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Students' experiences of sexual harassment; a descriptive cross-sectional study in a college of education, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Sexual harassment is a component of gender-based discrimination that indicates unequal power relations and affects students' psychological and physical well-being and academic achievement. This study assessed students' experiences of sexual harassment at the Offinso College of Education.

Methods: This cross-sectional descriptive study incorporated a whole population sampling of second and third-year female students to respond to a pre-tested questionnaire uploaded on Google Forms. The data were vetted for appropriateness, cleaned in Microsoft Excel, and transferred to IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences for analysis into descriptive statistics and chi-square tests of associations.

Results: The study indicated that women (66%) had previously had sex before admission into college and perceived that they were at risk of sexual harassment (43.0%). It was statistically significant that the student's level of education was associated with the experience of being sexually harassed ($\chi 2 = 10.950$, *p-value* <0.00) and the perception that sexual harassment was a problem among students ($\chi 2 = 13.376$, *p-value* <0.01). The nature of the female students' marital relationships was statistically significant ($\chi 2 = 11.209$, *p-value* <0.02) to the perception of sexual harassment as a problem in the college.

Conclusion: Female students must have adequate education on the sexual harassment policy of the institution and measures put in place to identify and provide appropriate sanctions to issues of sexual harassment at the college education level.

1. Introduction

Sexual harassment in educational institutions is an unfortunate part of the educational experience and is not a new phenomenon in tertiary education worldwide [1–3]. Sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination that involves sexual propositions or requests for sexual favoritism and other verbal and physical contacts of a sexual nature [4]. Sexual harassment is also a component of gender-based discrimination that indicates unequal power relations between men and women [5]. Sexual harassment affects students' psychological and physical well-being and academic achievement [1,6,7] and includes sexual violence, which consists of sexual acts perpetrated

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against a person's will or without a person's consent [5,8]. The phenomenon causes the victims irritation, frustration, anxiety, stress, and trauma [3,9]. The negative academic consequences are that students avoid school, experience low academic performance, have diminished interest in education or co-curricular activities, and have insufficient dedication to academic life [10]. Yet, sexual harassment policies in schools are not comprehensive [2]. Inadequate sexual policies have resulted from the limited focus of education authorities on this subject area, and the overall level of influence of has not been assessed adequately in Ghana's colleges of education.

In educational settings, sexual harassment involves unwelcome sexual advances or propositions that intend to interfere with academic performance or create an intimidating and hostile academic environment against the victims [11]. Sexual harassment lacks universality in description and quantification in educational institutions [12]. It was also described as an unwelcomed sexual advance, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature [13]. The concept is said to occur when any of the following is accurate: (1) such conduct is either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of a person's employment or academic advancement; (2) there is the rejection of sexual advances or conduct by an individual as the basis for employment decisions or academic decisions affecting the person; (3) such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with a person's work or academic performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working, learning or social environment [13].

Sexual harassment can occur everywhere on campus, including the classrooms, libraries, and academic and administrative staff offices [6]. A survey by the Association of American Universities identified that 11.7% of students across 27 universities reported experiencing some form of non-consensual sexual contact by physical force and threats of physical force [14]. In Sweden, 77% of female students experienced sexual harassment in their academic life [15]. A study by six African countries showed that between 16% and 47% of women in primary and secondary schools reported sexual harassment by male teachers and students [16]. A survey of female adolescents in Ghana showed that 7–48% of their first sexual experiences were forced [17]. In most of these sexual harassment cases, the offender was someone known to the woman and maybe a family member, friend, schoolmate, or teacher [17]. In Ghana, both the traditional and contra-power forms of sexual harassment are prevalent in public universities and professional institutions [18]. Sexual harassment in these institutions was tolerated because most victims engage in transactional sex with male professors for academic grades or financial assistance to pay school fees [1,19,20]. This challenge is gender deferential on how the harassment occurs, as women are 61% more likely than men (39%) to be sexually harassed in medical schools in Ghana [21].

Policymakers and law enforcement officers have ignored mainly sexual harassment in education. Where it has been addressed, the focus has been on peer-on-peer sexual harassment [22], even though more than one-third of female college students do not tell anyone about their experiences with sexual harassment [6]. Female students offer a range of reasons they do not report incidents, including fear of embarrassment, guilt about their behavior, skepticism that anyone can or will help, and not knowing whom to contact at the school and/or the experience was not severe or "not a big deal" [6]. The case of female students' sexual harassment is further worsened by the increasing burden brought about by the patriarchal nature of Ghanaian societies where female girl child education is still underdeveloped [23]. Studies on this subject area are also limited and have not focused on female students in college education, especially in Ghana. Regardless of this seeming neglect or fear of discussing this subject matter, it is a canker that most students suffer. Issues of sexual harassment have been assessed in conventional universities in Ghana [18,21,24], but to the best of our knowledge, this is not reported in teacher training institutions. This study aimed to assess students' experiences of sexual harassment in the Offinso College of Education.

2. Methodology

2.1. Design

This was a descriptive cross-sectional study of female trainee teachers in the Offinso College of Education in the Ashanti region of Ghana. Because of the restrictions that were brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers used Google forms to collect the data. The questionnaire was self-administered because all study respondents could read and comprehend English.

3. Settings

Located in the Offinso township of the Ashanti region of Ghana, the college has a teaching staff of 48; 13 females and 35 males. The non-teaching staff is 52 personnel. The student population for the 2020/2021 academic year was 522 females and 675 males. Currently, the college awards a bachelor's degree after its three-year basic education diploma was upgraded in September 2007. The Offinso College of education's vision is to provide an excellent teaching and learning environment with opportunities for training quality teachers. The vision reflects the college's core values, which are competence, dedication, God-fearing, and commitment. Student leadership is usually contested by both males and females, even though the males dominate key positions. Offinso College of Education has a sexual harassment policy aligned with the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC) policy on sexual harassment in tertiary institutions [25]. The sexual harassment policy protects the staff and students against sexual abuse from colleagues and authorities, and it also strengthens the college's values of a no discriminatory environment. Safe space and focal persons are known to the students and tutors and abstracts of the policy are included in the student's handbook.

3.1. Population and sampling

The sampled population was female teacher trainees in the Offinso College of Education in the Ashanti Region. There are about 300 female teacher trainees in the college out of 850 students for the target levels. This study specifically targeted students who were in

Levels 200 and 300. The first years (level 100) were not part of the sampled population because they spent less than a year on campus (at the time of data collection) and barely understood the activities in the school, especially concerning sexual behavior. Students were not physically present in the college but held online classes during the study period because of restrictions that were imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The link (to the Google Forms) was posted on the various course platforms, and instructions were given on how the forms will be accessed and completed online. Also, two trained research assistants were available to help clarify questions the respondents raised. The research assistants had a day of training by the study principal investigators (authors) on using Google Forms, research ethics, and the questionnaire. Research assistants had a minimum of a bachelor's degree. Students who had specific questions about the study could call the research assistants or contact them through WhatsApp messaging application. Students who contacted research assistants had all their concerns addressed. Upon completing the questionnaire, the researcher checked to ensure the participants duly submitted the form. The Google Forms were created using the email address of the first author.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The questionnaire was pre-tested with 20 female students from St. Monica College of Education in Mampong. The St. Monica College of Education is also located in the Ashanti region of Ghana and shares very similar cultural and demographic characteristics to the study institution. The validity of the instrument was assessed, and the alpha Cronbach score was calculated to be 0.79. The questionnaire contained both closed and open-ended items. The closed-ended questions were dichotomous, Likert scale type, or multiple-choice responses. The first section of the questionnaire assessed female students' experiences of sexual harassment since they were admitted into the college. In this section, they also reported the nature of sexual relationships they have been in since being admitted into the college and if they found sexual harassment a challenge. This further required them to ascertain if the harassment was from an employee of the college or from a male colleague student. The students were required to indicate the frequency of experiencing sexual harassment situations between them and a college student or an employee of the collection during the previous year. Further, the questionnaire also assessed the actions taken when they experience sexual harassment. These questions were adopted from the sexual harassment survey [26] to measure sexual harassment among college students.

Before the statistical analysis, the data from the completed questionnaires were checked for completeness and appropriateness of responses, cleaned, coded, and entered into the IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, version 24) for analysis. Descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies and Chi-square test of relationship were used. Data analysis involving demographic characteristics and sexual experiences were analyzed as proportions. Cross tabulations of comparisons were conducted with a Chi-square test statistic to identify the factors related to the identification of sexual harassment as a problem in the training institution.

3.3. Ethics

The principal and management of the Offinso College of Education gave permission for the conduct of the study before the commencement. This study was performed in line with the principles of the declaration of Helsinki. The Ethics Committee of the Institute of Health Research at the University of Health and Allied Sciences approved the study [UHAS.REC.A9.(21) 20–210]. Participants were informed about the study's goal, and verbal consent was obtained before they could answer the questionnaire. Respondents were told they could opt out of the study at any point they so wished without repercussions. There were no repercussions

Table 1
Distribution of demographic characteristics.

Responses	Frequency $(n = 297)$	Percent (%)	
AGE			
18–24	224	75.4	
25–30	56	18.9	
>30	17	5.7	
Year in school now			
Second-year	208	70.0	
Third-year	89	30.0	
Ethnicity			
Ashanti	198	66.7	
Bono	7	2.4	
Ewe	11	3.7	
Fante	6	2.0	
Others	42	14.2	
Religion			
Christian	281	94.6	
Muslim	15	5.1	
Traditional religion	1	0.3	
Marital status			
Cohabitating	5	1.7	
Married	15	5.1	
separated	1	0.3	
Single	276	92.9	

associated with participants' decision to participate or not in this study or those who chose to opt out of the survey.

4. Results

4.1. Demographic characteristics

The study was conducted using 297 young adult females in levels 200 and 300 of the Offinso College of Education. Most respondents were between 18 and 24 years (75.4%), while a few (5.7%) were more than 30 years old. The students were Ashantis (66.7%) by ethnicity, Christians (96.6%) by religion, and single (92.9%) based on marital status. The demographic characteristics are shown in Table 1.

4.2. Sexual experience of students

The results showed that respondents (66%) had had previous sexual intercourse before admission into the college. The students (43.0%) perceived that they were at risk of sexual harassment, while some (39.0%) were uncertain of their risk of sexual harassment, as shown in Table 2. Receiving sexual unwarranted remarks from colleague students (68.0%) or college employees (76.0%) were reported. Also, some (74.0%) indicated some employees tried to engage in sexual conversation with them, while 80% showed some employees tried to harass them. Some (80%) indicated some college employees attempted to have a sexual outing (date) with them. Some students (8.0%) revealed they had been sexually harassed in the past by college employees, while 8% indicated they have a

Table 2

Distribution of sexual harassment experience.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Sex in past		
No	102	34.3
Yes	195	65.7
Nature of relationship in offinso college (unmarried fema	ale)	
Casual/free sexual relationship	52	20.1
Married relationship	157	60.6
Steady, serious relationship	50	19.3
Fear of sexual harassment in future		
Perceive risk of Sexual harassment	124	42.5
Uncertain of risk	115	39.4
No perceived risk or sexual harassment	53	18.2
Sexual remarks from student		
No response	19	6.4
No	201	67.7
Yes	77	25.9
Sexual remarks or jokes from an employee		
No response	17	5.7
No	225	75.8
Yes	55	18.5
Employees try to engage in sexual conversation.		
No response	17	5.7
No	220	74.1
Yes	60	20.2
An employee tried to harass through Social Networking		
No response	18	6.1
No	236	79.5
Yes	43	14.5
A student tried to harass me through SNS		
No response	19	6.4
No	224	75.4
Yes	54	18.2
Sexual outing or dating by an employee	01	- 1
No response	21	7.1
No	236	79.5
Yes	40	13.5
Physical sexually harassed by an employee	16	F 4
No response	16	5.4
No	258 23	86.9 7.7
Yes		1.1
Afraid will be sexually harassed by a student based on a	19	6.4
No response Maybe	36	6.4 12.1
No	36 219	73.7
Yes	23	7.7

heightened risk of being harassed by students at the college. Few students (11.8%) complained that they had received unsolicited Social Networking Services (SNS) from fellow students, even though some (5.7%) did not respond to this item. The female students (10.1%) indicated they had been threatened with harm following sexual advances by a college employee, while others (5.7%) did not respond to this item. Also, the respondents (25.9%) indicated that their female students engage in sexually unwarranted conversations with them, while others (6.7%) did not respond to this item.

4.3. Factors associated with the risk of sexual harassment

It was statistically significant ($\chi 2 = 10.950$, n = 297, p = 0.001) that the student's college education level was statistically associated with the experience of being sexually harassed in the past. Second-year (13.9%) and third years (30.3%) indicated they had been sexually harassed. It was also statistically significant ($\chi 2 = 13.376$, n = 297, p = 0.010) that the level of education was related to the perception that sexual harassment was a problem among students at the college. The results showed that 13.0%, 31.2%, 13.0%, 20.2%, and 22.6% of level 200 students agreed, disagreed, neutral, strongly agreed, and strongly disagreed with sexual harassment as a problem in the college. On the other hand, level 300 students indicated that they agreed (27.0%), disagreed (16.9%), were neutral (18.0%), strongly agreed (16.9%), and strongly disagreed (21.3%). The relationship between marital status, having experience with sex, and the nature of sexual relationships one has in the college showed a significant relationship to the determination of sexual harassment as a problem in the Offinso College of Education, as shown in Table 3.

5. Discussion

This study assessed the perception and experiences of sexual harassment in tertiary institutions using the Offinso College of Education as a case in Ghana. In this study, we assessed students' perception of sexual harassment or unwarranted sexual advances made to them by college employees or male colleagues students. This study is essential because issues related to sexual harassment over the years have disproportionally disadvantaged women who have primarily been victims. Sexual harassment leaves in its trail lasting harm to women and students at tertiary levels and influences how to achieve academic excellence [27]. This extreme disadvantage worsens when there is a power gradient with the woman on the lower side. In Ghana, women have historically had less access to tertiary-level education than males, with many tertiary educational institutions putting pragmatic interventions to ensure that women receive an appropriate education at the tertiary level [23]. Depending on the setting, sexual harassment can encompass a range of behaviors and practices of a sexual nature, such as unwanted sexual comments or advances, sexual jokes, displaying pictures or posters objectifying women, physical contact, or sexual assault [28].

We identified that 66.0% of young adult females reported having had sex before gaining admission into college. In the typical Ghanaian culture, sex and sexual behavior are a prerogative for only married people, and premarital sexual encounters are highly discouraged. These findings were similar to the report that 69% of unmarried women in Ghana had had sexual intercourse in 2018 [2, 29]. These findings contradict the anecdotal belief that sexual reproductive issues are poorly discussed among non-married women as

Table 3

	Sexual harassment as a problem				
	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	X2	p-value
Age					
18–24	116 (54.0%)	52 (24.2%)	47 (21.9%)	3.07	0.546
25–30	30 (53.6%)	10 (17.9%)	16 (28.6%)		
>30	7 (41.2%)	4 (23.5%)	6 (35.3%)		
Marital Status					
Cohabitating	1(20.0%)	4 (80.0%)	0	19.492	.003
Married	13 (86.0%)	1 (7.0%)	1 (7.0%)		
Separated	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	1 (100)		
Single	139 (52.1%)	61 (22.8%)	67 (25.1%)		
Sex in the past					
No	51 (52.0%)	30 (30.6%)	17 (17.3%)	6.582	0.037
Yes	102 (53.7%)	36 (18.9%)	52 (27.4%)		
Nature of current sexual rela	ationship				
Casual	24 (46.2%)	14 (26.9%)	14 (26.9%)	11.309	0.023
Married	89 (58.6%)	36 (23.7%)	27 (17.7%)		
Steady relationship	18 (37.5%)	11 (22.9%)	19 (39.6%)		
Religion					
Christian	149 (54.8%)	60 (22.1%)	63 (23.2%)	7.801	0.99
Muslim	3 (20.0%)	6 (40.0%)	6 (40.0%)		
traditional religion	1 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)		
Have adequate knowledge of	of SH policy				
Maybe	22 (52.4%)	15 (35.7%)	5 (11.9%)	13.237	0.039
No	51 (53.7%)	22 (23.2%)	22 (23.2%)		
Yes	80 (53.7%)	29 (19.5%)	40 (26.8%)		

they were empowered to mention personal escapes even among non-married people. Sexual stigma among Ghana's non-married, unworking, and young girls may be uncommon. People who have had sexual experiences are likely to repeat the same and may encourage sexual relationships while in college. Therefore, it was not surprising that 73.7% of the ladies did not feel they were at risk of sexual harassment. This may be a result of their exposure to what constitutes sexual harassment through orientation to the sexual harassment policy document of the college [25]. However, those who have had sex in the past (53.7%) did not identify sexual harassment as a significant problem. Sexual touch or advances may come in various forms, and women's ability to identify the same in its early stages is key to mitigating the resulting devastation. This is particularly problematic as several terms are used to describe the concept of sexual harassment in Ghana [18,21]. The words used include forcing sex on another, seeking sexual favors, and offering unwelcome gifts or dates, which are unwelcome, unwanted, non-consensual, offensive, and unwelcome [21,24].

It is essential that as female students perceive higher academic careers, they are mentally and emotionally stable in doing so. It was identified that 42.5% of women in the colleges of education were afraid of the risk of sexual harassment in the future. The nature of the interaction between male workers and students' female counterparts might be vital in fueling these fears that female students harbor [25,30]. This is particularly worrying that women cannot focus on academic work [30–32]. Similarly, findings were reported among hotel workers in Ghana [33]. This emphasizes the liberal nature of the laws that govern workplace attitudes and male-female relationships in Ghana. Sexual harassment issues must be engrained in the policy of educational institutions to increase the perception that the likelihood of occurrence will be minimal. In this study, students (14.2%) reported they were not given education on the sexual harassment policy of the institution. In comparison, only 76.4% of the students indicated they knew the sexual harassment policy. Lack of knowledge of sexual harassment policies is a bane to the measures women institute to prevent [30,31]. This is particularly important because when sexual harassment occurs, it can influence female students' academic performance [30,32]. In Ghana, women are disproportionately affected by the repercussions of sexual harassment, especially in educational and other institutions, because of the patriarchal nature of Ghanaian communities and the limited access to education by women due to cultural and social beliefs.

In light of this, fresh students in the college must be educated on the sexual harassment policy upon admission and stiffer punishment meted out to those who engage in such acts. It was shown that knowledge of the sexual harassment policy was inadequate among the students as 35.7%, 23.2%, and 19.5% reported "maybe," "no," and "yes" to the question if they had adequate knowledge of the sexual harassment policy of the college. This Chi-square relationship was statistically significant (*p-value*<0.037). The college has a sexual harassment policy, but it is poorly circulated among students, limiting this policy's awareness level. Other findings recommended institutional sexual harassment policy circulation among students [1,21,25]. The circulation of the sexual harassment policy document will give students adequate knowledge and information on the policy, and students are likely to take appropriate actions if they are sexually harassed. As part of first-year students' orientation at the college, the sexual harassment policy is introduced. However, there are so many issues that fresh students must deal with within this period and may pay limited attention to. This limits the usefulness of the policy as they mature through the institution. Therefore, it is imperative that education on sexual harassment and the policy is continuous to keep students abreast and educated. It was statistically significant that students' marital status, history of having sexual intercourse, and the nature of current sexual relationships influenced the perception of sexual harassment as a problem in college. As women have had previous sexual relationships, their likelihood of identifying unwarranted sexual behavior from colleagues or employees of the college increased. These factors were reported to influence the awareness of sexual harassment in educational institutions elsewhere [34].

This study elicited the perception of sexual harassment among students in the college of education. The study was not without some limitations. Firstly, this study was a cross-sectional self-reported experience of sexual harassment and may present some inherent challenges as students could have been timid to respond sincerely about their experience of sexual harassment. This is particularly so that sexual harassment and issue related to sex are poorly discussed, with the power gradient that usually influences such relationships also a factor. Secondly, students' experiences of sexual harassment in colleges must be assessed at the point of completion, where the fear of being victimized may be limited. Also, the findings may be influenced by the variations in the precise definition of sexual harassment as it presents varied interpretations to people depending on their past experiences and current situation. Conceptualizing and having a uniform definition of the concept, especially in the colleges of education, remain imperative. Lastly, this study was conducted in only a single college of education and may not reflect the situation in other educational institutions entirely; hence, the findings should be interpreted with caution.

6. Conclusions

It was shown that even though the school has a sexual harassment policy, female students cannot be described as having adequate education on the policy and hence could not describe their knowledge of the policy to be acceptable. Also, the female students identified issues of sexual harassment in the college as a significant problem, and a good proportion indicated they had a higher risk of experiencing sexual harassment in the future. The college authorities must institute measures to ensure that students receive adequate and appropriate education on the sexual harassment policy, with the institutionalization of continuous education and resolutions of sexual harassment issues a constant activity in the college. It is also crucial that those engaged in sexual harassment receive the appropriate sanctions to deter offenders and repose confidence in implementing the policy. Further research is required to test effective means of improving students' knowledge of identifying at-risk situations and the appropriate therapy for victims. School authorities must also ensure that the sexual harassment policy is effective in preventing, detecting, controlling, and meting out effective punishment of offenders.

Author contribution statement

Kennedy Diema Konlan: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper. Muriel Mavis Dangah: Conceived and designed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

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Data availability statement

Data included in article/supp. material/referenced in article.

Declaration of interest's statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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