GENDERED SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The study investigated the perceived influence of gender roles and stereotypes on sexual harassment among selected South African secondary schools’ girl learners in the Free State using the quantitative methodology. 200 Participants were selected through a cluster random sampling technique. The Sexual Experiences Survey instrument was used to collect data and data were analysed through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) – Windows, version 19 programme. The gender discrimination theory served as the conceptual framework. The study will provide the department of education, educators, parents and learners with a clear understanding of the impact of gender discrimination on girl learners in relation to sexual harassment. Education policy makers and reviewers will also benefit from the study during their policy review, formation and implementation sessions. The study revealed that sexual harassment is gendered and does not discriminate against any gender. This finding suggests a shift from being either feminine or masculine as most of the learners are beginning to be androgynous. Feminism as well as gender theories will be discussed to develop an understanding on how gender discrimination and inequalities are relating to sexual harassment incidents for both girls and boys. Subsequent to the findings, the conclusion is that gender discrimination and sexual harassment affects all irrespective of gender. The researchers recommends further research on the relationship between sexual harassment and gender discrimination based on cultural stereotypes and how such stereotypes affect the education system.

Keywords: Androgynous, feminism, gender theories, masculinity, sexual harassment.

# INTRODUCTION

Several grievances ascending from sexual harassment in secondary schools were recorded in the education sector in South Africa. The indication from these cases is that, it is a severe problem that is observed as early as in primary schools up until at institutions of higher learning [1; 2]. By implication, any girl child of school going age is prone to being a sexual harassment victim in South African schools. Discrimination, repression and neglect are being brought back to the picture as they were during the apartheid era due to the commonness of sexual harassment in schools [3]. The country’s vision, promulgates that “South Africa belongs to all who live in it” [4] endeavors for freedom from gender discrimination including all forms of supremacy as conserved in the Constitution of the Republic of South African. This shared vision is entrenched in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and related laws. Additionally, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa preserves values of democracy like dignity of all humans, impartiality and free will [4].

[5] In a study on gender equality posit that a lot of women are subjected to diverse forms of violence just because they are women.  In addition, [6] during the United Nations campaign presentation, which was launched to make sure that young men and women achieve women’s rights and empowerment in their different countries as a starting point to deal with gender violence. The cited research provides evidence that gender bias results to gender based violence. Furthermore, gender- based violence consists of intimidation, sexualised verbal abuse, assault or rape, which are some of the defilements, especially of girl learners as per the focus of this study.

The purpose of the study

This study sought to investigate the influence of gender roles and stereotypes on sexual harassment of girl learners in secondary schools in the Free State. The following research question was used to probe participants’ views to achieve the set objective of the study.

Research questions:

1. Which forms of sexual harassment are prevalent in secondary schools in the Free State?

# METHODOLOGY

2.1.1 Paradigm

The positivistic paradigm was used for this study. A primary goal of positivist inquiry is to generate explanatory associations or causal relationships that ultimately lead to prediction and control of the phenomena in question. The choice was consequent to its relationship with what the researchers were betrothed in for the data gathering duration as well as after data gathering and interpretation processes. The positivistic paradigm is reliant on hypothetic deductive method of authentication which are mostly presented quantitatively where practical relationships between underlying and illustrative factors and conclusions can be derived [7].

2.1.2 Population

The population of the study consist of all girl learners who are in grades 8 to 12 at secondary schools of Thabo Mofutsanyana District and all officials based at the Education District office of Thabo Mofutsanyana. Girl learners were selected to share their experiences on the reality of the scourge as well as to reveal forms of sexual harassment in their school surroundings.

2.1.3 Sample and sampling techniques

A sample of N=200 participants, was drawn from secondary schools’ girl learners based in the Thabo Mofutsanyana Education District. The sample was drawn from 24 secondary schools across Thabo Mofutsanyana district with each of the five local municipalities represented. The numbers were distributed as follows: (N= 70) learners from secondary schools based in Maluti A Phofung local municipality, (N = 50) learners from Dihlabeng local municipality, (N = 40) learners from Setsoto local municipality secondary schools, (N = 20), Learners from Nketoana local municipality secondary schools and (N = 20) learners from secondary schools based in Phumelela local municipality. Stratified random sampling technique was used to select girl leaners.

2.1.4 Instruments

The Sexual Experiences Questionnaire – Revised (SEQ –W) was administered to all girl learners.

2.1.5 Data collection procedure

The main researcher secured appointments with the 24 principals to arrange for the distribution of questionnaire to their learner participants. On the other hand, participants from the district office were also contacted through the district director’s office and an interview appointment plan was drawn according to their work schedules. The completed questionnaire was collected from the principals whose schools the researcher could not administer the questionnaire in person. Interviews were conducted both in person and telephonically depending on the availability and preferences of the different officials. Recorded interviews were transcribed before analysing the data.

2.1.6 Data analysis techniques

Researchers utilised the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) – Windows, version 19 computer programme to analyse collected data from the questionnaire.

2.1.7 Ethical issues

Sexual harassment in its nature is a delicate conversation point in most of the communities. Subsequently, ethical issues had to be executed to the latter when conducting research. Ethical clearance for both conducting research and data gathering in schools was received from the Central University of Technology and the Free State Department of Education respectively. Parents of participant girl learners were addressed on the process and the purpose of the study. Following the discussions parents were then requested to complete and sign the consent form. The consent was necessary as school going learners are still regarded as minors by law. In line with the loco parentis rule, principals granted permission to consent on behalf of parents in some schools. Additionally, participants were informed that their participation was optional and purely voluntary. Learners were also informed that they can withdraw from the programme as and when they wish to do so without being subjected to any discussions. Thus, participants’ wishes could be implemented. The researcher guaranteed all participants’ confidentiality and assured them that data gathered would only be used for research purposes and nothing else. To protect respondents’ identity, girl learner participants were instructed not to write their names on the questionnaire.

# RESULTS

Responses to the research question: *Which forms of sexual harassment are prevalent in secondary schools in the Free State*? Provides an indication that sexual harassment as was categorised into six indices for purposes of identifying gender related aspects exists in secondary schools. The categorisation of sexual harassment was as follows: general sexual harassment, unwanted sexual attention, sexual coercion, sexist hostility, sexual hostility and gender-based harassment. The least prevalent index was sexual coercion which was experienced by 30% of girl participants and the highest experienced form was sexual hostility, experienced by 50% of girl participants. Graph 1 below represent responses by girl learner participants.

Graph 1 Prevalent Forms of Sexual Harassment in selected Free State Secondary Schools

Pursuant to the results of the research question above, there was a need to further outline which of the six categories are more prevalent than others. Graph 2 below will represent the top three categories which are more prevalent.

Graph2: Most prevalent categories of sexual harassment in selected Free State Secondary Schools

Graph 2 above confirms reflect sexual hostility as the most prevalent category of sexual harassment followed by unwanted sexual attention and lastly the gender based harassment. The three represents the most prevalent forms of sexual harassment in secondary schools under investigation. The most prevalent form of sexual harassment is sexual hostility with 14, 4% of girl learners stating that it happened very often. Unwanted sexual attention as confirmed by 10, 14 % of the girl learners comes just after the sexual hostility. The top 3 pack is being closed by gender-based harassment which registered 10, 9 % of girls saying that it is happening very often.

## Discussion

According to [7], sexist hostility, like making jokes that are belittling or remarks implying that women cannot be successful in science because they are not up to the required intelligence level. The study revealed that 25% of women who are pursuing engineering studies and 50% of those in the medical field in the USA’s Texas system alluded to the notion. As per the report, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion were lower whereas in the current study unwanted sexual attention is the second highest. The fact that Sexual Hostility in the Thabo Mofutsanyana is not influenced by the age of learners, as noted in the ANOVA results of the study, is also a source of concern as this suggests that any girl who is in a secondary school of Thabo Mofutsanyana is vulnerable.

* + 1. *Unwanted Sexual Attention*

[7] Notes that sexist and crude behaviour accounts for the highest number of sexual harassment. [7] Further agrees with the notion that these frequent practices of sexual harassment contribute to unwanted sexual advances. The study, through ANOVA, discovered that unwanted sexual attention in the Thabo Mofutsanyana secondary schools is not dependent on the age of the girl child. The ANOVA analysis noted the p-value = 0,492 and alpha = 0, 05. In addition, the ANOVA exposed that the sexist and crude behaviour form of sexual harassment is not swayed by the municipal area where the school is based. As a result, a girl learner gets affected by unwanted sexual attention irrespective of her local municipality, as her presence in the Thabo Mofutsanyana means that she is prone to victimisation.

* + 1. *Gender Harassment Index*

[7] Points out that the report also pronounces that persistent and detrimental “gender harassment” actions demean women and leave them with a sense that they do not belong. These actions include sexist comments and demeaning jokes. The report found out that the conducted large surveys observed that female science and medical students, 17% and 50% respectively had experienced this type of harassment. As already noted, the conclusion from the ANOVA results on gender Harassment is that the age of the girl learner in Thabo Mofutsanyana District Secondary Schools does not influence gender based harassment on her.  The above conclusion is drawn from the p-value = 0,445; alpha = 0, 05.  However, the ANOVA also revealed that the local municipality influences this form of sexual harassment with the p-value = 0,014. Hence, the location of the school becomes a determinant the level of exposure to gender harassment.

* + 1. *Sexual Hostility*

[7] Report on sexual harassment of women: Climate, Culture, and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine revealed that the most common form of sexual harassment experienced by Texas University students and faculty staff was sexual hostility. Sexual hostility, according to ANOVA results, is influenced by the local municipality in which the secondary school is situated in at the p-value = 0,001; alpha = 0, 05. However, it is not influenced by the age of the girl learnerwith the p-value = 0,776.

## Feminism

Feminist theory seeks to clarify the nature of gender inequality [8; 9]. Feminism also focuses on females’ and males’ social roles, practices, benefits, responsibilities, and feminist politics from contexts located in a diversity of sectors like anthropology and sociology, communiqué, broadcasting studies and therapy. [10] Notes that the feminist theory defines a political, cultural or economic crusade intended at creating equal rights and legal protection for women. [11] Also note that there is a need to clarify how establishments function with normative gendered expectations and choices to incentivise or reprimand gendered matters.

[9] Defines it as a main division of theory within sociology that changes its conventions, logical lens, and contemporary concentration away from the male standpoint and practise towards that of women. In addition, [11] explain the feminist philosophy as an investigation of both disparity in gender affairs and the configuration of gender. The above definitions indicate that the feminist theory has a relationship with feminism, male standpoint, gender affairs and the composition of gender in the society. Hence, this considers this theoretical framework in relation to concepts and themes that include discrimination, objectification (particularly sexual objectification), oppression, patriarchy, and stereotyping.

It should however, be underscored that feminist philosophy suggests that “sexual harassment be treated as a sexist act that aims to defeat and disempower women, and punish their efforts to compete with men over jobs and status” [10:1]. This philosophy instigates scholars to view sexual harassment differently and not as a sexual act but from a gender-based perspective that echoes male supremacy and female’s subservience, those persistently tolerated by communities.

## Gender Theories

[5] In a study on gender equality states that many women experience different forms of violence just because they are women.  In addition, [6] presented the United Nations campaign which was launched to make sure that young men and women achieve women’s rights and empowerment in their different countries as a starting point to deal with gender violence. It is evident, from the cited research that gender prejudice leads to gender based violence. Moreover, gender- based violence comprises of intimidation, sexualised verbal abuse, assault or rape, which are some of the violations, particularly of girl students that this study focuses on.

According to [12] and [13] sexual harassment is regarded as a form of gender violence or violence that is clearly or indirectly reflect gender aspects. Explicit gender violence encompasses sexual harassment, hostile or unwelcome sexual advances, touching, coercion assault or rape [14]. Indirect gender violence includes emotional antagonism, verbal abuse and daily life that reinforces and spreads gender differences. In this perspective, sexual harassment becomes a great feature of gender violence.

Different gender theories are discussed in an effort to respond to the question above and unpack the writer’s enunciation over the gender roles and identity in relation to the feminist approach. Feminists believe that theories of gender domination go further than theories of gender transformation together with disparity [9]. Their stand point is that women are not the same or rendered unequal to men and face with active oppression, subordination and even abuse from men [9]. “The gender schema theory; social learning theory; social role theory; psychoanalysis theory and cognitive development theory form part of the familiar psychological theories of gender role and identity” [15]. The above - mentioned theories assist to give direction and widen our understanding of how socialisation stages as a lifelong process to adolescents and all members of the community together with societal organisations towards the advancement of gender related functions and beliefs.

### Gender Schema Theory

The theory is a reflection of traditional features of gender roles of expecting women to be of a developmental in nature whilst men are expected to be competitive. This theory postulates that the culture that kids live in becomes a learning process for them to understand the meaning of being male and female [16; 17]. In terms of this stand point, sex-typing, which is one type of sexual harassment which is gaining popularity in secondary schools, is consequently largely from gender schematic processing; which is the child’s state of readiness to translate and arrange information in terms of the cultural meaning of functions that are dedicated to individuals based on their sex [18]. The scholar [18] continues to mention that children’s observations of the cultural discrepancies made between males and females in their different environments serves as a learning process of detailed gender roles information, and the significance of gender. The manner in which people tend to process information is guided by the cognitive structure which is referred to as an acquired gender schema [19].

### Social Learning Theory

Social learning theorists note that the main form of learning behaviour is the observation of other people’s conduct [20; 21; 22; 23]. Various children imitate role models who are viewed by communities as influential, developmental and conforming to certain societal roles [24].

The list of the references should be given at the end of the paper. References are numbered in brackets by order of appearance in the document (e.g. [1], [2], [3]). The same reference can be cited more than once in the text with the same reference number. The references should be cited according to the Bibliography and Citation Style: <https://iated.org/citation_guide>.

# CONCLUSIONS

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