

Sexual Harassment and Effect on Students' Self-Esteem in Selected Public and Private Secondary Schools in Kenya

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Abstract

Sexual Harassment (SH) is a global phenomenon and a pervasive problem that affects thousands of students in learning institutions daily yet there are few studies exploring its effect on students' self-esteem especially from the Kenyan context. Sexual harassment is also considered a risk factor for lifelong problems including psychological ill-health and poor self-esteem. The purpose of this study was to describe and explore sexual harassment in and its effect on students' self-esteem. The study was done in selected public and private secondary schools in 2 purposively sampled Counties in Kenya. The study was guided by a theoretical framework based on Finkelhor and Browne's Traumagenic Dynamics Model. The design of the study was descriptive survey targeting 23,659 students, 88 Deputy Principals and 88 Heads of G/C. Samples were obtained through purposive and proportionate simple random sampling. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected using a School Sexual Harassment Questionnaire (SSHQ), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) guides. Content validity was determined by seeking expert judgments. Cronbach alpha technique was used to measure the reliability of the research instruments. Quantitative data were analyzed both descriptively and inferentially using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) while qualitative data were analyzed based on emerging themes and presented in narrative and verbatim forms. Findings indicated that verbal sexual harassment had a significant effect on students' self-esteem whereas effects of physical and visual sexual harassment were not statistically significant.

Keywords: Sexual harassment, forms, students' self-esteem, effect

DOI: 10.7176/JEP/10-21-06

Publication date: July 31st 2019

1. Introduction

It is believed that students face different forms of maltreatment while in school some of which are sexual in nature (Wei & Chen, 2011). Studies have shown that Sexual Harassment (SH) is prevalent in secondary schools and that this harassment not only affects students' social wellbeing but their psychological health which in turn impacts on their self-esteem (AUUW, 2003, & 2006; Young, et al., 2008; Hill & Holly, 2011; UNICEF, 2014; Gruber & Finneran, 2016; Bendixen et al., 2018). Kenya's Ministry of Education (MOE) defines sexual harassment as unwanted and unwelcome behaviours of a sexual nature that cause discomfort to the targeted person. These behaviours include words, persistent requests for sexual favours, gestures, touch, suggestions, coerced sexual intercourse and rape (MOE, 2001) all of which are risk factors for lifelong problems among students including psychological ill-health and poor self-esteem (Witt et al., 2018, Dahlqvist et al., 2016).

Empirical studies have established that SH is a near epidemic in schools across the globe (Chang, Hayter, & Lin, 2010). However, many of these studies emanate from the west in countries like the USA, Canada, The Netherlands, China and Australia. Similar studies from the Kenyan context are scanty and where available, they fail to explore the effects of this harassment on the self-esteem of students. Nonetheless, student sexual harassment in Kenya's institutions of learning is not a new phenomenon. In 2018, the Kenyan media reported the rape of three female students in a girls' only boarding school situated a few minutes' drive from the official residence of retired President Moi with whom the school shares a name. The incident which took place inside the washrooms at night at Moi Nairobi Girls Secondary School negatively impacted both the victims and the rest of the student body leading to temporary closure of the school.

In the same year, 2018, at Loreto Msongari Girls in Kiambu County, a female student was forced to change school when she was sexually harassed while she slept. In 2017, a male student was gang raped at Maseno School by form 3 and 4 boys leading to the interdiction of the school principal. In 2016, St. Caritas Mariana mixed Secondary school in Thika West was closed by officials from the MOE and 72 students sent home over allegations of sexual abuse at the school then headed by a Nigerian priest (Citizen Digital, September 5, 2018). There have also been incidents of SH in other renowned secondary schools such as Kakamega Boys School, the former St. Kizito Boys high school in 1990 where 19 students lost their lives and several others left traumatised, Kangubiri Girls in Nyeri in 2006 and at Keveye girls from Western Kenya in 1996. There are, however, indications that the

actual statistics of sexual harassment in schools may be higher than reported due to the culture of silence that surrounds issues of sex (Idoko, 2016).

Table 1: Schools with Reported Incidents of Sexual Harassment in Kenya

School	School type	Year	Magnitude of harassment
St Kizito Mixed Sec. school	Public Boarding	1990	Grievous, several students raped, 19 dead, 71 left traumatised
Keveye Girls Sec. School	Public Boarding	1996	Serious, 12 girls impregnated
Kangubiri Girls Sec. School	Public Boarding	2006	Serious, 3 students raped
St. Caritas Mariana Mixed Sec. School	Public Day	2016	Serious sexual allegations, school temporarily closed
Maseno Boys Sec. School	Public Boarding	2017	Serious, student gang raped
Kakamega Boys Sec. School	Public Boarding	2018	Serious, student sodomised
Loreto Convent Msongari	Private Boarding	2018	Less grievous, unwanted touches
Moi Nairobi Girls Sec. School	Public Boarding	2018	Serious, 3 students raped

Source: Media/ research reports, Kenya

A study by Ondicho et al. (2019) established that sexual harassment is on an upward trajectory in learning institutions in Kenya. The study which was conducted in selected secondary schools in Nyamira South and Thika West sub counties found that public and private secondary school students were victims of diverse forms of sexual abuses majorly perpetrated by peers and other adults in schools. However, the study like most others before did not look explore the effects of this harassment on the self-esteem of students thus leaving a gap in knowledge which the present study sought to fill.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Even though considered a global phenomenon and a near epidemic in most schools (Chang et al., 2010) there are few studies in the Kenyan context exploring sexual harassment in both public and private secondary schools and its effects on students' self-esteem. The Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS) observes that until 2003 there was no nationally representative data on sexual violence in Kenya's schools (Maternowska et al., 2009). Much of what is known as sexual violence in schools was gathered from press and media reports. This study sought to establish sexual harassment in selected secondary schools in Nyamira and Kiambu Counties, Kenya and its effects on students' self-esteem.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

The present study was guided by a conceptual framework based on the Traumagenic Dynamics Model (TDM) developed in 1985 by David Finkelhor and Angela Browne (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). The Model posits that experiences of sexually abused children can be analysed in terms of 4 trauma causing factors: traumatic sexualisation, betrayal, powerlessness and stigmatization (Makhija, 2014). This study considered powerlessness and stigmatization. Powerlessness is marked by fear and low esteem. Further, sexually abusive experiences create disempowerment through sexual messages communicated covertly and overtly. These traumatising experiences undermine a child's self-worth by causing feelings of worthlessness, shamefulness and guilt. The stigmatization factor is linked to a child's level of awareness hence high school students are likely to be more stigmatised than those in lower classes. TDM postulates that the stigmatization factor covers all the mechanisms that undermine children's positive self-image and self-esteem. Omari (2015) opines that demeaning and sexually abusive language is not only hurtful but is also a significant contributor to emotional and psychological problems.

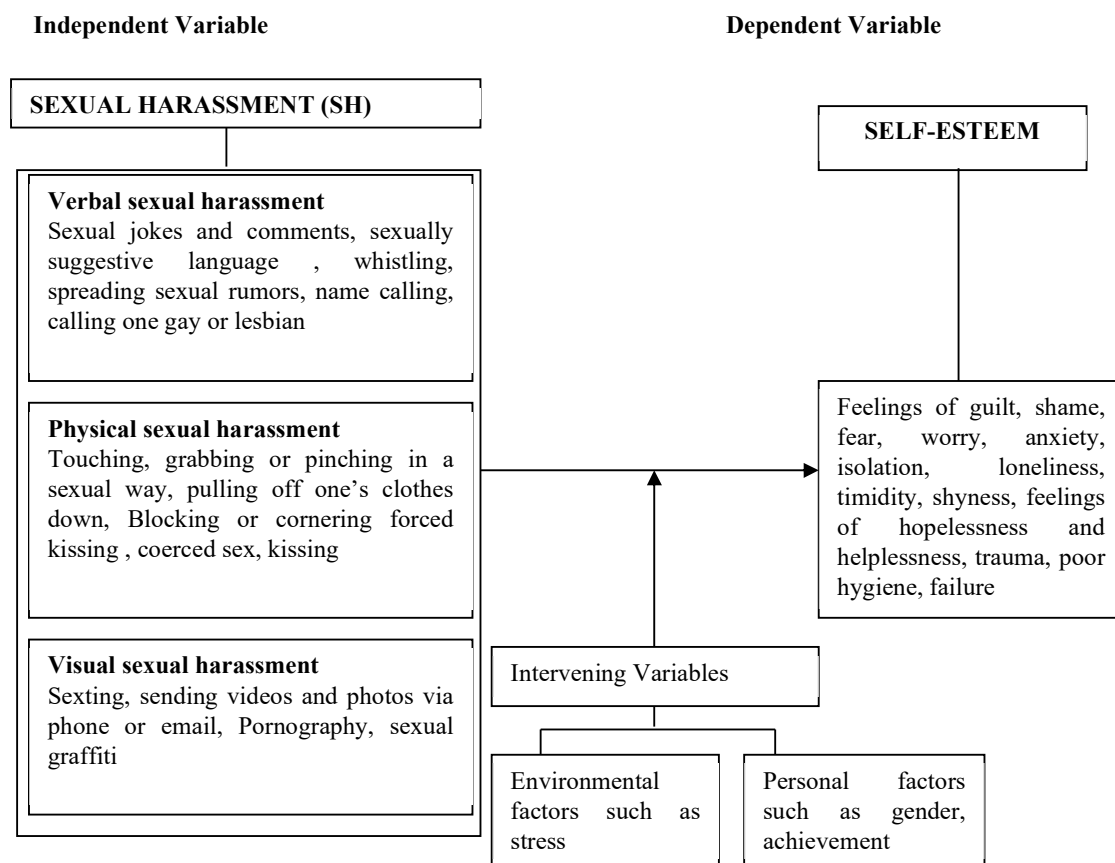


Figure 1.1: Conceptual Framework showing the convergence between sexual harassment and self-esteem
 Source: Authors

3. Literature Review

The United States of America’s Department for Education and Civil Rights (2008) describes sexual harassment as unwelcome conducts of a sexual nature. These conducts can be categorized into verbal, physical and visual forms. They include unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, unwanted touches, sexual comments, jokes, or gestures; writing graffiti or displaying or distributing sexually explicit drawings, pictures, or written materials; calling students sexually charged names; spreading sexual rumors; rating students on sexual activity or performance; or circulating, showing, or creating e-mails or Web sites with explicit sexual content (AAUW, 2013). These conducts are believed to have debilitating effects on students’ self-esteem.

Self-esteem refers to how people feel about themselves, how they perceive their value to the world and how valuable they think they are to others (Strauss, 2012). Self-esteem encompasses beliefs such as competence, triumph, despair, pride and shame. One’s self-esteem can either be positive or negative, high or low. Okoko (2012) posits that people with high self-esteem are presumed to be psychologically happy and healthy, they feel good about themselves, are able to cope with challenges and generally lead productive lives. Unfortunately, the presence of sexual harassment in schools destroys this status as it affects students in diverse ways. For instance sexually spiked gossip and rumors can drive students to develop depression and suicidal thoughts, loss of friends and ruined reputations which are indicators of a low-esteem (Gordon, 2017).

Title IX (a law that prevents SH in schools in the USA) recognizes two broad forms of sexual harassment: Quid Pro Quo harassment which occurs whenever a student’s participation in an educational program or activity is supposedly pegged on their willingness to submit to a sexual request and hostile environment sexual harassment which typically involves sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal, non-verbal, or physical conducts of a sexual nature (AAUW, 2011). The latter is most common in schools.

In middle and high schools in America, over 80% of students report experiencing varied forms of SH much of which are perpetrated by peers (AAUW, 2003 & 2012). Whereas some forms of these forms occur rarely and are mild, others occur more frequently and register effects ranging from severe, moderately severe to very severe. Rape, sexual coercion and sexual assault are considered some of the most severe forms of physical sexual harassment (Wane, 2009; Hill & Holly, 2011). These are not only debilitating, but they also leave victims

psychologically traumatized and terrified besides eliciting lots of silence and denial (Mwiti, 1997;).

In Britain, Canada, China, Israel, Norway and Germany SH is on an upward trajectory both in and out of secondary schools (Zeira et al., 2002; Canadian Press, 2008; Wei & Chen, 2011; Bendixen et al., 2018; Witt et al., 2018). In Canada, a survey of 1800 students carried out in 23 high schools showed that over 50% of girls were victims of unwanted sexual comments and gestures which affected their health, adjustment, worth and overall wellbeing in school (Canadian Press, 2008). In China, a study conducted among Junior high school students revealed that SH in the form of name calling and rumor mongering was quite prevalent in Chinese schools and that this harassment negatively affected both the perpetrators and the victims (Wei & Chen, 2011).

Across section of schools in Africa specifically in schools in Ghana, Botswana, Ethiopia, S. Africa, Tanzania, Niger and Uganda reveal that SH forms part of daily school life (www.hrw.org/reports/2001/safrica) which leave students suffering in multiple ways (www.hrw.org/reports/2001/safrica). Bunyi (2003) affirms that this harassment occurring in the form of persistent insulting verbal remarks, physical attacks including rape, sexual assault; forced sexual penetration and other types of Gender Based Violence (GBV) are regularly perpetrated on students.

In 2008, the Government of Kenya through the Ministry of Education (MOE) and in collaboration with the Church World Service Schools (CWSS) came up with a School Standards Safety Manual (SSSM) to protect students against unsafe practices in schools. The SSSM addresses student sexual abuse and recognizes chronic lack of self-esteem and low self-confidence as forms of emotional abuse meted on children. Standard Safety Number 10 of the SSSM urges schools to ensure that learners are safe from physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect perpetuated either by fellow learners, teachers, parents or community members. The MOE has also published guidelines and policies such as the Gender Policy in Education which address sexual abuses in schools. Nevertheless, reports of student sexual harassment in schools continue unabated pointing probably to weaknesses in policy implementation.

In effect, schools are supposed to be child friendly providing conducive learning atmospheres where students are protected from all forms of harm. In Child Friendly Schools, (CFSs) students are protected from threats such as rape, physical beating, humiliation, sexual harassment, taunts from fellow students and even physical hazards such as pollution, noise, fires and unhygienic environments. The aim of this study was to determine the forms of sexual harassment prevalent in secondary schools in Kenya and their effects on students' self-esteem.

3. Design and Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design embracing qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis. The study was located in Nyamira South and Thika West sub counties. Nyamira South is one of the five administrative Sub Counties in Nyamira County. This County is found in one of the most densely populated regions in Kenya: Nyanza region posted a total of 5,824,711 people in the 2009 National Housing and Population Census. The County is served with high density schools with a big student population. Majority of the inhabitants of Nyamira County are of the Abagusii tribe who are patriarchal by nature (Johnstone, 2002). Thika West is one of the ten Sub Counties that make up Kiambu County which is situated in the Central region of Kenya with a total population of 744,010 inhabitants. . It covers an area of 1,324 km². Majority of the inhabitants are of the Kikuyu tribe who are matriarchal in nature.

The schools were first stratified into public and private secondary schools and then into single sex and mixed schools. Proportionate simple random sampling was used to arrive at the required sample size of 3 girls' only, 3 boys' only and 11 mixed secondary schools. A School Sexual Harassment Questionnaire (SSHQ) was used to collect data from a randomly selected sample of 380 students (105 girls and 80 boys) obtained through the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) Table of Sample Size Determination. Study participants were sampled across forms 1 to 3. Form four students were left out intentionally as they were considered too busy preparing for end of cycle national exam.

Data triangulation was done through interviewing key informants: Deputy Principals and Guidance and Counseling (G&C) Coordinators) representing the 8 sampled schools. The study observed confidentiality, anonymity and freedom of participation. Quantitative data collected were analyzed using SPSS and presented in frequencies, percentages and tables while qualitative data were analyzed based on emerging themes and presented in narratives and in the voices of the informants.

4. Findings and Discussions

The study targeted 88 secondary schools with a total student population of 12,594 students (6,288 boys & 6,306 girls). Half of the participating schools (50.0%) were mixed secondary schools and the rest were single sex schools (25.0% girls' only and 25.0% boys' only). The demographic characteristics of the sample respondents are summarized on table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Boys	80	43.0%
Girls	105	56.8%
Class		
Form 1	69	37.3%
Form 2	50	27.0%
Form 3	66	35.7%
Religion		
Christian	170	97.7%
Muslim	2	1.1%
Other	2	1.1%
Age		
14 years	23	11.9%
15 years	62	32.1%
16 years	29	15.0%
17 years	58	30.1%
18 years	15	7.8%
Over 18 years	6	3.1%

Table 1 shows that there were 56.8% female and 43% male respondents in the study. Slightly more than 37% of these respondents were form ones. The mean age of the respondents was 15 years. The data shows that 6(3.1%) students were above 18 years old surpassing the ideal age of high schools students in Kenya which is between 14-18 years. It is important to note that the free and subsidized education initiative started in 2013 has over the years attracted back to schools students who are sometimes much older than the other students in the classes they are enrolled in. The table similarly shows that 97% of the students were Christians, 2% were Muslims and 2% indicated that they belonged to other religions. This finding is a fair representation of the Kenyan populace where majority are professed Christians and few are Muslims. The rest belong to several other religious and nonreligious groupings.

Table 2 shows the forms of SH witnessed and or experienced by students in secondary schools in the study locale.

Table 2: Prevalent Forms of Sexual Harassment

	Students' views	
	F	%
Verbal sexual harassment	141	40.3%
Physical sexual harassment	125	35.7%
Visual sexual harassment	84	24.0%

The findings on table 2 show that of the three forms of sexual harassment either experienced or witnessed in secondary schools in the selected study locale, verbal sexual harassment was the most prevalent form (40.3%). This form of harassment manifests itself in the form of sexual rumours, use of obscene, dirty or vulgar language, use of sexually suggestive names such as 'sweetie', Baibe' as well as use of gestures that are sexually suggestive. It encompasses asking or being asked for sexual favours either by fellow students or adults within the school and whistling and ogling at others in a sexually suggestive manner. The findings demonstrate that physical sexual harassment was the second most prevalent whereas the least prevalent form of sexual harassment in secondary schools was visual sexual harassment.

Next the researcher sought to measure students' self-esteem. The results are as shown on table 3.

Table 3: Students' Self-Esteem Scores

Scores	F	%
14.00	2	.5
16.00	2	.5
17.00	2	.5
18.00	6	2.0
19.00	11	2.7
20.00	10	2.5
21.00	22	5.4
22.00	38	9.4
23.00	47	11.6
24.00	38	9.4
25.00	63	15.6
26.00	27	6.7
27.00	22	5.4
28.00	24	5.9
29.00	11	2.7
30.00	15	3.7
31.00	5	1.2

It is evident from table 3 that 167(48.7%) students scored above 25 hence demonstrating that their self-esteem was high and 176(51.3%) students obtained scores below 25 hence were considered to be having low self-esteem. The mean self-esteem score using 343 students who fully responded to all the items on the scale was 20.5 showing that majority of the students in this specific sample had low self-esteem. Overall there were more students with low self-esteem 235(58.6%) than high self-esteem 166(41.4%) in both public and private schools.

Table 4: Students' Self-esteem* Category of School

Category of school	Students' Self-esteem		Total
	Low Self-Esteem	High Self-Esteem	
Public schools	205 (87.2%)	146 (88.0%)	351 (87.5%)
Private schools	30 (12.8%)	20 (12.0%)	50 (12.5%)
Total	235 (58.6%)	166 (41.4%)	401 (100%)

Chi-square ($\chi^2=0.046$, $df=1$ $p < 0.05$ (Critical $\chi^2 = 3.84$ at $p < 0.05$))

The results of the cross tabulation between student self-esteem levels and category of school as shown on table 4.15 reveal that there were more students with low self-esteem 235(58.6%) than high self-esteem 166(41.4%) in both public and private schools. Results of $\chi^2 = 0.046$ at 0.05 level of significance showed that there was a statistically significant relationship between public and private secondary schools and students' self-esteem levels. Eremie and Chikweru (2015) found significant differences between public and private school students' self-esteem scores which they attributed to differences in socio-economic factors and the school learning environment.

Table 5: Verbal Sexual Harassment * Students' Self-esteem

			Students' Self-esteem				Total	
			Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree		
Verbal sexual harassment	Large extent		1	14	51	4	70	
			25.0%	32.6%	18.8%	19.0%	20.6%	
		Moderate extent		1	12	135	7	155
				25.0%	27.9%	49.8%	33.3%	45.7%
		Small extent		0	8	60	6	74
	0.0%		18.6%	22.1%	28.6%	21.8%		
Not at all		2	9	25	4	40		
		50.0%	20.9%	9.2%	19.0%	11.8%		
Total			4	43	271	21	339	
			100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Chi-square ($\chi^2=20.48$, $df=9$ $p < 0.05$ (Critical $\chi^2 = 16.92$ at $p < 0.05$))

Table shows that a combined total of 186(78.6%) students said that verbal sexual harassment affected their self-esteem from a moderate to a large extent whereas a combined 28(8.3%) students either strongly disagreed or disagreed that verbal sexual harassment affected self-esteem from a moderate to a large extent. Less than 10% of students indicated that verbal sexual harassment did not have any effect at all on their self-esteem contrary to the view of the majority. This means that in general in one way or the other verbal sexual harassment affected the self-esteem of a student.

Informants expressed diverse feelings connected to different forms of verbal sexual harassment. One student said thus:

I don't like it when I am told I have sexy eyes. I really don't understand what that means. It hurts me.

Another student said:

I always get these verbal remarks by boys saying 'you are cute', 'I admire your hips'....I don't like these remarks at all. Then there are endless cat calls whenever I passed. I don't think this kind. I feel uncomfortable.

A male student expressed dislike over what he considered a verbally insulting remark directed at him:

It is insulting to be told you have the looks of a girl. Is that right? I don't think so.

For some students however the verbal sexual harassment made them indifferent and quite unsure whether the comments made them feel bad or good. One student stated:

I am always receiving these funny comments from my class mates. They tell me I have an attractive body for men. Often I don't take them seriously. I know they are joking. I am really not sure how that makes feel, partly good and sometimes bad. But I think it should now stop.

These sentiments from the students indicate the upsetting nature of verbal sexual harassment and its negative effects on their esteem. Sometimes the verbal sexual comments may be mild but when said repeatedly may cumulatively affect a student's self-esteem.

Table 6: Physical Sexual Harassment and Students' Self-Esteem

			Students' Self-esteem				
			Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
Physical harassment	Sexual	Large extent	0	7	64	6	77
			0.0%	16.7%	23.6%	30.0%	22.8%
		Moderate extent	0	9	69	3	81
			0.0%	21.4%	25.5%	15.0%	24.0%
		Small extent	1	16	98	5	120
25.0%	38.1%		36.2%	25.0%	35.6%		
Not at all	3	10	40	6	59		
	75.0%	23.8%	14.8%	30.0%	17.5%		
Total			4	42	271	20	337
			100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-square $\chi^2=16.43$, df=9 p<0.05 (Critical=16.92 p<0.05)

It is evident from the results on table 4.18 that 70(53.6%) of the student respondents combined either strongly agreed or agreed that physical sexual harassment affected their self-esteem to a large extent. The results also indicate that 69(25.5%) students were of the view that physical sexual harassment affected their esteem to a moderate extent and 98(36.2%) students to a small extent. Based on the obtained scores of the χ^2 value, the study concluded that there was no statistically significant relationship between physical sexual harassment and students' self-esteem. The finding of no significant relationship between physical sexual harassment and students' self-esteem went contrary to the expectations. One would expect that unwanted and inappropriate touching; grabbing and pinching someone, physically forcing someone into having sex with them or kissing, hugging, touching them against their wish would affect students in one way or the other yet chi-square results from the analyzed findings failed to demonstrate this relationship.

Table 7: Visual Sexual Harassment* and Students' Self-Esteem

			Students' Self-Esteem				
			Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
Visual harassment	Sexual	Large extent	0	11	69	7	87
			0.0%	26.2%	25.8%	36.8%	26.2%
		Moderate extent	0	14	85	4	103
			0.0%	33.3%	31.8%	21.1%	31.0%
		Small extent	1	4	56	2	63
25.0%	9.5%		21.0%	10.5%	19.0%		
Not at all	3	13	57	6	79		
	75.0%	31.0%	21.3%	31.6%	23.8%		
Total			4	42	267	19	332
			100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-square $\chi^2=13.658$, df= 9 p<0.05 (Critical=16.92 p<0.05)

From table 7, it is clear that regardless of the extent students experienced or witnessed visual sexual harassment, majority of the students 103(31.0%) either strongly agreed or agreed with the fact that visual sexual

harassment affected their self-esteem to a moderate extent. The number of students who indicated that visual harassment affected them to a large extent was lower at 26.2% (87). The findings show that 29(8.7%) students disagreed that visual sexual harassment affected their self-esteem from a small extent to a large extent. Interestingly, 63(22.6%) students expressed the view that visual harassment did not affect their self-esteem at all. The calculated chi-square value ($\chi^2=13.66$, $df=9$ $p = 0.05$) was interpreted against the chi-square table value of 16.92. Based on the figures, the study concluded that there was no statistically significant relationship between visual sexual harassment and effect on students' self-esteem. The probable reason could be that whereas there is generally lots of sexually harassing incidents in the environment yet some incidents may be rare within the school setting due to presence of rules and regulations which bar their manifestation. Some of the schools in the study sample were categorical regarding the use of electronic gadgets in their schools. It is through the use of some of these gadgets that visually harassing content is sometimes sent to a non-willing recipient. One key respondent said:

We have clear rules in school. Our students are not allowed to come with mobile phones to school. We inspect them when they report back to school during school opening days and when they come back from mid-term break. we also conduct impromptu searches of their things both in the dorm and in class and any student found with a phone is punished....

Another student said:

In our school, electronic items such as mobile phones are not allowed.

The ban of mobile phones in schools withstanding, some key informants were of the view that the same could be used during holidays when access was not if access was not restricted. Another probable reason why visual harassment was least prevalent may be tied to censorship by some schools of materials they stock in their libraries and computers which are only of academic nature.

6. Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that sexual harassment of diverse forms is a common occurrence in public and private secondary schools in Kenya. This harassment affects both boys and girls and takes place in all types of schools. The findings demonstrate that sexual harassment has an effect on student self-esteem. The findings moreover indicate that students from private secondary schools were more likely to have higher esteem levels when compared to students from public secondary schools. Consequently, sexual harassment has a greater negative effect on the self-esteem of students from public schools than private. These findings demonstrate the need for concerted stakeholder support to deal with issues of SH in secondary schools.

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Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the National Council for Science and Research (NACOSTI) in Kenya for issuing the needed permit that allowed this research to take place and to the deputy school principals, the Coordinators of Guidance and Counseling, the teachers and all students from the selected public and private secondary schools in Nyamira and Kiambu Counties who willingly participated in this study. Special thanks to the late Stephen Ondicho and Judy Gitau who were very helpful in data collection and data analysis respectfully.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This study was conducted after obtaining clearance and written approval from the Kenyatta University Ethics Committee.

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