

The Hidden Epidemic: Prevalence of Sexual Harassment, Reporting Barriers, and Institutional Pathways to Disclosure among University Students in South-South Nigeria

¹Deborah Odejimi PhD, ²Josephine Omoruyi PhD & ³Michael Thomas PhD

^{1,2&3}Igbinedion University Okada, Edo State Nigeria

Correspondence: odejimi.deborah@iuokada.edu.ng drodejimi@gmail.com

Abstract

Sexual harassment remains a major challenge in higher education, with underreporting limiting institutional efforts to protect students and respond effectively to incidents. This study examined the prevalence of sexual harassment, reporting barriers, and institutional pathways to disclosure among university students in South-South Nigeria. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was adopted, involving 620 undergraduate students selected from six universities through a multistage sampling technique. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's Chi-square test, and binary logistic regression. The findings revealed that 49.4% of the respondents had experienced sexual harassment. Female students and off-campus residents were significantly more likely to report experiences of harassment than their counterparts ($p < 0.001$). Fear of retaliation, victim-blaming, lack of confidence in university authorities, and concerns about confidentiality emerged as the major barriers to reporting, while 57.4% of respondents were unaware of their universities' sexual harassment policies. Logistic regression showed that policy awareness, confidence in institutional response, and knowledge of reporting procedures significantly increased the likelihood of disclosure. Respondents identified confidential reporting systems, protection against retaliation, and strict sanctions for offenders as the most effective institutional strategies for promoting reporting. The study recommends strengthening policy awareness, survivor-centred reporting mechanisms, and institutional accountability to improve disclosure and enhance student protection.

Keywords: sexual harassment; disclosure; reporting barriers; institutional trust; university students; South-South Nigeria.

Introduction

Sexual harassment has become one of the most persistent challenges confronting higher education institutions worldwide. Despite decades of legislation, institutional policies, awareness campaigns, and advocacy initiatives, universities continue to record incidents of unwelcome sexual behaviour involving students, academic staff, administrative personnel, and peers. Rather than diminishing over time, sexual harassment has evolved into a hidden epidemic that is sustained by unequal power relations, deeply embedded gender norms, organisational silence, and persistent underreporting. Although universities have increasingly adopted formal mechanisms for addressing sexual misconduct, these interventions have often failed to produce substantial reductions in victimization or meaningful improvements in reporting behaviour. As a result, sexual harassment remains a recurring feature of campus life rather than an isolated occurrence.

The persistence of sexual harassment reflects the complex interaction of individual, institutional, and socio-cultural factors. Within many universities, hierarchical relationships between lecturers and students, dependence on academic assessment, fear of victimization, and unequal power

dynamics create conditions in which inappropriate behaviour can occur while simultaneously discouraging victims from seeking redress. In many societies, cultural expectations surrounding gender, sexuality, and authority further reinforce silence by encouraging victims to protect institutional reputations, avoid public scrutiny, or accept harassment as an unfortunate aspect of university life. Consequently, many survivors choose not to disclose their experiences, allowing perpetrators to continue offending without accountability (Freyd, 2018). This combination of repeated victimization, organizational silence, and limited disclosure has transformed sexual harassment into a problem that extends beyond individual misconduct to become a systemic challenge for higher education.

The hidden nature of sexual harassment is one of the principal reasons why it has proved difficult to address effectively. While prevalence studies consistently demonstrate that substantial numbers of university students experience different forms of sexual harassment during their academic careers (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020), official institutional records frequently report far fewer cases than are likely to occur. This discrepancy arises because many incidents never enter formal reporting systems. Fear of retaliation, victim-blaming, academic disadvantage, breaches of confidentiality, emotional trauma, and limited confidence in complaint procedures discourage victims from reporting their experiences (Ogunfowokan et al., 2024). Consequently, universities often respond to only a small proportion of incidents, making it difficult to identify patterns of offending, evaluate institutional interventions, or implement evidence-based prevention strategies.

Although considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to estimating the prevalence and consequences of sexual harassment, increasing evidence suggests that prevalence alone provides only a partial understanding of the problem. High prevalence demonstrates the magnitude of sexual harassment but does not explain why reporting remains consistently low despite the existence of institutional policies. Similarly, documenting the adverse academic, psychological, and social consequences of sexual harassment offers limited guidance on how universities can encourage survivors to disclose their experiences. Greater attention is therefore needed to the institutional and behavioural factors that shape reporting decisions and influence students' willingness to seek support.

Disclosure is not simply an individual decision but a process influenced by perceptions of fairness, safety, trust, and organisational credibility. Students are generally more willing to report incidents when they believe that complaints will be treated confidentially, investigated impartially, and resolved without retaliation. Conversely, where reporting procedures are poorly understood, inconsistently implemented, or perceived as ineffective, silence becomes a rational response to perceived institutional risk. Understanding these factors is essential because reporting represents the critical link between victimisation and institutional action. Without disclosure, universities have limited opportunities to investigate complaints, protect survivors, sanction offenders, or develop effective preventive measures.

These concerns are particularly relevant within Nigerian universities, where sexual harassment continues to attract widespread public attention. Legislative initiatives, institutional policies, media investigations, and advocacy campaigns have increased awareness of campus sexual harassment, yet evidence suggests that reporting remains disproportionately low relative to the likely occurrence of incidents (Ogunfowokan et al., 2024). Fear of academic victimisation, unequal power relationships, inadequate awareness of reporting procedures, and limited confidence in institutional complaint mechanisms continue to discourage disclosure.

Consequently, many universities struggle to reconcile official statistics with students' lived experiences, creating uncertainty regarding the true magnitude of sexual harassment and limiting the effectiveness of institutional interventions.

Within South-South Nigeria, empirical evidence on reporting behaviour and institutional mechanisms for encouraging disclosure remains relatively scarce. Existing studies have predominantly focused on estimating prevalence, identifying determinants, or examining the consequences of sexual harassment, frequently within individual universities. Comparatively less attention has been given to understanding how institutional environments influence students' willingness to report incidents or to identifying the organisational conditions that encourage disclosure. This represents a significant knowledge gap because effective institutional reforms depend not only on recognising that sexual harassment occurs but also on understanding why survivors choose silence and what universities can do to build confidence in reporting systems.

The crux of this study is to examine sexual harassment among university students in South-South Nigeria with particular emphasis on the factors that shape reporting behaviour and institutional disclosure. While the prevalence of sexual harassment provides an important indication of the magnitude of the problem, the study is primarily concerned with understanding why many incidents remain unreported and identifying the institutional conditions that encourage disclosure. Specifically, the study seeks to answer four interrelated questions: What proportion of university students experience sexual harassment? Which barriers discourage survivors from reporting incidents? To what extent are students aware of existing reporting mechanisms? Which institutional measures are most likely to encourage disclosure and strengthen reporting behaviour?

Conceptual Clarifications

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is widely recognized as a form of gender-based violence involving unwelcome verbal, non-verbal, physical, or digital conduct of a sexual nature that violates an individual's dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, or offensive environment (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2019). Within higher education, such behaviours range from sexually suggestive remarks and unwanted physical contact to repeated requests for intimate relationships, coercion, stalking, and technology-facilitated harassment. The defining characteristic of sexual harassment is not the intention of the perpetrator but the absence of consent and the adverse effect on the recipient. Although prevalence studies consistently show that sexual harassment remains common in universities, estimates vary across studies because of differences in definitions, research methods, and socio-cultural contexts (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Molstad, Weinhardt & Jones, 2023; Ranganathan et al., 2021). Consequently, prevalence should be interpreted as an indication of the scale of the problem rather than a complete measure of students' experiences.

Beyond prevalence, increasing attention has been directed towards reporting behaviour, which refers to the decision by survivors to disclose experiences of sexual harassment through formal institutional channels or informal support networks. Research suggests that disclosure is shaped by perceptions of institutional fairness, confidentiality, safety, and expected outcomes rather than by the experience of harassment alone (McDonald, 2012). Consequently, reporting barriers including fear of retaliation, victim-blaming, stigma, lack of awareness of reporting procedures, and distrust of institutional processes remain major obstacles to disclosure. The persistence of

these barriers contributes to a culture of silence in which many incidents remain undocumented, thereby limiting institutional capacity to respond effectively and protect survivors.

Recent scholarship has therefore shifted from viewing sexual harassment solely as an individual experience to understanding it as an institutional governance challenge. This perspective emphasizes that effective responses require more than policy formulation; they depend on accessible reporting systems, transparent procedures, survivor-centred support services, organisational trust, and consistent policy implementation. Institutional pathways to disclosure comprise the mechanisms through which universities encourage reporting, protect complainants, and strengthen confidence in institutional processes. Guided by this perspective, the present study examines sexual harassment through the interconnected lenses of prevalence, reporting barriers, and institutional pathways to disclosure, recognising that improving reporting is fundamental to effective prevention, accountability, and survivor protection.

Theoretical Framework

Institutional Betrayal Theory, proposed by Smith and Freyd (2014), explains how institutions entrusted with protecting individuals may inadvertently perpetuate harm through inadequate prevention, delayed responses, or ineffective handling of complaints. The theory assumes that institutional failures diminish trust, discourage victims from reporting misconduct, and reinforce organisational silence. Its major strength lies in explaining how organisational practices and institutional credibility influence reporting behaviour beyond individual experiences. In the context of this study, the theory provides a useful framework for understanding how weak implementation of sexual harassment policies, fear of retaliation, and lack of confidence in university complaint mechanisms may discourage students from disclosing incidents (Smith & Freyd, 2014).

Ecological Systems Theory, developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), posits that human behaviour is shaped by interactions within multiple environmental systems, including the family, peers, institutions, community, and broader socio-cultural context. The theory assumes that individual decisions are influenced by these interconnected systems rather than by personal factors alone. Its strength lies in providing a holistic explanation of behaviour by recognising the influence of interpersonal, institutional, and societal factors. Applied to the present study, the theory explains how students' reporting decisions are shaped by interactions between personal experiences, peer influence, university policies, institutional culture, and prevailing social norms, thereby complementing Institutional Betrayal Theory in explaining reporting barriers and institutional pathways to disclosure.

The integration of Institutional Betrayal Theory and Ecological Systems Theory provides a robust analytical framework for understanding the complex processes underlying sexual harassment reporting and disclosure in higher education. While Institutional Betrayal Theory explains how institutional failures such as weak policy implementation, delayed investigations, inadequate survivor protection, and inconsistent sanctions erode students' trust and discourage reporting, Ecological Systems Theory extends this explanation by demonstrating that reporting behaviour is simultaneously shaped by interactions across multiple environmental systems. These include individual perceptions, peer relationships, lecturer–student power dynamics, institutional culture, family influences, community values, and broader societal norms. Consequently, students' decisions to disclose experiences of sexual harassment cannot be understood as purely personal choices but as behavioural responses to institutional and socio-cultural environments that either facilitate or constrain disclosure.

The complementary nature of these theories is particularly relevant to the present study because neither theory independently provides a complete explanation for the persistent underreporting of sexual harassment within universities. Institutional Betrayal Theory primarily explains the organisational conditions that undermine students' confidence in reporting mechanisms, whereas Ecological Systems Theory situates these institutional conditions within the wider network of interpersonal and societal influences that shape students' perceptions of risk, safety, and expected outcomes. Their integration therefore recognises that underreporting is not merely a consequence of individual fear but the product of institutional weaknesses operating within broader socio-cultural contexts characterised by gender inequality, power asymmetry, stigma, and victim-blaming. This integrated perspective offers a more comprehensive understanding of why formal reporting remains disproportionately low despite the increasing availability of anti-sexual harassment policies across universities.

The present study is anchored on this integrated theoretical framework because its objectives extend beyond determining the prevalence of sexual harassment to examining the institutional and contextual factors that influence disclosure. Specifically, the framework explains how awareness of institutional policies, knowledge of reporting procedures, confidence in university response mechanisms, fear of retaliation, fear of victim-blaming, and perceived accessibility of support services interact to influence reporting behaviour among university students. These variables are conceptualized not as isolated determinants but as interconnected institutional and environmental factors operating across multiple ecological levels. Consequently, the framework provides the theoretical justification for the study's analytical model and supports the use of Chi-square analysis and binary logistic regression to identify the institutional and psychosocial predictors of reporting behaviour.

The integrated framework also strengthens the practical relevance of the study by providing a basis for interpreting the empirical findings and developing evidence-based recommendations. If underreporting is influenced by both institutional failures and broader ecological conditions, then effective interventions must extend beyond the formulation of anti-sexual harassment policies. Universities must build institutional trust through transparent complaint procedures, prompt investigations, confidentiality, protection against retaliation, and survivor-centred support services, while simultaneously addressing socio-cultural norms that normalize harassment or discourage disclosure. Thus, the combined application of Institutional Betrayal Theory and Ecological Systems Theory offers a comprehensive explanation of reporting behaviour and provides an appropriate theoretical foundation for identifying institutional pathways capable of promoting disclosure, strengthening accountability, and creating safer university environments in South-South Nigeria.

Empirical Review

Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020), in their study titled Sexual Harassment in Higher Education: A Systematic Review, examined the prevalence, characteristics, consequences, and institutional responses to sexual harassment in higher education globally. The objective of the study was to synthesize empirical evidence on sexual harassment within universities and identify research gaps. Using a systematic review methodology, the authors analysed 67 peer-reviewed empirical studies drawn from different regions of the world. The review reported substantial variation in prevalence estimates, ranging from 2% to 93%, depending on study design and measurement approaches. However, across the reviewed studies, approximately 20–25% of female university students had experienced sexual harassment, while only 5–30% of incidents were formally

reported. The authors concluded that although many universities have adopted anti-sexual harassment policies, there is little empirical evidence demonstrating their effectiveness in reducing victimisation or increasing reporting. They therefore recommended stronger institutional leadership, improved reporting systems, and more rigorous evaluation of preventive interventions. Although comprehensive, the review paid limited attention to how reporting barriers interact with institutional mechanisms to influence disclosure in developing countries.

Ranganathan, Wamoyi, Pearson, and Stöckl (2021), who investigated Measurement and Prevalence of Sexual Harassment in Low- and Middle-Income Countries, examined the prevalence of sexual harassment and the consistency of measurement approaches across low- and middle-income countries. The objective was to synthesize published evidence and identify methodological gaps affecting prevalence estimates. The authors conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of 49 peer-reviewed studies published between 1990 and 2020, covering workplaces, educational institutions, and public spaces. The review found marked variation in reported prevalence, ranging from 12.5% among women in community surveys in China to 47% among female faculty and staff in Ethiopian higher education institutions. The authors attributed these differences largely to variations in conceptual definitions, sampling strategies, and measurement instruments rather than actual differences in occurrence. They concluded that harmonized measurement approaches and stronger institutional reporting systems are essential for improving evidence-based policy and practice. While the review advances understanding of prevalence across low- and middle-income countries, it provides limited evidence on institutional pathways that encourage disclosure among university students.

Ogunfowokan et al. (2024), in their study on the Characteristics of Higher Education Students Who Reported Sexual Violence in Nigeria: A Secondary Analysis, investigated the demographic and institutional characteristics associated with reporting sexual violence among students in Nigerian higher education institutions. The study employed a quantitative secondary analysis of nationally available survey data using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. The findings showed that formal reporting of sexual violence remained relatively low, with reporting behaviour influenced by institutional confidence, concerns about confidentiality, and fear of victim-blaming. The authors concluded that improving students' awareness of institutional reporting procedures, strengthening confidence in complaint mechanisms, and providing survivor-centred support services would encourage greater disclosure. However, the study focused primarily on students who reported incidents and did not examine the interaction between prevalence, reporting barriers, and institutional pathways to disclosure across multiple universities.

McDonald (2012), worked on Workplace Sexual Harassment 30 Years On: A Review of the Literature, examined organisational factors influencing reporting behaviour and institutional responses to sexual harassment. Although the review focused primarily on workplace settings, its findings have important implications for higher education because universities operate within similar hierarchical organisational structures. Through a critical review of three decades of empirical research, the study found that victims were substantially more likely to report sexual harassment where complaint procedures were perceived as fair, confidential, and supported by management. Conversely, fear of retaliation, limited organisational support, and low confidence in institutional processes consistently discouraged disclosure. The author concluded that transparent procedures, leadership commitment, and effective policy implementation are critical for improving reporting behaviour. These findings provide a useful organisational perspective for

understanding institutional pathways to disclosure in university settings, although the review was not specific to higher education.

Overall, the reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that sexual harassment remains prevalent, whereas formal reporting remains disproportionately low despite the existence of institutional policies. The empirical evidence further indicates that reporting behaviour is shaped by institutional trust, policy awareness, confidentiality, and perceptions of organisational fairness. Nevertheless, most existing studies have examined prevalence, reporting behaviour, or institutional responses independently, with limited attention to how these dimensions interact within a single analytical framework. Furthermore, empirical evidence from universities in South-South Nigeria remains limited. The present study addresses this gap by simultaneously examining the prevalence of sexual harassment, reporting barriers, awareness of institutional reporting mechanisms, and institutional pathways to disclosure among students in six universities, thereby providing context-specific evidence to strengthen institutional policy and practice.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to investigate the prevalence of sexual harassment, reporting barriers, and institutional pathways to disclosure among undergraduate students in South-South Nigeria. The study was conducted across six universities, with one accredited university purposively selected from each of the six states in the South-South geopolitical zone (Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers). Purposive selection was adopted to ensure equitable representation of all states and to capture the diversity of institutional environments within the region. Including multiple universities across the six states reduced the likelihood of institution-specific bias and enhanced the external validity of the findings by providing a broader regional perspective on sexual harassment, reporting behaviour, and institutional pathways to disclosure.

A multistage sampling procedure was adopted, with respondents selected through simple random sampling. A total of 650 structured questionnaires were administered, of which 620 were validly completed and returned, representing a response rate of 95.4%. The questionnaire comprised sections on respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, experiences of sexual harassment, reporting behaviour, awareness of institutional reporting mechanisms, reporting barriers, and institutional measures that could encourage disclosure. The instrument was subjected to expert review to establish face and content validity, while a pilot study involving 50 students outside the study area confirmed its reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70.

Data were collected over a six-week period by trained research assistants following ethical approval from the relevant institutional review committee and permission from the participating universities. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the study. Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 29. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were used to describe respondents' characteristics and patterns of sexual harassment, while Pearson's Chi-square test examined associations among categorical variables. Binary logistic regression was subsequently employed to identify the independent predictors of reporting behaviour, with reporting status (reported/not reported) specified as the dependent variable and selected demographic,

institutional, and psychosocial factors entered as explanatory variables. Statistical significance was determined at the 5% level ($p < 0.05$).

Results and Findings

The results are presented from the field work are computed and analyzed by the authors in according to the research questions that guided the study.

Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 620)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	248	40.0
	Female	372	60.0
	Total	620	100.0
Age (Years)	16–20	178	28.7
	21–25	284	45.8
	26–30	108	17.4
	Above 30	50	8.1
	Total	620	100.0
Level of Study	100 Level	110	17.7
	200 Level	132	21.3
	300 Level	145	23.4
	400 Level	158	25.5
	500 Level and Above	75	12.1
	Total	620	100.0
Residence Status	On-campus	238	38.4
	Off-campus	382	61.6
	Total	620	100.0

Table 1 shows that female students constituted the majority of respondents (60.0%), while males accounted for 40.0%. Most respondents (45.8%) were aged 21–25 years, indicating that the sample was predominantly composed of students within the typical undergraduate age bracket. Across academic levels, 400-level students (25.5%) formed the largest group, followed by 300-level (23.4%) and 200-level (21.3%) students, demonstrating adequate representation across levels of study. In terms of residence, 61.6% of the respondents lived off campus, whereas 38.4% resided on campus.

Research Question One: What is the prevalence of sexual harassment among university students in South-South Nigeria?

Table 2: Presents the Prevalence of Sexual Harassment Among the Respondents

Experience of Sexual Harassment	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	306	49.4
No	314	50.6
Total	620	100.0

The findings in Table 2 indicate that 306 (49.4%) of the respondents reported having experienced one or more forms of sexual harassment during their university education, while 314 (50.6%) indicated that they had never experienced sexual harassment. This suggests that

approximately one out of every two students surveyed had experienced sexual harassment, confirming that the problem remains prevalent within universities in South-South Nigeria.

Research Question Two: What forms of sexual harassment are most experienced by students?

Table 3. Presents The Forms of Sexual Harassment Experienced by Respondents.

Form of Sexual Harassment	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Sexually suggestive comments	285	46.0	1
Unwanted touching	242	39.0	2
Sexual jokes	221	35.6	3
Persistent requests for dates	203	32.7	4
Online sexual harassment	188	30.3	5
Quid pro quo harassment	156	25.2	6

Table 3, reveals that sexually suggestive comments, unwanted touching, repeated requests for intimate relationships, sexually explicit jokes, and online sexual harassment were the most frequently reported forms of sexual harassment. These findings indicate that students experience both physical and non-physical forms of sexual harassment within university environments.

Research Question Three: What factors discourage victims from reporting incidents of sexual harassment?

Table 4: Reporting Barriers to the Disclosure of Sexual Harassment among Students.

Reporting Barrier	Mean	SD	Rank
Fear of retaliation	4.63	0.56	1
Fear of victim-blaming	4.57	0.61	2
Lack of confidence in university authorities	4.48	0.65	3
Concerns about confidentiality	4.39	0.68	4
Inadequate knowledge of reporting procedures	4.27	0.72	5

Table 4 shows that fear of retaliation (Mean = 4.63, SD = 0.56) was the most significant barrier to reporting incidents of sexual harassment, followed by fear of victim-blaming (Mean = 4.57, SD = 0.61) and lack of confidence in university authorities (Mean = 4.48, SD = 0.65). Concerns about confidentiality and inadequate knowledge of reporting procedures also emerged as important barriers.

Research Question Four: To what extent are students aware of existing institutional policy and reporting mechanisms?

Table 5: Awareness of University Sexual Harassment Policy and Reporting Mechanism.

Awareness of University Policy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Aware	264	42.6
Not aware	356	57.4
Total	620	100.0

Table 5 shows that more than half of the respondents (57.4%) were not aware of the university's sexual harassment policy, while only 42.6% indicated that they were aware of its existence.

Table 6: Institutional Strategies for Promoting the Disclosure of Sexual Harassment.

Strategy	Mean	SD	Rank
Confidential reporting system	4.62	0.58	1
Strict sanctions for offenders	4.58	0.63	2
Protection against retaliation	4.55	0.61	3
Anonymous reporting platform	4.47	0.71	4
Student awareness campaigns	4.41	0.68	5
Counselling services	4.32	0.75	6

Respondents in table 6 strongly endorsed institutional measures that promote safe and confidential reporting of sexual harassment. A confidential reporting system ranked highest (Mean = 4.62, SD = 0.58), followed by strict sanctions against offenders (Mean = 4.58, SD = 0.63) and protection against retaliation (Mean = 4.55, SD = 0.61). Anonymous reporting platforms, awareness campaigns, and counselling services were also highly rated, indicating broad support for survivor-centred institutional interventions aimed at increasing disclosure and strengthening confidence in university reporting systems.

Binary Logistic Regression

To further determine the independent influence of these factors on reporting behaviour, a binary logistic regression analysis was conducted.

Table 7: Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Reporting Behaviour among Students.

Dependent Variable: Reporting Behaviour (1 = Reported; 0 = Did Not Report).

Predictor Variable	B	S.E.	Wald	p-value	Adjusted Odds Ratio (AOR)	95% CI for AOR
Gender (Female)	0.842	0.224	14.14	<0.001	2.32	1.49 – 3.61
Age	0.118	0.074	2.54	0.111	1.13	0.98 – 1.31
Level of Study	0.215	0.083	6.71	0.010	1.24	1.05 – 1.47
Residence (Off-campus)	-0.516	0.197	6.85	0.009	0.60	0.41 – 0.88
Awareness of University Policy	1.278	0.238	28.84	<0.001	3.59	2.25 – 5.73
Fear of Retaliation	-1.106	0.256	18.66	<0.001	0.33	0.20 – 0.55
Fear of Victim-blaming	-0.784	0.231	11.52	0.001	0.46	0.29 – 0.74
Confidence in University Response	0.965	0.214	20.33	<0.001	2.63	1.73 – 4.00
Knowledge of Reporting Channels	0.881	0.226	15.18	<0.001	2.41	1.55 – 3.74
Constant	-2.984	0.654	20.83	<0.001	0.05	

Model Summary

Statistic	Value
-2 Log Likelihood	608.34
Cox & Snell R ²	0.382
Nagelkerke R ²	0.511
Hosmer–Lemeshow χ^2	6.24
Hosmer–Lemeshow p-value	0.621
Overall Classification Accuracy	81.6%
Sample Size (N)	620

Table 7 shows that the binary logistic regression model was statistically significant and demonstrated a good fit to the data. The non-significant Hosmer–Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test ($\chi^2 = 6.24$, $p = 0.621$) indicates that the model adequately fits the observed data. The model explained between 38.2% (Cox & Snell R²) and 51.1% (Nagelkerke R²) of the variation in reporting behaviour and correctly classified 81.6% of the respondents.

Among the predictor variables, awareness of the university's sexual harassment policy emerged as the strongest positive predictor of reporting behaviour (AOR = 3.59, 95% CI = 2.25–5.73, $p < 0.001$). Students who were aware of the institutional policy were approximately 3.6 times more likely to report incidents of sexual harassment than those who were unaware.

Similarly, confidence in the university's response mechanisms significantly increased the likelihood of reporting (AOR = 2.63, $p < 0.001$), while students with adequate knowledge of reporting channels were about 2.4 times more likely to report incidents (AOR = 2.41, $p < 0.001$). Female students also had significantly higher odds of reporting sexual harassment than male students (AOR = 2.32, $p < 0.001$).

Conversely, fear of retaliation significantly reduced the likelihood of reporting (AOR = 0.33, $p < 0.001$), indicating that students who feared negative consequences were approximately 67% less likely to report incidents. Likewise, fear of victim-blaming significantly discouraged reporting (AOR = 0.46, $p = 0.001$). Residence status also influenced reporting behaviour, with off-campus students being less likely to report than their on-campus counterparts (AOR = 0.60, $p = 0.009$).

Although age showed a positive coefficient, it was not a statistically significant predictor of reporting behaviour ($p = 0.111$). However, level of study was positively associated with reporting, suggesting that students in higher academic levels were more likely to report incidents of sexual harassment than those in lower levels (AOR = 1.24, $p = 0.010$).

Overall, the findings indicate that institutional factors including policy awareness, confidence in institutional response, and knowledge of reporting procedures are stronger determinants of reporting behaviour than demographic characteristics. At the same time, fear of retaliation and victim-blaming remain major barriers to breaking the culture of silence among university students.

Chi-square Test of Association

To determine whether awareness of institutional policies was associated with reporting behaviour, a Chi-square analysis was performed.

Table 8: Association between Awareness of Sexual Harassment Policy and Reporting Behaviour among Students.

Awareness of University Policy	Reported Incident n (%)	Did Not Report n (%)	Total n (%)
Aware	146 (55.3)	118 (44.7)	264 (100.0)
Not Aware	88 (24.7)	268 (75.3)	356 (100.0)
Total	234 (37.7)	386 (62.3)	620 (100.0)

The result in table 8 shows that out of 264 students who were aware of the policy, about 45% did not report while 75% of students who were not aware of the policy did not report.

Chi-Square Test

Statistic	Value
Pearson Chi-Square (χ^2)	59.82
Degrees of Freedom (df)	1
p-value	<0.001
Phi Coefficient	0.311
Cramer's V	0.311
N	620

The Chi-square analysis revealed a statistically significant association between students' awareness of the university's sexual harassment policy and their reporting behaviour ($\chi^2 = 59.82$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$). Students who were aware of the university policy reported incidents of sexual harassment more frequently (55.3%) than those who were not aware of the policy (24.7%). The effect size (Cramer's $V = 0.311$) indicates a moderate association, suggesting that awareness of institutional policies is an important factor influencing students' willingness to report incidents of sexual harassment.

Table 9: Chi-Square Test of Association between Gender and Experience of Sexual Harassment.

Gender	Experienced Sexual Harassment	Did Not Experience	Total
Male	74 (29.8%)	174 (70.2%)	248
Female	236 (63.4%)	136 (36.6%)	372
Total	310 (50.0%)	310 (50.0%)	620

Chi-Square Statistics

Test	Value	df	p-value
Pearson Chi-Square	68.54	1	<0.001
Phi Coefficient	0.332		
Cramer's V	0.332		

The Pearson Chi-square test revealed a statistically significant association between gender and experience of sexual harassment ($\chi^2 = 68.54$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$). Female students reported significantly higher experiences of sexual harassment (63.4%) than male students (29.8%). The effect size (Cramer's $V = 0.332$) indicates a moderate association between gender and the experience of sexual harassment. The finding suggests that female students are disproportionately affected by sexual harassment, highlighting the need for gender-responsive institutional interventions and strengthened protection mechanisms within universities in South-South Nigeria.

Table 10: Association between Residence Status and Experience of Sexual Harassment.

Residence Status	Experienced Sexual Harassment n (%)	Did Not Experience n (%)	Total n (%)
On-campus	96 (40.3)	142 (59.7)	238 (100.0)
Off-campus	210 (55.0)	172 (45.0)	382 (100.0)
Total	306 (49.4)	314 (50.6)	620 (100.0)

Chi-Square Test

Statistic	Value
Pearson Chi-Square (χ^2)	13.14
Degrees of Freedom (df)	1
p-value	<0.001
Phi Coefficient	0.146
Cramer's V	0.146
N	620

The Chi-square test in table 10 showed a statistically significant association between students' residence status and experience of sexual harassment ($\chi^2 = 13.14$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$). Students residing off campus reported a higher prevalence of sexual harassment (55.0%) than those residing on campus (40.3%). Although the association was statistically significant, the effect size (Cramer's $V = 0.146$) indicates a small association, suggesting that residence status has a modest influence on students' experiences of sexual harassment.

Discussion of Findings

This study examined the prevalence of sexual harassment, reporting barriers, and institutional pathways to disclosure among university students in South-South Nigeria. The findings showed that 49.4% of the respondents had experienced at least one form of sexual harassment during their university education, confirming that sexual harassment remains a significant concern within higher education. Although prevalence estimates vary across studies because of methodological and contextual differences, the present finding is consistent with international evidence indicating that sexual harassment continues to be widespread in universities (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Ranganathan et al., 2021). The predominance of sexually suggestive comments, unwanted touching, and persistent requests for intimate relationships further suggests that students are frequently exposed to behaviours that are often normalised despite their adverse effects on learning and well-being.

The study also established significant demographic differences in students' experiences of sexual harassment. Female students reported significantly higher levels of victimisation than male students (61.3% versus 31.5%; $\chi^2 = 54.87$, $p < 0.001$), while students residing off campus

experienced higher levels of harassment than those living on campus (55.0% versus 40.3%; $\chi^2 = 13.14$, $p < 0.001$). These findings support previous research linking sexual harassment to gendered power relations and unequal social structures within higher education. The higher prevalence among off-campus students further suggests that exposure to less regulated environments and reduced institutional oversight may increase vulnerability, underscoring the need for university interventions that extend beyond campus residences.

A major contribution of this study lies in its examination of the factors influencing reporting behaviour. Despite the relatively high prevalence of sexual harassment, only 37.7% of respondents indicated that incidents were formally reported, illustrating the persistence of underreporting within universities. Fear of retaliation (Mean = 4.63), fear of victim-blaming (Mean = 4.57), and lack of confidence in university authorities (Mean = 4.48) emerged as the most important barriers to disclosure. Furthermore, 57.4% of respondents were unaware of their universities' sexual harassment policies, suggesting that limited policy awareness remains a significant obstacle to effective reporting. These findings indicate that institutional policies alone are insufficient unless students are aware of their existence, understand reporting procedures, and have confidence that complaints will be handled fairly and confidentially.

The binary logistic regression analysis further demonstrated that institutional factors were stronger predictors of reporting behaviour than demographic characteristics. Awareness of university policies (AOR = 3.59, $p < 0.001$), confidence in institutional response mechanisms (AOR = 2.63, $p < 0.001$), and knowledge of reporting procedures (AOR = 2.41, $p < 0.001$) significantly increased the likelihood of reporting sexual harassment. Conversely, fear of retaliation (AOR = 0.33, $p < 0.001$) and fear of victim-blaming (AOR = 0.46, $p = 0.001$) significantly reduced reporting. These findings support Institutional Betrayal Theory, which argues that inadequate institutional responses diminish survivors' trust and discourage disclosure, and Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasises that reporting decisions are shaped by interacting institutional, interpersonal, and socio-cultural influences. Together, the findings demonstrate that strengthening policy awareness, ensuring confidentiality, protecting complainants from retaliation, and building confidence in institutional processes are fundamental to improving reporting behaviour and reducing the culture of silence surrounding sexual harassment in universities.

Conclusion

This study examined the prevalence of sexual harassment, reporting barriers, and pathways to breaking the silence among university students in South-South Nigeria. The findings demonstrate that sexual harassment remains a significant concern within higher education institutions, with a substantial proportion of students reporting experiences of various forms of sexual harassment during their university education. The study further established that female students and off-campus residents were more vulnerable to sexual harassment than their counterparts. More importantly, the findings revealed that awareness of institutional sexual harassment policies, confidence in university response mechanisms, and knowledge of reporting procedures significantly increased the likelihood of reporting incidents, whereas fear of retaliation and victim-blaming substantially discouraged disclosure. These findings reinforce the view that underreporting is driven not only by individual fears but also by institutional and socio-cultural factors that sustain a culture of silence.

Integrating prevalence, reporting barriers, and institutional pathways within a single analytical framework, the study contributes to the growing literature on campus sexual harassment,

particularly within the Nigerian context where empirical evidence remains relatively limited. The findings underscore the importance of institutional accountability in fostering trust, encouraging disclosure, and creating safer learning environments. They further demonstrate that strengthening reporting systems is as important as preventing incidents of sexual harassment, since effective institutional responses depend on students' willingness to report their experiences.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. Universities should strengthen awareness of sexual harassment policies and reporting procedures. Given that more than half of the respondents were unaware of existing institutional policies, universities should integrate information on sexual harassment policies, reporting channels, and available support services into student orientation programmes, institutional websites, and periodic campus-wide awareness campaigns to improve policy visibility and utilisation.
- ii. Universities should establish confidential and survivor-centred reporting systems. As fear of retaliation and victim-blaming emerged as the major barriers to reporting, institutions should provide confidential and accessible reporting mechanisms, including anonymous reporting platforms, while ensuring that complainants are protected from victimisation and that complaints are investigated promptly, fairly, and transparently.
- iii. Universities should strengthen institutional trust through effective implementation of anti-sexual harassment policies. Since confidence in university response mechanisms significantly increased reporting behaviour, university management should consistently enforce anti-sexual harassment policies, provide regular training for staff and disciplinary committees on survivor-centred complaint handling, and ensure timely resolution of reported cases to enhance students' confidence in institutional processes.

Acknowledgements

- i. The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided by Africa-UniNet for this research. This publication was supported by Africa-UniNet, financed by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Women, Science and Research (BMFWF) and implemented by OeAD.
- ii. The authors also sincerely appreciate the collaboration and support of the partner institutions, the management of the participating universities, the research assistants, and all the students who voluntarily participated in this study. Also, acknowledged are Prof. Therese Claes, Dr. Esther Amaoko, Prof. Evelyn Umemezia, Dr. Olusoji Popoola, Dr. Kiapene Zidieghe and Dr. Wogene Berhanu who are members of the research project but did not contribute to this paper.

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