:
A POLICY BRIEF**

BY

STAND TO END RAPE INITIATIVE (STER)

JULY 2021

Executive Summary

In Nigeria, there is an absence of a precise legislative framework that specifically addresses sexual harassment in the workplace. Several Nigerian legislations recognise the prospect of workplace sexual harassment and how this poses challenges to the well-being, productivity and overall welfare of the recipient of unwarranted sexual attention in the world of work. However, this does not suffice to address the issue, and there is a need for proactive legislative action prohibiting and criminalising workplace sexual harassment. Organisations owe employees a safe workplace and need to put in place pragmatic, practical and confidential reporting systems that serve the invaluable purpose of allowing survivors of sexual harassment in their workplaces to make reports when subjected to sexual harassment in the course of their employment. This Policy Brief aims to foster legislative action in Nigeria and demand the ratification and domestication of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190), which is a landmark International Legislation that recognises that all persons are entitled to a workplace free from violence and sexual harassment.

Introduction

Sexual harassment in the workplace is widespread in Nigeria and remains grossly underreported. The absence of legislative action in matters of sexual harassment in the workplace is an unacceptable phenomenon that must be addressed expeditiously. Sexual harassment in the workplace, in all its pervasiveness, is a clear manifestation of discrimination based on sex and gender and has been subject to much debate both at domestic, regional and international levels. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), workplace sexual harassment, which may be physical, verbal, or non-verbal, is always unpleasant to the recipient and is constituted of the following components:

1. Quid pro quo sexual harassment: refers to situations where favourable work conditions, lucrative work packages and job benefits are made conditional to the victim/survivor succumbing to sexual advances or engaging in one or more forms of activity of a sexual nature.¹

2. Hostile work environment: refers to the sexually harassing conduct making the workplace no longer conducive or driving workplace conditions to be intimidating, unbearable or humiliating for the victim/survivor.²

Research Studies

In a Workplace Sexual Harassment Research Study conducted in 2020 by Stand To End Rape Initiative,³ 80% of the 493 Individuals who partook in the research study were women and had faced sexual

¹International Labour Organization, "Sexual Harassment At Work Factsheet" https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms_decl_fs_96_en.pdf accessed 12 July 2021

² ibid

³ Oyesola Oluwafunmilayo Ayeni and Stand to End Rape Initiative (STER) "Examining the Prevalence, Context, and Impact of Workplace Sexual Harassment in Nigeria" (Stand to End Rape Initiative 2021) 3

harassment in their place of work, in contrast to 20% who were men. The emphasis on this contrast is to bring to the fore how women are disproportionately affected by sexual harassment in the workplace in Nigeria and in no way invalidates or dismisses the validity and significance of the male experience. The Research identified a range of behaviours that amounted to sexual harassment. The research study indicates that participants experienced one or several of the following:

- (a) Visual appraisal in a sexual manner (45%),
- (b) Verbal commentary of a sexual nature on their clothing and or accessories (44%),
- (c) Subjected to lewd, sexual jokes and escapades that made them uneasy (43%),
- (d) Commentary that amounts to the sexual objectification of their bodies (35%),
- (e) Subjected to situations where they were regaled with or asked to narrate explicit, risqué or sexual topics they did not want to indulge or divulge (34%); and
- (f) Persistent invitations to outings and requests for sexual intercourse despite prior refusals (27%).⁴

An industry where workplace sexual harassment is rampant is the banking industry. A study conducted in 2014 from 288 participants (142 males and 146 females) across five commercial banks in Nigeria⁵ revealed that only 6.6% of participants subjected to workplace sexual harassment lodged an official complaint, a bare fraction of 4.5% considered taking legal steps, while 8.3% considered quitting their jobs.⁶ In terms of sexual harassment, 84.2% of female participants indicated experiencing physical harassment to 7.7% of male participants. This disparity reinforces the fact that women are disproportionately susceptible and at-risk to workplace sexual harassment.

Additionally, a sector-specific study was conducted amongst legal practitioners in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, between August 2017 and January 2018.⁷ The research study involved anonymous responses from 561 legal practitioners cutting across the Ministry of Justice, Private Law Firms, Law faculties in Universities, Government legal parastatals and the Judiciary.⁸ Statistics revealed that of the entirety of participants, 60.4% identified as female, and 39.6% identified as male. Data revealed that the perpetrators fall within the following positions: Senior Advocate of Nigeria (0.7%), Head of Chambers (15.2%), Associate Counsel (22.6%), Senior Counsel (16.6%), Counsel (28.0%), Senior State Counsel (2.1%), State Counsel (1.4%), Administrative Staff (3.7%), Partner (9.4%) and Judge (0.2%).⁹

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Fapohunda Tinuke, "Gender Differences In Perceptions And Experiences Of Sexual Harassment In The Workplace" (2014) 1(2) *Global Journal of Management and Business* https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343690734_Gender_differences_in_perceptions_and_experiences_of_sexual_harassment_in_the_workplace accessed 22 July 2021.

⁶ Ibid, pp 39-40.

⁷ Aina-Pelemo Adetutu, Mc Mehanathan, Kulshrestha Pradeep and Aina Iseoluwa, "Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Case Study of the Nigerian Legal Sector" (2019) 86, *Journal of Law, Policy and Globalization*, 121 – 137, 10.7176/JLPG/86-13.

⁸ Ibid, pp 124-125.

⁹ Ibid, p 126.

Participants indicated a spectrum of sexually harassing acts they were subject to, such as "unwanted deliberate touching, turning work discussions to sexual topics, asking personal questions on sexual life, sexual comments about the person's clothing or look, to unwanted sexual looks or gestures".¹⁰

These studies bolster the widespread prevalence of workplace sexual harassment and drawback to the problematic legislative dysfunction in Nigeria owing to the absence of a concise law that prohibits workplace sexual harassment. This lacuna poses a challenge to victims/survivors of sexual harassment in the workplace, as they are uncertain about available legal options. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) recognises that everyone has a fundamental right to the dignity of their person and that no one should be subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment.¹¹ Sexual harassment in the workplace amounts to inhuman and degrading treatment that directly impacts the dignity of the victim/survivor, which causes decreased work productivity, fear of intimidation and the risk of unemployment.

International Legislation

International legislation takes prominence in the absence of domestic legislation guiding appropriate sexual conduct in the workplace and prohibiting workplace sexual harassment. At the fore is the International Labour Organization (ILO) Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190), which is the first International Convention to recognise that all persons are entitled to a world of work free from violence and harassment, particularly sexual harassment and gender-based violence.

The Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) defines violence and sexual harassment in the workplace to be "a range of unacceptable behaviours and practices, or threats thereof, whether a single occurrence or repeated, that aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm, and includes gender-based violence and harassment".¹²

The implication of this definition recognises that women are disproportionately affected by sexual harassment in the workplace. Article 1 (b) of the Convention corroborate this and states that "gender-based violence and harassment" means violence and harassment directed at persons because of their sex or gender or affecting persons of a particular sex or gender disproportionately and includes sexual harassment".¹³

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), s34 (1) (a).

¹² Violence and Harassment Convention 2019 (No 190) art 1 para (a).

¹³ Ibid, art 1 para (b).

The Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) came into force on 25 June 2021, and it is expected that Nigeria becomes a signatory to this Convention and ratifies it to domesticate and implement it across all states in Nigeria.

Legislative Intervention on Workplace Sexual Harassment: The Nigerian Situation

As earlier observed, there is no legislation presently in Nigeria that covers workplace sexual harassment. The Labour Act, Cap L1, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004 is the extant legislation guiding employment and work-related matters and makes provisions on employer-employee relations in Nigeria. However, the Labour Act makes no provisions for workplace sexual harassment prevention or response. On its part, the Employee's Compensation Act 2010 recognises that mental stress may arise in the workplace and provides that an employer is bound to pay compensation to an employee for mental stress that is "an acute reaction to a sudden and unexpected traumatic event arising out of or in the course of the employee's employment".¹⁴ While not being precise, the courts can interpret this provision in numerous ways, one of which is compensation for sexual harassment in the workplace.

However, this does not mean that sexual harassment in the workplace is a novel or new concept to the Nigerian legal system.

The Criminal Law of Lagos State recognises sexual harassment as a crime liable to three (3) years imprisonment upon conviction.¹⁵ It considers that sexual harassment creates an offensive, hostile and intimidating workplace when assented to or rejected.¹⁶ On its part, the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) 2015, whilst being a laudable law recognising the concept of sexual harassment, unfortunately, makes no decisive provision protecting against or criminalising workplace sexual harassment. The VAPP Act 2015 defines sexual harassment as "unwanted conduct of a sexual nature or other conduct based on sex or gender that is persistent or serious and demeans, humiliates or creates a *hostile or intimidating environment*. This may include physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct."¹⁷ This definition covers elements of workplace sexual harassment as sexual harassment creates a hostile work environment, and its victims/survivors have reduced job satisfaction and output. Additionally, the VAPP Act 2015 recognises that attempting to demand or requiring sexual intercourse in exchange for employment is sexual intimidation.¹⁸ Beyond these, the VAPP Act 2015 makes no further allusions to workplace sexual harassment.

¹⁴ Employee's Compensation Act 2010, s 8.

¹⁵ Criminal Law of Lagos State 2011, s264.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015, s46.

¹⁸ Ibid.

The only seeming legal recourse to victims/survivors of workplace sexual harassment is found in the Nigerian Judicial System, specifically, the National Industrial Court of Nigeria. Under the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended), the National Industrial Court has jurisdiction to sit on employment and workplace conditions, industrial relations, and labour law in Nigeria.¹⁹ This jurisdiction is equally reiterated in Section 7 of the National Industrial Court Act, 2006.

The National Industrial Court of Nigeria Civil Procedure Rules of 2017 attempts to fill the legal void on sexual harassment in the world of work and makes provision for categories of conduct/behaviour that constitute sexual harassment in the workplace. Order 14 Rule 1 (1) (a) – (d) provides as follows:

1. (1) Where in an action before the Court, a Claimant alleges sexual harassment at the workplace, the Claimant or the Claimant's counsel may in the complaint, indicate whether the sexual harassment is:

- (a) Physical conduct of a sexual nature
- (b) A verbal form of sexual harassment
- (c) A non-verbal form of sexual harassment
- (d) Quid pro quo harassment.

Further, the National Industrial Court, by virtue of the powers conferred on it by the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended), has jurisdictional powers to adjudicate on matters connected with or about the application of any international convention, treaty or protocol of which Nigeria has ratified relating to labour, employment, workplace and industrial relations matters.²⁰

For this reason, Nigeria must ratify the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190). A ratification by the Nigerian Government reinforces Nigeria's international stance as a progressive Nation. It is an avenue to effectively address the widespread epidemic of workplace sexual harassment, which remains overlooked in Nigeria. Going further, the National Assembly should domesticate the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190). The same Constitution that vests the National Industrial Court of Nigeria with jurisdiction to adjudicate on international conventions and treaties also limits the applicability of ratified treaties in Nigeria unless domesticated into local laws of the Nigerian Legal System by an Act of the National Assembly. This is based on Section 12 (1) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), which provides as follows:

¹⁹ Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) s 254C (1).

²⁰ *ibid* s 254C (2); Perchstone and Graeys, "Nigeria: Workplace Sexual Harassment: Is The Employer Immune From Liability?" (Mondaq, 13 August 2018) <https://www.mondaq.com/nigeria/discrimination-disability-sexual-harassment/727212/workplace-sexual-harassment-is-the-employer-immune-from-liability> accessed 12 July 2021.

"No treaty between the Federation and any other country shall have the force of law except to the extent to which any such treaty has been enacted into law by the National Assembly."²¹

The National Assembly is urged to take decisive action in tackling workplace sexual harassment in Nigeria. Under Part 1, Schedule II of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended), matters pertaining to Labour, listed under item 34, are regarded as being under the exclusive legislative list and thus can only be legislated upon by the National Assembly.

The National Industrial Court has deliberated upon a handful of cases concerning Sexual Harassment in the workplace, which led to the dismissal of survivors from their employment for refusing to accept the sexual advances of their superiors in the workplace. Notable amongst these cases is the landmark case of *Ejike Maduka V Microsoft & Ors*.²² where the National Industrial Court applied sections 34 and 42 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights 1981 and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to find the employers of the Claimant (defendants) guilty. The National Industrial Court has since then adjudicated workplace sexual harassment cases occasioning wrongful termination of employment which, amongst others, include *Dorothy Adaeze Awogu v. TFG Real Estate Limited*,²³ *Pastor (Mrs) Abimbola Patricia Yakubu v. Financial Reporting Council of Nigeria & Another*,²⁴ and *Stella Ayam Odey v. Ferdinand Daapah & Cuso International*.²⁵ These cases were addressed under the civil jurisdiction of the National Industrial Court, all in favour of the claimants.

Legislative Intervention on Workplace Sexual Harassment: An African Perspective

Mauritius, Namibia and Somalia are the only African countries to have ratified the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190). However, the Convention has yet to come into force in these countries. Looking at Namibia, the Labour Act, 2007 (Act No. 11 of 2007) merely recognises workplace sexual harassment, but neither criminalises nor provides any legal options to the victim/survivor.²⁶

In Kenya, the Employment Act, Chapter 226 2007 (revised 2012) prohibits workplace discrimination and obligates employers to ensure policies prohibiting discrimination and harassment on any

²¹ CFRN 1999, s 12 (1).

²² (2014) NLLR (pt 125) 67 NIC.

²³ S Suit No. NICN/LA/262/2013 (National Industrial Court, Lagos Division June 4, 2018)

²⁴ (Unreported) Suit No NICN/LA/673/2013.

²⁵ (Unreported) Suit No: NICN/CA/ 03/2016 (National Industrial Court, Calabar Division January 13, 2017)

²⁶ Labour Act, 2007 (Act No. 11 of 2007), s 5 (8)-(10)

grounds, including sex and gender.²⁷ The law defines acts that constitute workplace sexual harassment²⁸ and stipulates that employers with more than twenty (20) employees issue a policy statement in the workplace specifically on sexual harassment.²⁹

The Kenyan Employment Act, however, has several pitfalls. One of which is permitting employers to decide what they consider appropriate workplace policy statement content in addition to the terms stipulated by the Employment Act.³⁰ Secondly, the workplace policy statement requirement applies to companies with twenty (20) or more employees. This does not consider that sexual harassment can occur in offices with less than 20 employees. Thirdly, the law vests upon the employer discretion to determine whatever disciplinary action the employer deems appropriate. Another downside to this law is that it fails to consider situations where the employer is the perpetrator or abuser. In such a situation, employees who have been exposed to workplace sexual harassment have no recourse to a higher authority for redress.

In addition to the Employment Act, Chapter 226, 2007 (revised 2012), the Sex Offences Act 2006 (revised 2009) prohibits workplace sexual harassment. However, the latter Act recognises and criminalises workplace sexual harassment as an offence that attracts three years imprisonment or a fine, not less than one hundred thousand shillings or to both such fine and imprisonment.³¹ The downside to this section is that it burdens the victim/survivor to prove sexual harassment under specific limiting circumstances delineated by the Act.³²

In South Africa, a 2015/2016 study revealed that 142 reports of sexual harassment were reported daily.³³ As is the case in Nigeria, workplace sexual harassment predominantly affects women compared to men in South Africa. Legislations in South Africa acknowledge workplace sexual harassment in varying degrees, directly or by interpretation.³⁴

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 recognises the right to human dignity of all

²⁷ The Employment Act, Chapter 226 2007 (revised 2012) s 5.

²⁸ Ibid, s 6 (1) (a)-(d)

²⁹ Ibid, s 6 (2)

³⁰ Ibid, s 6 (3)

³¹ Sex Offences Act 2006 (revised 2009), s 23 (1)

³² Ibid, s 23 (2), (a) and (b).

³³ Lux Lesley Kubjana, "Understanding The Law On Sexual Harassment In The Workplace (Through A Case Law Lens): A Classic Fool's Errand" (2020) *Obiter*, 41(1), 88-105 http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1682-58532020000100006&lng=en&tlng=en. accessed 18 July 2021.

³⁴ The Occupational Health and Safety Act, 1993; The Labour Relations Act, 1995; The Code of Good Practice on the Handling of Sexual Harassment Cases 1998 (amended 2005); The Protection From Harassment Act, 2011.

persons³⁵ and provides that no person shall be subject to unfair discrimination.³⁶ Applying this interpretation in the workplace context, sexual harassment amounts to a violation of these provisions of the South African Constitution. On its part, the South African Employment Equity Act 2008 makes it incumbent on an employer to eliminate unfair discrimination by promoting equitable practices and ensuring an equal opportunity workplace.³⁷ Section 6 (3) of the same Act prohibits unjust discrimination and considers harassment of an employee as unfair discrimination in the workplace.

An observation of these legislations across various legal systems in Africa evinces that much needs to be done to curb workplace sexual harassment in Africa. This void serves as an opportunity for Nigeria to take the lead in the elimination of workplace sexual harassment continentally. Admittedly, laws are not sufficient to address the entirety of workplace sexual harassment; transparent law enforcement agencies and an impartial judiciary play significant roles in the fight against workplace sexual harassment. Nonetheless, the law is the foundational basis and platform by which these other avenues of ensuring justice subsist. In addition to ratifying the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190), workplace sexual harassment must be criminalised as an offence in Nigeria with adequate sanctions, given the Convention does not make provisions for sanctions. Equally, the law should have nationwide applicability for coherence in attaining justice. The decisions of the National Industrial Court, thus far, have been rooted in its civil jurisdiction, with monetary compensation being awarded to claimants — arguably a flick on the wrist for the defendants who may offset the judgment debt with ease.

In July 2020, during its plenary session, the Nigerian Senate passed the much-contested Sexual Harassment Bill (SB 77) titled "A Bill for an Act to prevent, prohibit and redress Sexual Harassment of students in tertiary educational institutions and for matters concerned therewith 2019". The Bill has yet to become law in Nigeria as it must be passed by the House of Representatives and, subsequently, assented into Law by the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. On the premise of this progressive step by the Nigerian Senate, it is reiterated that an anti-workplace sexual harassment law is equally essential. Indeed, a viable strategy to quell the dissent amongst academics and critics in Nigeria that the Sexual Harassment Bill is segregationist and targets a particular sector of the workforce — being academic staff in tertiary institutions — is by incorporating anti-workplace sexual harassment provisions into this Bill to expand the applicability of the proposed law. This is an alternative proposition to an exclusive legislation regulating, prohibiting and criminalising workplace sexual harassment in Nigeria, which is most preferred.

³⁵ Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, s 10

³⁶ *ibid*, s 9

³⁷ Employment Equity Act 2008, s5.

Further to legal intervention, employers must be mandated by law to maintain a conducive and healthy work climate. Employers must establish an anti-sexual harassment policy handbook that prohibits workplace sexual harassment, contains information on sexual harassment definition and acts that constitute sexual harassment; set out procedures for making sexual harassment complaints, which should be anonymous and confidential; protect employees who make complaints from victimisation or reprisals and set out the disciplinary measures that will be adopted in the event of a violation. In the absence of such a policy or a failure to take proactive steps to assess claims of workplace sexual harassment, an employer should be held vicariously liable for sexual harassment in their workplace in addition to their agents or employees who are the actual perpetrators. In conjunction with an anti-workplace sexual harassment policy, employers should conduct awareness training programmes to educate employees on sexual harassment and set up workplace protocols to promote appropriate conduct and disciplinary measures.³⁸

Recommendations

Stand To End Rape Initiative (STER) is committed to fighting for workplaces in Nigeria to be free from all forms of sexual harassment and the complete eradication of gender-based violence in the workplace. This informed the research study conducted by STER in 2020 and has equally informed this Policy Brief. We hereby recommend:

- ❖ A ratification and domestication of the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190), which came into force on 25 June 2021, by the Executive and Legislative arms of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.
- ❖ A codification of workplace sexual harassment as a crime with nationwide applicability.
- ❖ A mandatory and comprehensive internal official reporting mechanism is to be established in all workplaces so employees exposed to sexual harassment can communicate and report their grievances confidentially and safely.
- ❖ Organisations set up a confidential procedure of addressing claims of workplace sexual harassment. In cases where the employer is the perpetrator, an external body is established for investigating these claims before presenting them before a Court for appropriate redress.
- ❖ Employers must be charged by law with ensuring that the workplace is conducive for work and free from all forms of sexual harassment.

³⁸ Famsville solicitors, "Nigeria: #MeToo Movement- Steps To Curbing Work Place Sexual Harassment In Nigeria" (Mondaq 27 December 2018) <<https://www.mondaq.com/nigeria/discrimination-disability-sexual-harassment/767776/metoo-movement-steps-to-curbing-work-place-sexual-harassment-in-nigeria>> accessed 17 July 2021

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