

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Sexual harassment in academia - perception, understanding and reporting of sexual harassment in a Southern African University

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The study was conducted to explore the perspectives, understanding and reporting patterns of sexual harassment, among staff and students at the University of Zambia (UNZA). The participants included 76 academic staff, 128 non academic staff and 885 students who were randomly selected from the different schools at UNZA. A self-reported questionnaire was developed and piloted for use in this study. The results indicated that sexual harassment occurred among different categories of the UNZA community, with 37% of all the participants reporting to have been sexually harassed. There was found to be a discrepancy in the understanding of the term sexual harassment with majority of the participants only recognizing overt acts such as “subtle or overt pressure for sexual favors” to be acts of sexual harassment. Reporting of sexual harassment was found to be minimal, with only a quarter of those who were sexually harassed having told someone about the act. The majority of those who were sexually harassed did not make a formal complaint because they were embarrassed or they did not believe any action would be taken. It may be concluded that sexual harassment at the UNZA is a challenge to be addressed seriously.

**Keywords:** Sexual harassment, University, HIV and AIDS, Academia, Students, Gender.

## INTRODUCTION

We report the first among studies carried out in Zambia to address the subject of sexual harassment on campus from both student and staff perspectives at the University of Zambia (UNZA). Given the high seroprevalence of HIV and AIDS (adult prevalence 15.2%, UNAIDS, 2007) no community can afford the added cost of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is defined (UNZA HIV and AIDS policy) as “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature, when submission to or rejection of this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects a person's employment or education, unreasonably interferes with a person's work or educational performance, or creates an

intimidating, hostile or offensive working or learning environment” (p 16).

Sexual harassment generally occurs when one person, the harasser, holds a position of real or perceived authority over the other individual. Harassment can occur anywhere on campus, including the classroom, the workplace, or a residence hall. It is estimated that over 50% of all women have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace and 20-30% of all college women have been sexually harassed (Gervasio and Ruckdeschel, 1992).

Studies carried out at institutions of higher learning in other parts of the world and in developed countries reported sexual harassment among graduate female students considerably more than for undergraduates (Fitzgerald et al., 1988). Further, it was found that the longer the students stayed on campus, the higher was the prevalence rates (Allen and Okawa, 1987). There seem to be few studies carried out on sexual harassment

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in Zambia, but there are studies carried out in the region. A report on 'Researching the implementation of Sexual harassment policies in three Universities in Southern Africa' (coordinated by the African Gender Institute-University of Cape town) includes narrations on Zambia (2005). It refers to a national gender policy that was instituted in 2000. This is restricted in relation to sexual harassment and gender based violence. Emphasis is placed on sexual harassment at the work place, leaving out other stakeholders. Many women have to give in to sexual advances in order to secure work. Most of these cases go undocumented, little research has been done on these cases.

Sexual harassment can have various consequences for both students and staff. For example, students who experience sexual harassment are likely to change their major subject choices, alter career plans or avoid the threatening situation (Schneider et al. 1997) and the harassed academic staffs are likely to experience strained work relations and become generally unsatisfied with their jobs (Dev et al., 1996) which may impede their academic careers (Schneider, 1987). For this reason, it would be pertinent to address this issue in academia. Thus, following a number of informal complaints from UNZA students about sexual harassment, this study was conducted to explore this issue in the interest of protecting the rights of all.

### **Aim of the Study**

The study explored the perspectives, understanding and reporting patterns of sexual harassment, among staff and students at the UNZA.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

Participants included students, academic and non-academic staff at UNZA during the academic year 2006-2007. All the students, by year of study, were given the chance to participate in the sample. For the academic and non-academic members of staff, schools and departments were used as the sampling strata. At least two academic and two non-academic members of staff were selected from the departments. Deans, Directors and Heads of Department also participated in the study.

### **Response rate**

Of the 2003 students (25%) targeted, questionnaires were received back from 855 students, giving a response rate of 44.2%. Two staff members from each department

were targeted (216 staff); questionnaires were received back from 76 staff, giving a response rate of 35.2%. Twenty-five percent of the non-academic staffs at UNZA were targeted (294 academic staff) and the questionnaires were received back from 128, giving a response rate of 43.5%.

### **Research Instruments**

A self-administered questionnaire consisting of both of semi-structured open questions as well as closed-questions was developed and piloted. The questionnaire included questions about perception and understanding of sexual harassment.

### **Procedure**

This baseline survey obtained cross-sectional data from all fourteen schools at UNZA from students, academic and non-academic members of staff. Research assistants met students in the classes and distributed self-administered questionnaires, which were collected within one month. Academic and non-academic members of staff as well as the Deans were contacted. Questionnaires were left with staff and Deans. The research assistants later collected the completed self-administered questionnaires.

### **Data Management and Processing**

The data was managed by a trained data expert. Only the complete questionnaires were immediately used. The data was analyzed using SPSS and EPI. Since none of the measures were normally distributed, Kruskal Wallis and Mann-Whitney were used to make inter-group comparisons.

### **Ethical considerations**

Approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Zambia prior to the commencement of the research. An informed verbal consent was obtained from the participants prior to their participation. Confidentiality was observed and participants were free to withdraw from study at any time. Consent and institutional support were obtained from Vice-Chancellor and Deputy Vice Chancellors' offices. Permission to meet the students in class and distribute questionnaires was also obtained from their lecturers.

## RESULTS

### Profile of participants

The study included a total of 1089 participants, aged from 20 to above 45 years, from different categories within the confines of the University. The different categories included 76 academic members of staff, 128 non academic members of staff and 885 students. Participants had spent from less than one year to above five years at UNZA.

Among the 76 academic members of staff who participated, 70% (49) were males and 30% (21) were females while 8% (6) did not indicate their sex. The majority of participants (64.5%) in this category were aged above 45 years while the rest (22%) were between 40-44 years of age. Majority of participants in this category had spent more than five years at UNZA.

The non academic category had 128 participants. Among the non academic staff who participated in the study, the majority, (65.5%) were female staff and the rest were males (26.6%). The great number of participants in this category was in the age range 35-39 years. There were more females in this category.

Eight hundred and eighty five students from the different schools at UNZA participated in the study. The majority of the students were in their 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year of study (21.7% for both) and about 19% had spent less than a year at UNZA. The age range was 20-24 years for most of the students (55.4%) while the rest were in the ranges 25-29 years (19.4%), less than 20 years (10%), 30-34 years (8.8%), 35-39 years (2.7%), 40-44 years (0.8%) and above 45 years (0.5%) respectively. There were more female student participants (47.7%) than males (43.3%). Seven percent (7%) of the student participants did not indicate their sex. However, the sex difference was not significant ( $p=0.42$ ).

### Perception and Understanding of Sexual Harassment

The following modalities were studied: perception of UNZA environment, levels of worry about being sexually harassed as well as levels of knowledge and understanding. The category to which the participant belonged to at UNZA had a bearing on the perception of sexual harassment (table 1 and 2).

#### (a) Perception of the Environment at UNZA

The measured responses included whether the participants found the University environment "welcoming, challenging, supportive, exciting, unsafe, hostile, stressful and or intimidating".

All three categories showed a significant difference in

their perceptions. The inter group comparison revealed a significant difference in perception. When compared to the students, the non-academic staff perceived the environment to be more hostile ( $Z=-3.34$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), unsafe ( $Z=-2.89$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and intimidating ( $Z=-3.07$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). The non academic staff also found the environment to be more hostile than the academic staff ( $Z=-3.35$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). The students, however, perceived the environment as supportive compared to the non academic staff ( $Z=-4.27$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

All three groups showed a significant difference in their responses to "understanding of sexual harassment". Compared to the academic staff, more students understood, repeated humiliation based upon the sex ( $Z=-3.60$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), remarks about sexual activities ( $Z=-4.39$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), exposure to sexually suggestive visual displays ( $Z=-4.23$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), persistent, unwanted sexual attention ( $Z=-4.11$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), physical interference with individuals ( $Z=-3.84$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and overt pressure for sexual favors ( $Z=-3.46$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), and explicit statements ( $Z=-3.78$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) to be acts of sexual harassment. Compared to academic staff, non-academic staff understood unwanted sexual attention ( $Z=-3.56$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), subtle pressure for sexual favors ( $Z=-2.72$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), and intentional touching ( $Z=-2.93$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) to constitute acts of sexual harassment.

The majority of the respondents (98%) expressed knowledge of what sexual harassment is. However, when segregated by sex, results show that, all the female academic staff (100%) interviewed indicated that they understand what sexual harassment is compared to 88% of the male academic staff. Eighty four percent (84%) of the non-academic staff reported that they knew what sexual harassment is. There was no significant gender difference in this response ( $p=0.80$ ). Among students, majority of them (74.4%) reported that they knew what sexual harassment is. There was almost no gender difference to this response, 72.3% female students and 76.3% male students reported they knew what sexual harassment was. However, more female students reported that they did not know what sexual harassment was.

### Reporting of sexual harassment

Participants were asked whether they had been sexually harassed and if they reported such acts.

Few sexually harassed participants were free to share the problem with anyone. Overall, 67.4% of the respondents indicated that sexual harassment had not occurred to them. It was found that 32.6% of the respondents had experienced sexual harassment. Of all those who had experienced it, close to one-in-four (24.5%) of the respondents indicated that they had told someone about it.

**Table 1.** Perception of the environment at UNZA

	Role at UNZA	Mean	$\chi^2$	p-value
<b>Hostile</b>	Student	515	11	p=0.004*
	Academic Staff	513		
	Non-academic Staff	554		
<b>Intimidating</b>	Student	511	10	p=0.008*
	Academic Staff	528		
	Non-academic Staff	568		
<b>Supportive</b>	Student	534	19	p=0.000*
	Academic Staff	493		
	Non-academic Staff	456		
<b>Unsafe</b>	Student	512	11	p=0.003*
	Academic Staff	547		
	Non-academic Staff	553		

\*P<0.05

**Table 2.** Understanding of sexual harassment

Acts considered to be sexual harassment in UNZA HIV and AIDS policy	Role at UNZA	Mean	$\chi^2$	p
Explicit or implicit propositions to engage in sexual activity	Student	525.86	4.61	0.01
	Academic staff	458.92		
	Non academic staff	522.37		
Explicit statements, jokes, anecdotes or remarks of sexual nature	Student	539.48	22.19	0*
	Academic staff	428.42		
	Non academic staff	458.20		
Deliberate, repeated humiliation or intimidation based upon the sex	Student	539.75	25.63	0*
	Academic staff	404.13		
	Non academic staff	469.85		
Remarks about sexual activities or speculations about sexual experience	Student	544.13	44.67	0*
	Academic staff	435.39		
	Non academic staff	426.78		
Exposure to sexually suggestive visual displays such as photographs,	Student	532.75	17.38	0*
	Academic staff	414.66		
	Non academic staff	505.67		
Persistent, unwanted sexual or romantic attention	Student	527.86	14.97	0
	Academic staff	422.05		
	Non academic staff	530.64		
Deliberate physical interference with or restrictions of individuals	Student	534.53	16.09	0*
	Academic staff	439.21		
	Non academic staff	481.69		
Subtle or overt pressure for sexual favors	Student	531.81	14.94	0.001*
	Academic staff	422.58		
	Non academic staff	506.90		
Intentional touching or physical assault	Student	512.92	12.69	0.002*
	Academic staff	480.03		
	Non academic staff	587.63		

\*P<0.01

## DISCUSSION

Academic institutions have the mandate to provide working and learning environments where work and studies can be pursued without fear or intimidation and existence of sexual harassment in contrary to this mandate. Sexual harassment in academia and workplace has received a lot of attention (Whatley and Wasieleskie, 2001; Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Murrell et al., 1995). It has been suggested that 19-60% of women reported some form of sexual harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1988) and that sexual harassment had a negative impact on the victims. Fitzgerald et al. (1988) reported that anxiety, depression and physical problems are experienced by victims of sexual harassment. The present study offers a perspective to understanding the issue of sexual harassment in a Southern African University.

Quid Pro Quo is a Latin phrase meaning *this for that* or *something for something*. Exchange between parties may take place where one is asked to provide sexual favors in return for something else. In academia, sexual harassment is likely to take this form. Examples include provision of sexual favors in exchange for grades, inclusion in activities and scholarships (bursaries). Among the students who were brave enough to approach the UNZA-HIV response, some were students whose lecturers wanted sex in exchange for “change of discipline”, or better grades in the subject taught. Informal complaints of this nature can be looked at and understood clearly in the light of the findings of the present study

In academia, as in other environments victims of sexual harassment in most cases are women, though men have been target to harassment too (Dey et al., 1996). This was evident in our study too. More female academic staff reported having been harassed compared to for their male counterparts. Studies have shown that consequences of sexual harassment, even at low levels, include impaired psychological well-being resulting in lowered self-esteem, nervousness, irritability and anger (Popovich, 1988). Therefore it is likely that that may hold true for the students and staff at UNZA.

### Perception and Understanding of Sexual Harassment

Results of the present study indicated that about a quarter of the participants were not sure about the occurrence of sexual harassment at UNZA. This could be because of perceptions that the participants do not recognize some of the acts that constitute sexual harassment. The non-academic staff perceived the environment to be hostile, unsafe and intimidating, however the students perceived the environment as supportive.

We also found a significant difference in understanding what constitutes sexual harassment among the

categories. The students better understood explicit statements, repeated humiliation based upon the sex, remarks about sexual activities, exposure to sexually suggestive visual displays, persistent, unwanted sexual attention, physical interference with individuals and overt pressure for sexual favors to be sexual harassment, where as non-academic staff better understood unwanted sexual attention, subtle pressure for sexual favors, and intentional touching to constitute sexual harassment. However, a majority of the participants, considered deliberate, repeated humiliation or intimidation based on sex; persistent, unwanted sexual or romantic attention; subtle or overt pressure for sexual favors; and intentional touching or physical assault, to be acts of sexual harassment. Only a small percentage of the respondents considered remarks about sexual activities, or speculations about sexual experience and deliberate physical interference with or restrictions of individuals, to be acts of sexual harassment. This may suggest the need for a deliberate policy to address sexual harassment. With a sexual harassment policy that is widely circulated the academic community will be able to understand that the university will not tolerate sexual harassment and know that sexual harassment is illegal and is against policy. They will also know where to get professional help.

According to Stein et al (1994), flirting is very different from sexual harassment. Flirting feels good: sexual harassment does not. If the other person feels the same way then a mutual attraction exists. Flirting and joking are two-sided, and are usually enjoyable for both people. Sexual harassment is not enjoyable—it is bullying. (Stein, Nan, 1994). On the other hand when something offends the person, then it may be sexual harassment. However, sexual harassment is not a hug between friends, mutual flirtation or sincere and personal compliments (Monroe, 1999) and therefore these normal relations should continue. This stresses on the importance of sensitizing the UNZA community, about sexual harassment

### Reporting of Sexual harassment

Although the incidence of sexual harassment was also high among females non-academic staff, surprisingly none of the participants made a formal report about the harassment. This was in concordance with a Zimbabwean study (Zindi, 1994) in which all female participants (3500), complained of sexual harassment but 93% indicated that they could not report sexual harassment.

When subjected to sexual harassment only few academic staff made formal complaints and no action was taken based on their complaint. The most frequently reported reason by all category of participants for not making a formal complaint were ‘being embarrassed’ and ‘not expecting any action to be taken’. This finding is

similar to findings of other studies (e.g. Whatley and Wasieleskie, 2001) which described underreporting of sexual harassment in academia.

Although gender role seems not significant, the university must put up measures to protect both men and women in the working and learning environment, and ensure that the environment is conducive to learning. Rather than reinvent the wheel, UNZA can learn from others. In order to achieve the objectives of the University Policy on Sexual Harassment, the University should like others have done, commit itself to:

- Develop preventative educational programmes directed towards students and staff.
- Provide appropriate support and confidential counseling in cases of sexual harassment.
- Establish and implement procedures to deal effectively with alleged cases of sexual harassment. This would include procedures for reporting, documentation, mediation, investigation and liaison with existing university disciplinary authorities. (Bayly, 1990).

The UNZA definition does not directly include *visual* aspect of sexual harassment. If included or integrated in the UNZA definition of sexual harassment, this might increase the number of cases being reported. However, as long as there is no complaint procedure instituted and there is no guarantee of confidentiality, minimum cases of sexual harassment will be reported.

Would-be offenders may sometimes be highly respected faculty members. The university has an obligation towards its students and also towards staff, to provide an environment free from sexual harassment, in keeping with rules and regulations of an “equal opportunity” environment at UNZA. In a study done at four of Nigeria’s universities, students identified sexual harassment as being among stressors hindering academic work (Ladebo, 2001). It is, however, everyone’s responsibility i.e. both staff and students, not to make themselves easy prey to harassers. According to a research carried out at the university of Natal, in the Republic of South Africa, vulnerability to sexual harassment appeared to be associated with being alone, provocative dressing, attractive or being under the influence of alcohol.

Persons who find others’ behavior offensive should act respond appropriately towards stopping it. However, some find it difficult to speak up. This may require asking the offender to stop, or asking someone in authority for help. The fact that someone did not intend to sexually harass an individual is generally not considered defense to a complaint of sexual harassment. In most cases it is the effect and characteristics of the behavior, not the intent of the person who is alleged to have harassed, that determines whether the behavior constitutes sexual harassment (David et al., 2008). Some find jokes with a sexual content to be sexually harassing, while others see sexual jokes to be part of normal interaction in the work or school setting (Baird, et al., 1995). The inclusive

definition of both verbal and action by the UNZA HIV and AIDS policy is a safeguard for the victim. It up to the University therefore to provide a safe environment for the students to learn.(Gunning- Schepers, 2005). Programs to sensitize staff and students on sexual harassment are essential at the University of Zambia. According to Monroe (1999), College and Universities impose unique expectation and opportunities. They must lead by example in eliminating gender inequities among all segments of the academic community. They also have the important opportunity to shape the future by forging an ethos of equity and care (Monroe, 1999)

### **Limitations of the study**

Although several conclusions could be drawn from the results of this study suggesting the need to deal with sexual harassment at the University of Zambia, we need to be careful when considering such conclusions. The results of the study may have been affected by various limitations such as the low response rates which may have influenced the patterns of the results and over estimation of sexual harassment. Earlier researches indicate that low response rate is often accompanied by an increased number of participants reporting sexual harassment (Gruber, 1990). It must also be acknowledged that personal characteristics of the participants may have had some influence on their responses. It was not possible for us to assess if there were any significant differences in the characteristics of those who participated and did not participate in this study due to the confidential nature of the study. .

### **CONCLUSION**

The problem of sexual harassment at UNZA should not be underestimated. The results indicate that the environment at UNZA does not allow complaints about sexual harassment. Definite measures for dealing with complaints need to be put in place, so that when a formal complaint is made, the complainants will have access to redress. Ongoing education of those who harass others and their victims is important. UNZA needs a distinct institutional policy and action plan on sexual harassment. A clear mechanism of complaints and regulatory procedures for both students and staff should be in place. We presume that Zambia is certainly not the only country with this challenge, especially in the era of HIV and AIDS. Awareness creation and education of all sectors of the community is expected to bear positive results in reducing the occurrence of sexual harassment among academia.

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