

Female Liberation from Sexual Harassment in Tertiary Institutions and Work Environment

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Abstract

Sexual harassment remains a pervasive issue affecting women across tertiary institutions and workplace environments, undermining their rights, dignity, and ability to thrive in educational and professional settings. This paper critically examines the dynamics of female liberation from sexual harassment. It focuses on institutional, cultural, and legal frameworks that either enable or challenge such misconduct. Drawing from interdisciplinary research, real-life case studies, and feminist theories, the study explores the psychological, academic, and career-related implications of harassment on women. It also evaluates existing policies and preventive mechanisms in place within higher education institutions and corporate organizations, identifying gaps in enforcement and support systems. Emphasis is placed on the importance of advocacy, awareness, gender-sensitive reforms, and empowerment strategies that equip women with the tools to resist, report, and recover from harassment. Furthermore, the paper underscores the role of institutional accountability, inclusive of leadership, and education in fostering safe and equitable environments. Ultimately, the study advocates for a transformative approach that moves beyond reactive measures to proactive liberation—ensuring that every woman is free from intimidation, discrimination, and abuse in both academic and professional spheres.

Keyword: Sexual harassment, Female liberation, Tertiary institutions, Workplace environment, Gender-sensitive reforms

Introduction

Sexual harassment remains a pervasive and deeply entrenched issue within both tertiary educational institutions and workplace environments, manifesting in ways that profoundly affect women's academic success, career progression, mental health, and sense of agency. Defined as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, or any verbal or physical conduct of a

sexual nature that creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], 2021), sexual harassment disproportionately targets women due to longstanding gendered power imbalances embedded within institutional and societal structures.

In tertiary institutions, female students and academic staff often encounter sexual harassment from individuals occupying positions of authority, such as lecturers and administrators. This abuse of power not only violates personal boundaries but also disrupts the learning process and contributes to a culture of fear and silence (Bhana & Pillay, 2021). Victims may fear academic retaliation, social stigmatization, or administrative neglect, all of which deter reporting and perpetuate the cycle of abuse. Likewise, in professional settings, hierarchical workplace structures and inadequate grievance mechanisms leave many women vulnerable to sexual coercion, verbal degradation, and other forms of misconduct (McDonald, 2012). The consequences are far-reaching, including decreased job satisfaction, withdrawal from employment, psychological distress, and stunted career advancement.

Despite the global rise in awareness due to advocacy campaigns like #MeToo, institutional responses often remain superficial or reactive, particularly in the Global South, where patriarchal norms and institutional inertia hinder effective enforcement of anti-harassment laws (UNESCO, 2019). In many African and Asian contexts, for instance, socio-cultural taboos around gender and sexuality further obscure open dialogue and accountability. As noted by Noreen and Mushtaq (2020), legal protections may exist, but their effectiveness is undermined by systemic bias, lack of awareness, and inadequate institutional support for survivors.

True liberation from sexual harassment must extend beyond the provision of policies—it requires transformative change in organizational structure, gender norms, and accountability systems. This includes empowering women with knowledge of their rights, equipping institutions with transparent and accessible reporting mechanisms, and training leadership to foster environments grounded in respect, safety, and equity. Furthermore, gender-sensitive education, survivor-centered support services, and collaborative interventions among stakeholders are critical to creating sustained structural change (Akinwale & Olayanju, 2021).

This paper explores the concept of female liberation from sexual harassment through the dual lenses of tertiary education and workplace environments. It critically analyzes the socio-cultural and institutional factors that contribute to the persistence of harassment, examines the barriers women face in seeking redress, and proposes actionable strategies rooted in gender equity and institutional reform. By interrogating both the overt and subtle forms of sexual harassment, the study contributes to ongoing global discourses on women's rights, institutional accountability, and the pursuit of safe, inclusive environments for all.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Feminist Theory and Organizational Power Dynamics Theory, both of which provide critical lenses for understanding the systemic and gendered nature of sexual harassment in academic and professional institutions.

1. Feminist Theory

Feminist theory, particularly Radical Feminism and Intersectional Feminism, serves as a primary lens through which this research interrogates the structural roots of sexual harassment. Radical feminism argues that patriarchal systems institutionalize male dominance and female subordination, manifesting in various forms of violence against women, including sexual harassment (MacKinnon, 1979). In the context of tertiary institutions and workplace environments,

patriarchal power hierarchies are often mirrored in male-dominated leadership structures, which allow harassment to thrive and discourage accountability.

Intersectional feminism, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), extends this critique by highlighting how overlapping identities—such as race, class, and socio-economic status—compound the vulnerabilities of women in these spaces. For example, female students or employees from marginalized ethnic or economic backgrounds may face additional challenges in reporting or resisting harassment due to fear of retribution, lack of institutional support, or social stigma. Thus, this framework helps to analyze sexual harassment not merely as isolated misconduct, but as a symptom of broader systemic inequalities.

2. Organizational Power Dynamics Theory

The Organizational Power Dynamics Theory (French & Raven, 1959; Kanter, 1977) provides another layer of analysis, focusing on how power is exercised and abused within institutional structures. Sexual harassment is frequently rooted in asymmetric power relations, where individuals in higher-ranking positions exploit their authority to impose coercive or inappropriate behaviors on subordinates. In universities, this is often seen in lecturer-student or senior-staff-to-junior-staff dynamics; in workplaces, it may emerge in supervisor-subordinate relationships.

Kanter's (1977) concept of tokenism is particularly relevant, as women in male-dominated institutions are often treated as symbolic minorities, scrutinized for their gender, and exposed to greater levels of harassment. The theory suggests that unless institutional power structures are made more egalitarian and transparent, sexual harassment will persist as a mechanism for maintaining male dominance and institutional control.

Synthesis and Relevance to the Study

The integration of feminist and organizational theories allows for a holistic exploration of sexual harassment as both a gendered and institutionalized phenomenon. Feminist theory situates the problem within larger socio-cultural and historical contexts of gender inequality, while organizational theory highlights the institutional mechanisms that enable and sustain harassment. Together, these frameworks inform the study's examination of policy, practice, and lived experiences, and support the development of strategies aimed at dismantling structural barriers to female liberation in educational and work environments.

Notable Advocacy Campaigns on sexual harassment Against the girl child and women

#ArewaMeToo Movement: This social media-driven campaign emerged in Northern Nigeria, providing a platform for survivors to share their experiences and challenge societal norms surrounding sexual harassment. It has been pivotal in raising awareness and fostering dialogue on gender-based violence in the region.

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Feminist Coalition: Established in 2020, this women-led organization gained prominence during the #EndSARS protests. Beyond advocating against police brutality, the coalition has focused on women's rights, including combating sexual harassment, by organizing protests and providing support to survivors.

Vogue

16 Days of Activism: An annual international campaign observed in Nigeria, it involves various stakeholders, including NGOs and government agencies, to raise awareness and take action against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment.

Spotlight Initiative:

A global partnership between the European Union and the United Nations, implemented in Nigeria to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls. The initiative supports programs that address sexual harassment through policy reform and community engagement.

Sexual Assault Referral Centers (SARCs): These centers provide medical, legal, and psychosocial support to survivors of sexual violence. Their establishment and operation have been crucial in offering safe spaces for reporting and addressing cases of sexual harassment.

Scholarly Evidence:

A study published in SAGE Open examined the knowledge and attitudes toward media campaigns against gender-based violence in Southeast Nigeria, highlighting the effectiveness of such campaigns in changing perceptions and encouraging reporting. SAGE Journals

Research in the Saudi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences analyzed media advocacy and public awareness campaigns in Nigeria, emphasizing their role in addressing gender-based violence and influencing policy responses.

Scholars Middle East Publishers

An article in PLOS ONE discussed the prevalence of sexual harassment in Nigerian tertiary institutions, underscoring the need for continued advocacy and institutional reforms to protect women in academic environments.

PMC

These campaigns and studies collectively demonstrate the ongoing efforts and challenges in combating sexual harassment in Nigeria, highlighting the importance of sustained advocacy, policy implementation, and societal change.



Other advocacy campaigns around the world include:

1. UN Women – "UNiTE to End Violence against Women"

About: A global campaign launched by the United Nations Secretary-General to prevent and eliminate violence against women and girls.

Key Components: "16 Days of Activism", #OrangeTheWorld.

2. #MeToo Movement

About: Grassroots movement started by activist Tarana Burke in 2006 and went viral in 2017.

Impact: Sparked global awareness about sexual harassment and assault, especially in workplaces.

3. "Time's Up"

About: Founded in 2018 by Hollywood celebrities and activists to fight sexual harassment and promote equality.

Focus: Legal defense fund for victims, workplace safety, and policy change.

4. "Stop Street Harassment"

About: A U.S.-based nonprofit dedicated to ending gender-based street harassment worldwide.

Activities: Research, awareness campaigns, policy advocacy.

5. "Our Streets Now" (UK)

About: Youth-led campaign calling for public sexual harassment to be criminalized in the UK.

Started: 2019 by sisters Gemma and Maya Tutton.

6. "This is Not Consent" (Ireland)

About: Viral campaign sparked by a court case where a woman's underwear was used as evidence.

Symbol: Thong protest to raise awareness of victim-blaming.

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