

## **Sexual Harassment Symptoms: The Effect on Female College Students' Academic Functioning**

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**Abstract:** *The paper analysed the impact of sexual harassment symptoms on the academic functioning of female college students. The findings derived from an earlier study which established the psychological, socio-emotional and physical states of female college students as a result of being sexually harassed formed the basis of the present study. The study was a desk or secondary research whereby relevant literature was interrogated to explore the effect of these states on students' academic functioning. The study found out that the symptoms of sexual harassment have a damaging effect on female students' academic functioning. The study recommends proactive actions like sexual harassment education to reduce sexual harassment occurrence as well as effective reactive counselling services for perpetrators so that crime of that nature is eliminated, and victims so that they are assisted to move on. The recommendation from this study is that institutions of higher learning must have a policy that clearly defines sexual harassment and how it should be dealt with.*

**Key words:** *sexual harassment, symptoms, female students, functioning, academic, effects*

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### **I. Introduction**

#### **Background**

Studies that have been carried out worldwide reveal that sexual harassment is prevalent in institutions of higher learning (Jewkes and Abrahams, 2002; Hill and Silva, 2005; Cadena, 2007; aware, 2008; Dhlomo et al., 2012). The researchers concur that sexual harassment includes gender harassment (generalized sexual remarks and behaviour), unwanted physical and verbal sexual attention, and the solicitation of sexual activity by threat of punishment or promise of reward (quid pro quo or sexual coercion). It is important to note that most sexual harassment includes more than one category, with the most frequent form being verbal abuse and suggestive comments followed by sexual postures, repeated requests for dates, sex or relationships and lastly outright sexual assault and coercion.

It is evident from an analysis of these studies' findings that the symptoms of sexual harassment interfere with the wellness of the individual. When viewed this way, well being implies a broader perspective that extends beyond physical health alone. Myers and Sweeney (2005) observed that wellness is often considered to be limited to physical well-being and yet it also encompasses social relationships, mental well-being and satisfaction with the surroundings (Larson, 1999; Myers and Sweeney, 2004). World Health Organisation (WHO) (1964) defines wellness as physical, social and mental well being, not just the absence of disease. Zhang and RiCharde (1998) say illness or lack of fitness may contribute negatively to academic performance, implying that students who have a high level of overall health or wellness are more likely to be more functional in the classroom. Wellness determines how well students interact with and function within the college environment.

### **II. Methodology**

For this study, desk or secondary research methodology was used. This method involves finding out what others have discovered through original research and trying to find new relationships between the normally non-related research studies, and based on the findings of these studies arrive at conclusions (Shastri, 2008). Therefore, desk research involves searching for information using existing resources, cross referencing and collation of data. In this research, it is serving as a stand-alone research method. As a result, this paper derives discussion from document analysis of what has been studied and recorded in books and the internet. The discussion interrogates how post sexual harassment symptoms impact on the female college students' academic functioning.

#### **Female college students post sexual harassment states and feelings**

Fitzgerald et al (1997) identified having to drop courses, change academic plans or leave school (loss of tuition); public scrutiny when the victim becomes the accused and her dress, life style and private life come

under attack; being objectified by scrutiny and gossip; defamation of character and reputation; loss of trust in people who occupy similar positions as the lecturer or his colleagues; extreme stress on peer relationships or relationships with colleagues; weakening of support network, or being ostracized from academic circles (friends, colleague) as some of the responses to sexual harassment. Some of these symptoms were also noted in various other studies (WLGJ, 2002; Khan, 1997). In these days of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, the female students can end up being infected with HIV (Chronicle, 31 July, 2004). A college community is a closed one and possibilities are that members of such a community can share sexual partners. If this happens, HIV and other STIs can also spread among members of the college community through sexual harassment. As a result of the sexual harassment, the female students experienced states and feelings of depression, anxiety, sleeplessness, shame and guilt, a continuous feeling of unhappiness, difficulty concentrating, loss of confidence and self esteem; physical problems like stomach aches and headaches; resenting going to the place where the harassment is occurring or occurred and thinking of dropping from the programme.

### **III. Discussion**

All the experiences indicated by the students, impact negatively on academic functioning. A student who feels dirty, ashamed embarrassed and very uncomfortable would not freely interact or mix with other students and members of staff. As a result, the student may find it difficult to attend lectures (Fitzgerald et al, 1997). It is not surprising therefore, that some of the female students experienced not wanting to come to college or attend lectures. The same feelings could also have been the cause of not wanting to talk much in lectures or find it difficult to enjoy daily college activities. Feeling hopeless and unworthy impacts negatively on one's self concept and self esteem (Fitzgerald et al, 1997). Such feelings could be the reason behind the attainment of lower grades by some of the harassed female students.

Feeling depressed negatively affects mind control, visual memory and learning of association (Torzandjani, 2006). It alters and impairs memory capacity (Park, Goodyear and Teasdale, 2002). If the student's information processing capacity is impaired it will be difficult for a student to academically function to the expected level. Productive engagement in college academic activities will be disrupted (Torzandjani, 2006; Eggen and Kauchak, 2004; Rudolph and Conley 2001; Chen and Li, 2000. Being tired all the time, finding it hard to study and difficult to pay attention in lectures, difficulty to concentrate, lack of interest and energy and withdrawal are accompanying features of depression that also undermine performance and engagement at college (Park, Goodyear and Teasdale, 2002). Fatigue or low energy interferes with a depressed person's ability to complete homework, attend class and think clearly (Sadeh et al, 1995).

Research has indicated that depressed mood is negatively related to academic achievement (Chen and Li, 2000; Sanders, 2001 cited in Modabber-Nia, Moosavi and Fallahi, 2006). Torzandjani (2006) isolated mind control, visual memory and learning of association as some of the subdivisions of memory that are negatively affected by depression. When these components are affected, attention and concentration are impaired since the individual will be unable to memorize and recall information. Transference of information from short-term to long term memory is a critical process in academic functioning which depends on attention and concentration. These processes are disrupted by depression (Eggen and Kauchak, 2004; Raulin et al, 2003). Depression has been linked to decreased classroom participation (Rudolph and Conley, 2001). A person who is depressed will often have difficulty focusing on class lectures or on reading a text book. The student may remember very little of what he or she would have read. Park, Goodyear and Teasdale (2002) found that depression affects and impairs the memory capacity. The symptoms and accompanying features of depression, like concentration difficulties, a lack of interest and energy, and withdrawal are likely to undermine performance and engagement at college.

Depression behaviours also may elicit negative reactions from teachers and peers, leading to social isolation and alienation from the school setting. As a result depression may induce negative beliefs about one's competencies and a sense of helplessness. The distorted perception of self eventually leads to a negative view of the world and the future, resulting in lack of persistence in academic tasks (Rudolph and Conley, 2001). Persistent sadness, discouragement, loss of self-worth and interest in daily activities are some of the markers of depression that significantly decrease memory performance (Pine, Lissek, Klein, et al, 2004).

Adequate sleep is necessary for the proper brain function of an individual and any amount of sleep deprivation will diminish mental performance. Even though college students suffer more sleep deprivation than the normal adult population because of their studies (Buboltz, Brown and Barlow, 2001), El-Sheikh, Buckhalt, Cummings, and Keller (2007) found that sleep disruptions related to students' social problems impacted on the students' academic functioning. In a study on stress and sleep patterns of students at Tel Aviv University, Sadeh found that those students who tended to focus on their emotions and anxiety during the high-stress period were more likely to shorten their sleep. Excessive worrying about the harassment can contribute to stress and can keep the student up at night.

Experiencing a disruptive or stressful environment has been linked to a wide range of adverse mental health outcomes (Rudolph and Conley, 2001). Stress and the accompanying emotional distress may then interfere with academic tasks. Stressful experiences and emotional difficulties are likely to undermine college-related competencies, including academic motivation and college engagement, goal orientation, college performance, and college conduct (Rudolph and Conley, 2001). Stressful experiences and emotional difficulties lead to a state of anxiety. Anxiety is characterized by feelings of tension and apprehension, worrisome thoughts, or autonomic nervous system responses (Spielberger, 1995) which result in decreased academic performance.

Feeling angry and hurt and afraid which was experienced by some of the students could also be the reason why some of the students ended up performing lowly academically. Besides making it difficult for the students to work with others, such emotions reduce concentration, making it difficult to process and retain information (Rudolph and Conley, 2001). For a student, information analysis and retention is important in research, assignment writing and when undertaking examinations. The emotions of anger and fear may therefore cause a sexually harassed female student to perform below her expected potential level.

Not wanting to come to college or attend lectures and thinking about changing colleges respectively indicated by some of the students was an effort to avoid the environment in which the harassment occurred or is occurring (Kaysen, Resick and Wise, 2003). This could be an effort to avoid public scrutiny and blame for causing the harassment (Rudolph and Conley, 2001). If sound support systems are not in place, the student may abscond or drop out (Fitzgerald et al, 1997), citing some other reasons not sexual harassment. This militates against both the individual student's drive to acquire a qualification and the government's efforts to invest in the production of teachers. It is therefore imperative for the teachers' college authorities to ensure that procedures to rehabilitate both the harassed and harasser are in place and are made known so that the students do not experience loss of tuition or view leaving or transferring to another college as the solution.

Sleeping badly, which some of the sexually harassed female students complained about, is known to diminish mental functioning (Buboltz, Brown and Barlow, 2001) and academic functioning (El-Sheikh, Buckhalt, Cummings and Keller, 2007). Keeping up at night could be a result of excessive worrying about the harassment (Sadeh et al, 1995). Lack of adequate sleep also manifest as feeling tired all the time, unusual headaches, stomach cramps, and blood pressure problems. Excessive worrying can also result in stress (Sadeh et al, 1995) which can also be characterised by symptoms like headaches, feelings of tension and tiredness (Spielberger, 1995). The stress and accompanying emotional distress undermine the female students' college-related competencies like academic motivation, college engagement, goal orientation, college conduct and college performance (Rudolph and Conley, 2001), which all work together for successful completion of the course for each student.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

- The symptoms of sexual harassment negatively impact on the academic functioning of sexually harassed female students.
- Sexually harassed female students are not being helped to deal with the harassment.
- College communities are not adequately guided on how to deal with sexual harassment at the college.

#### **V. Recommendations**

The study recommends the following:

- There is need for tertiary institutions to have policies that guide students and staff on how to deal with sexual harassment in the institutions. When there are organizational policies in place, both the harassed and the harasser will be guided on the action to be taken.
- Proactive measures against sexual harassment must be emphasized more than reactive ones.
- Tertiary institutions should also institute sexual harassment education programmes for students and lecturers so that both know what constitutes sexual harassment and how it can be dealt with.
- The students and lecturers should be made aware of the social, economic, emotional and legal implications of committing such a criminal act.
- Institutions should provide counselling services to victims and perpetrators to help them deal with the effects of sexual harassment.
- Colleges need organisational policies that assist female student survivors of sexual harassment to cope with college academic work.

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