



WORKPLACE SEXUAL HARASSMENT STUDY



**RESEARCH BRIEF:
EXAMINING THE PREVALENCE, CONTEXT,
AND IMPACT OF WORKPLACE SEXUAL
HARASSMENT IN NIGERIA**

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For further information about the research project, please contact Stand To End Rape Initiative via contactus@standtoendrape.org with research@standtoendrape.org in copy.

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Introduction

Sexual harassment in Nigeria continues to be a prevalent public health issue and a violation of human rights.¹ Workplace sexual harassment is a major challenge in formal and informal employment contexts. From a global perspective, sexual harassment at the workplace is associated with negative consequences, including employment outcomes² (e.g., reduced job satisfaction, poor job performance and low morale, loss of earnings, increased turnover intentions, and absenteeism) and health outcomes³ (e.g., nausea, high blood pressure, trauma, and stress-related disorders).

In the Nigerian context, previous studies have reported an alarming prevalence of sexual harassment. For example, one study examining the prevalence of workplace sexual harassment in the legal sector reported a prevalence rate of 63.5%,⁴ while another study investigating the prevalence of sexual harassment across various employment sectors in Lagos State reported a prevalence rate of 73.7%.⁵ The increasing prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace warrants further inquiry into the factors contributing to its occurrence, its impact, and the strategies to prevent it.

Considering this, the aim of this research brief is to provide evidence that improves understanding of the prevalence, context, and

impact of sexual harassment among employees working in diverse employment contexts across multiple states in Nigeria. The analysis covers data on workplace sexual harassment collected by a non-profit organisation working to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence – Stand to End Rape Initiative (STER), in the second half of 2020. STER provided funding for this study.

This assessment is based on the responses of 493 individuals who had maintained some form of employment within the last 12 months. Data was collected through an online self-report survey that included questions regarding the respondent's demographics (i.e., age, gender identity, sexuality, marital status, and primary state of residence), work context (job position, organisation size and harassment policies), experiences of workplace sexual harassment (i.e., verbal, non-verbal, and physical), individual and organisational response to sexual harassment, and impact of sexual harassment (i.e., mental health and job-related outcomes).

Most participants in this study were between 18 and 30 years old (74%, $n = 338$). 80% ($n = 392$) self-identified as female while 20% ($n = 100$) self-identified as male. Most participants were heterosexual (75%, $n = 370$) and single (74%, $n = 361$). Additionally, most participants were primarily located in the South-Western region of Nigeria (72%, $n = 344$) and employed full-time (83%, $n = 407$). Almost half of the

¹ Akinbode, G. A., & Ayodeji, F. (2018). Sexual Harassment: Experiences, prevalence, and psychopathology in some selected higher institutions in Lagos, South-West Nigeria. *African Journal for the Psychological Studies of Social Issues*, 21(3), 112-136.

² Merkin, R. S., & Shah, M. K. (2014). The impact of sexual harassment on job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and absenteeism: findings from Pakistan compared to the United States. *SpringerPlus*, 3(1), 1-13.

³ Mushtaq, M., Sultana, S., & Imtiaz, I. (2015). The trauma of sexual harassment and its mental health consequences among nurses. *Journal of the College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan*, 25(9), 675-679.

⁴ Aina-Pelemo, A. D., Mehanathan, M. C., Pradeep, K., & Aina, I. T. (2019). Sexual harassment in the workplace: Case study of the Nigerian legal sector. *JL Pol'y & Globalization*, 86, 121.

⁵ Ige, A. Y., & Adeleke, I. A. (2012). Evaluating the role of culture on sexual harassment: the case of Nigerian organisations.

participants were general employees (46%, n = 226).

Key Findings

Prevalence of Sexual Harassment

Overall, 64% of participants in this study (n = 259) had experienced one or more instances of sexual harassment. In addition, comparison tests revealed that younger participants (between ages 18 and 30), female, heterosexual, have never been married and worked at large organisations (with over 50 employees) were significantly more likely to experience sexual harassment compared to others.

Forms of Sexual Harassment

The most reported forms of sexual harassment experienced by participants include – (a) Being looked at in a sexual way (45%), (b) Receiving unwanted sexual comments/remarks about their clothing/accessories (44%), (c) Being told sexual jokes or stories that made them uncomfortable (43%), (d) Receiving sexual comments/remarks about their bodies (35%), (e) Being told crude/gross sexual things and asked to talk about sexual matters when they did not want to (34%), and (f) Receiving nonstop invitations to go out, get dinner, have drinks, or have sex even after declining (27%).

Characteristics of Sexual Harassment Experiences

91% of the offenders/perpetrators of workplace sexual harassment identified in this study were male. Additionally, participants reported that 48% of the offenders were their peers, 41% were senior colleagues, 10% were clients/customers, and 1% were junior colleagues.

Participants who reported experiencing sexual harassment were also asked to indicate where the most recent incident of harassment

occurred. 77% reported that the incident occurred at the office/primary place of assignment, 14% were harassed on a work assignment out of the office, 4% did not specify the location, 4% were harassed at a client/customer's home, while 1% were harassed in their own home.

Individual Response to Sexual Harassment

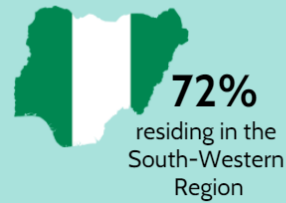
Participants who experienced sexual harassment reported on how they responded to the incident. Only 9% (n = 16) reported the assault through formal channels, while 34% (n = 61) took no action or tried to pretend it never happened, 26% (n = 48) engaged in de-escalation behaviours by asking the perpetrator to stop, and 10% (n = 19) told a colleague.

Participants that did not report the incident through a formal workplace channel were asked to indicate their reasons for not reporting. The most cited reasons for not reporting were – (a) thinking that nothing would be done (35%), (b) not considering the incident as severe enough to report (33%), (c) not wanting to get the offender into trouble (10%), and (d) not knowing where to go or who to report to (10%).

Total number of participants in this study = 493

Participant Demographics

Female 80%
Male 20%



74% never married & between ages 18 - 30 years old

Prevalence of Sexual Harassment



of participants in this study had experienced one or more instances of sexual harassment

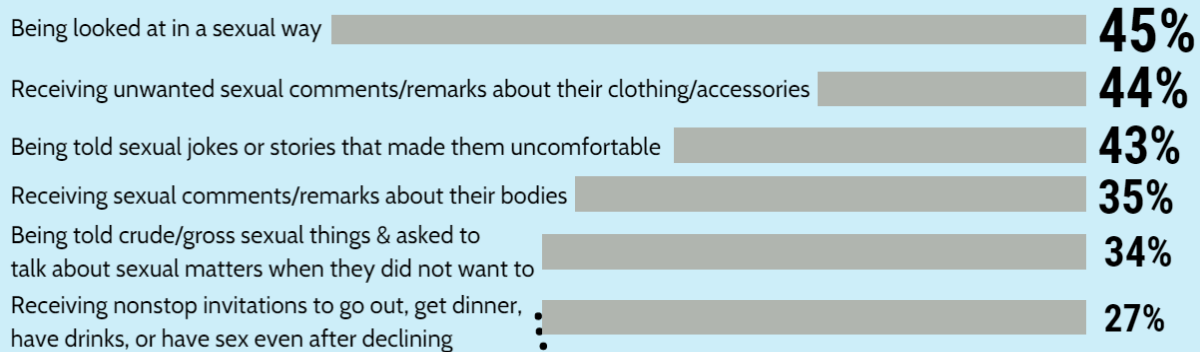


85% of those who had experienced sexual harassment were women



15% of those who had experienced sexual harassment were men

Prevalent Forms of Sexual Harassment



Characteristics of Sexual Harassment Experiences



of perpetrators were **MALE**



of perpetrators were **PEERS & SENIOR COLLEAGUES**

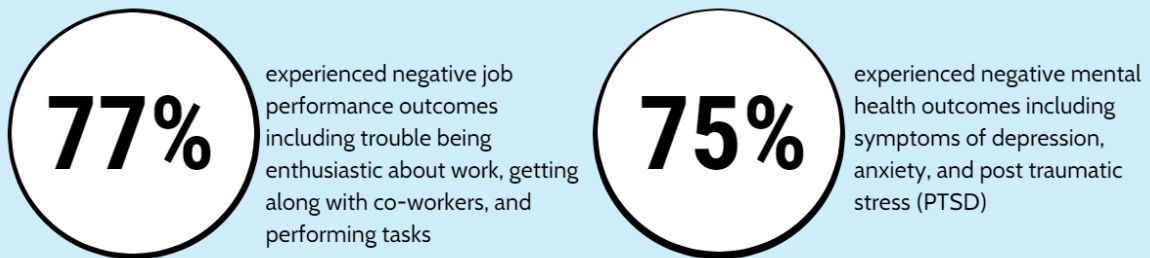


of incidents occurred at the **OFFICE/PRIMARY PLACE OF WORK**

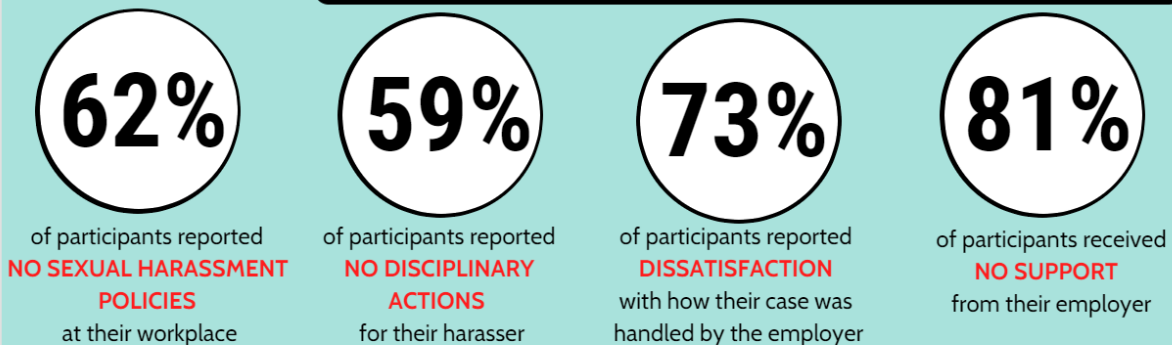
Individual Response to Sexual Harassment



Impact of Sexual Harassment



Organizational Sexual Harassment Policies & Practices



For additional information regarding the data, kindly send an email to the Lead Researcher, Oluwafunmilayo Oyesola Ayeni at research@standtoendrape.org



Impact of Sexual Harassment

When asked about the impact of experiencing sexual harassment on job performance, 77% of participants reported adverse outcomes. Specifically, 65% (n = 91) of participants reported having trouble being enthusiastic about their jobs, 62% (n = 88) had difficulty getting along with co-workers, and 49% (n = 68) had trouble performing work tasks.

75% of participants who were sexually harassed reported experiencing mental health problems. Specifically, 69% (n = 98) experienced symptoms of anxiety, 60% (n = 82) experienced symptoms of depression, and 34% (n = 48) experienced symptoms of PTSD.

Organisational Policies and Practices Related to Sexual Harassment

Only 38% of participants in this study reported the existence of sexual harassment policies at their workplace. When asked to specify the prevention measures to deal with sexual harassment at their workplace, more than half of the participants (58%) indicated that they were not aware of any sexual harassment prevention measures in place. Additionally, almost half of the participants (44%) reported no encouragement by any person or group to report sexual harassment at their workplace.

9 of the 16 participants (59%) who reported sexual harassment through formal workplace channels indicated no disciplinary action was taken against the harasser. When offenders received disciplinary actions, the most cited disciplinary action was a verbal warning (23%). **In addition**, 81% of participants who reported the incident through formal channels at their workplace did not receive any support from the employer. Overall, 73% of employees who reported the incident through formal workplace channels were dissatisfied with how their cases were officially handled.

Conclusions

The findings from this study suggest that workplace sexual harassment is persistent in Nigeria. There are also significant differences related to gender, age, and marital status in this study, such that women are more likely to experience workplace sexual harassment while men are more likely to be harassers. In addition, younger and unmarried employees are more likely to experience sexual harassment than older, married employees.

Despite the prevalence of sexual harassment in this sample, many participants did not disclose the incident or seek help. The low rates of reporting identified are associated with limited knowledge of the nature and consequences of sexual harassment among employees and a lack of clarity regarding the reporting channels available at their workplace.

The detrimental consequences of sexual harassment on employees' well-being and work performance were also noted as several employees reported experiencing depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms. Similarly, many employees reported low morale and decreased work performance.

Finally, findings from this study reveal a significant gap in the institutional response to workplace sexual harassment as most employers do not maintain sexual harassment policies and procedures that are accessible to their employees. In the few instances where employees officially reported the incident, they indicated an overall dissatisfaction with how the employer handled their cases. Additionally, most of these employees did not receive any support from the employer, and there were only a small number of cases where disciplinary actions were taken against the harasser.

Policy and Practical Implications

Government

The role of developing and enforcing national laws and policies that prevent and respond to workplace sexual harassment cannot be overemphasised. The Nigerian government is responsible for ensuring that all citizens and residents have legal and social protections against workplace sexual harassment. This can be accomplished through the **ratification of international standards for workplace violence prevention and response**. The government should ratify the International Labor Organization's (ILO) Convention 190 (C190)⁶ and Recommendation No. 206, which acknowledges the right of every person to a world of work free from violence and harassment, including gender-based violence and harassment. C190 is a global framework for action based on a common understanding of violence and harassment. It includes protections for everyone: employees, trainees, apprentices, volunteers, etc. It also considers third parties as victims or perpetrators. It has a wide reach and applies to workplaces and all work-related activities. The convention calls for violence and harassment to be prohibited in law and addressed in relevant national policies. Recommendation No. 206 provides valuable guidance on how the convention can be applied and should be used by the government to create a comprehensive plan to implement C190.

⁶ Violence, E. (2019). Harassment in the World of Work: Convention No. 190, Recommendation No. 206, and the accompanying Resolution. ILO.

Organisations and Employers

Organisations and employers play an important role in creating a safe work environment free from discrimination and harassment. These responsibilities include efforts to prevent and respond to workplace sexual harassment. Considering findings from this study, the following recommendations are provided to address workplace sexual harassment:

- **Create and enforce anti-sexual harassment policies and response procedure.** The dearth of workplace sexual harassment prevention policies and procedures for reporting, investigation, and disciplinary action indicates a need for organisations and employers to develop and enforce comprehensive anti-harassment policies and response mechanisms. Policies developed should account for all forms of sexual harassment that individuals may experience in the work environment (i.e., verbal, non-verbal, and physical harassment). Policies should also cover interactions with non-employees (such as customers and vendors).
- **Outline sexual harassment response procedures.** In addition to creating policies, organisations and employers must create formal channels that allow employees to report sexual harassment in confidence. Every report should be taken seriously, investigative procedures outlined, and immediate measures should be implemented to stop any confirmed harassment and ensure it does not recur. Following appropriate investigative processes, any disciplinary action should

Retrieved:
https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/meeting-reports/WCMS_721160/lang--en/index.htm

be proportional to the seriousness of the offence.

- **Build awareness and culture of responsibility.** In addition to harassment policies, employers should focus on building a culture of responsibility and safety to promote a healthy workplace environment. For example, employers can incorporate information about awareness of sexual harassment into employee orientation programs, wellness activities, seminars, workplace code of conduct/handbooks, newsletters, e-mail, posters, and brochures. These resources should clearly communicate that employees will not be penalised for seeking help.
- **Institute regular meetings and training on sexual harassment.** Sexual harassment training can also be offered to employees. Training should include information on recognising harassment, types of actions and behaviours that constitute sexual harassment, and how to respond. This information can be incorporated into onboarding and refresher job training sessions. Additionally, regular meetings can be held to discuss sexual harassment, communication skills, and reporting mechanisms/procedures. There should also be opportunities for employees to provide individual or collective feedback on the organisation/employer's sexual harassment prevention and response policies and practices.
- **Provide employee support services.** It is also necessary to provide protection and confidential support services for the employees who feel victimised. Support services may include paid time off, therapy/counselling services, wellness programs, and referral to local services.

Employees

In addition to efforts undertaken by the government and employers to create a safe work environment, employees are also essential in ensuring a harassment-free workplace environment. Therefore, employees in the workplace should:

- Be familiar with the organisation's sexual harassment policies and procedures.
- Build awareness by seeking out accurate information on how to identify and prevent sexual harassment.
- Treat all co-workers, clients, and vendors with respect and always be professional.
- Keep a record of all harassment incidents (name of the harasser, their position within the company and the type of harassment) if you are being harassed. Be specific about times, dates, locations, and the names of any witnesses to the incident.
- Report the incident through the appropriate workplace channels if you are experiencing harassment, are aware that an employee is being taken advantage of, or aware an employee is a sexual harasser.
- Refrain from engaging in any intimidation attempts towards individuals who report incidents of sexual harassment.



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