

## Should Peer-Generated Sexual Harassment be Called Sexual Harassment? Views of High School Students

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### Abstract

*The current study examined and assessed the views and feelings of high school students in Swaziland regarding sexual harassment by their peers. One hundred students (females=50%; mean age=17.6;SD= 0.5) participated in this study. A survey questionnaire and follow-up interviews were the instruments used to source data from the participants. Results indicate high incidence of sexual harassment perpetrated by both boys and girls, with more girls (38.2%) reporting sexual harassment from boys than boys (23%) from girls. However, the majority of the students (77.8%) felt that this sexual harassment was within acceptable range, arguing that it was part of their sexual development. Given these results, a major recommendation is that adults should not impose their world view and definition of sexual harassment on these youth who may see it as useful experience in their sexual development.*

**Keywords:** sexual harassment, perceptions, high school students, sexual abuse

### 1. Introduction

The current study examined and assessed the extent of sexual harassment of high school students by their peers. Such a study takes lofty significance given reports of student sexual harassment by teachers and community members in many high schools in Swaziland. Sexual harassment has a lot of implications to the students in terms of their studies, physical and mental health. It can traumatise them to a point of utter despair in their life endeavours, especially girls. (Fineran & Bennett, 1997, Mushoriwa, 2008)

While a number of studies (e.g. Stockdale, 1998, Lacasse, Purdy & Mendelsen, 2003) have concentrated on pupil harassment by adults such as teachers, few studies (e.g. Mushoriwa, 2008) have examined pupil harassment by their own peers. Some studies (e.g. ) that have looked at pupil harassment by their peers have, in most cases, tended to look at it from adults' point of view, sometimes completely ignoring what children themselves think about the issue. It is this position that forms the present study's point of departure.

Sexual harassment of students by peers tends to be looked at from adults' point of view. For Mushoriwa (2008), very often, the reason and justification for advancing and upholding adult perception of child sexual harassment has been that children are too young to know what is morally just and good for them. While this may be so, perhaps completely ignoring what children themselves think and feel about sexual harassment, especially if it is perpetrated by their school mates, may be misleading since these children may be holding views contrary to adult views. In fact, a research study by Loreda, Reid & Deaux (1995) produced results that suggest that adolescents are worried about sexual harassment perpetrated by adults, not by age mates. It is such a belief that triggered this investigation; to see what high school students really think and feel about sexual harassment by peers, instead of relying on adult views, which, in the present writer's view, seem to tell the story of adolescent sexual behaviour too easily and in a too simplified manner.

### 2. The Concept of Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is any form of unwanted, unwelcome and unacceptable sexual behaviour directed towards someone. Literature (e.g. Grover, Zeff, White, & Nangel, 2001; Greetje, 2003; Mushoriwa, 2008) shows a whole range of sexual behaviours defined as sexual harassment. These behaviours may include touching or patting inappropriately, pinching someone's buttocks, requesting sexual favours, an unwelcome look, standing too close to you, making derogatory remarks, sexist-name calling, inappropriate references to body parts, sexual advances, inappropriate gesturing, compliments with sexual overtones, bragging about sexual prowess etc. In fact, whatever you do that makes somebody

sexually uncomfortable is sexual harassment. As already seen, it is a potentially damaging behaviour; victims are less likely to do well in school and may fear to go to school.

It is perhaps imperative to differentiate between sexual harassment and sexual abuse. In the present writer's view, while there is, admittedly, a very thin line between sexual harassment and sexual abuse (and some would think that there is no line at all), sexual harassment generally implies sexually troubling, tormenting or pestering somebody who may or may not have equal status and power (Greetje, 2003). On the other hand, sexual abuse implies wrong or improper use of one's authority to get sexual favours (Greetje, 2003). Thus, while sexual harassment usually occurs between individuals with equal status such as peers, who, by definition should have equal status and therefore equal power (though of course, this is not always the case as in the case of boys and girls), sexual abuse usually occurs between people of unequal status and therefore unequal power; hence, the use of authority to get sexual favours (Mushoriwa, 2008).

At this juncture, it is important to note that from all the above explanations of sexual harassment and from the present writer's point of view, sexual harassment only occurs where and when the behaviour perpetrated is unwanted and unwelcome; otherwise where the behaviour is wanted and is welcome, as was assumed in this study, there is no sexual harassment.

### **3. Background and Literature Review**

Research on the sexual harassment of secondary and high school pupils outside a love relationship has tended to focus primarily on prevalence, the gender and/or position of the victim or perpetrator and the types of behaviours exhibited by both the victim and perpetrator (American Association of University Women Educational Foundation-AAUWEF-2001). Furthermore, few studies have focused on peer-generated sexual harassment. One of the notable studies on peer-generated sexual harassment was a large scale study in the USA conducted by AAUWEF (2001). The study established that peer sexual harassment was more common than sexual harassment perpetrated by teachers. The study actually found that 87% of girls and 71% of boys had been sexually harassed by another student. However, this study did not go on to find out how these students felt about sexual harassment by peers.

Hands & Sanchez (2000) also conducted a study on sexual harassment of students by their peers. Their study focused on whether boys and girls perceive sexual harassment in the same way. The observation was that boys and girls perceive sexual harassment differently, boys were less frightened than girls and they perceived some harassment episodes as positive. The study also noted that girls experienced sexual harassment more often and experienced qualitatively more severe, physically intrusive and intimidating forms. Roscoe, Strouse & Goodwin (1999) focused on how often students in colleges experience sexual harassment while Pellegrini (2000) and Price & Byers (1999) focused on the use of sexual force in a love relationship. To the present writer, while such studies have made significant contributions to the understanding of the issue of sexual harassment among students, perhaps more important is the question of how students themselves feel and think about sexual harassment by their peers.

Though there is limited research explicitly focusing on how students feel about sexual harassment by their peers, closer home, Mushoriwa (2008), conducted a study in Zimbabwe focusing on how secondary school students feel about sexual harassment by their peers. The study found that the majority of the students in the study (67.5%) viewed sexual harassment by peers as acceptable; arguing that it was part of their growing up.

In the present writer's view, although the current study may appear a replication of Mushoriwa's (2008) study, the aim is establish certainty regarding how high school pupils view peer-generated sexual harassment. The present study has involved different students from a different country in order to compare the views of the two different groups of students. Hopefully, this may increase our knowledge and understanding of how students feel about sexual harassment perpetrated by their peers instead of relying on adults' views.

### **4. Methodology**

The present study was premised on early investigations in this field by researchers such as Roscoe et al. and Lacasse et al. (2003). To this end, this study owes much to these early investigators in terms of its procedures and methodology.

#### **4.1 Research Design**

The research design of the study was survey. The survey design was used because it is appropriate for use with relatively large samples as was the case in this study (n=100). Survey manipulations also allow the collection and description of data which may be used to assess current practices and to see whether these practices require changing

or improving. It was the intention of the present study to assess the thinking and feelings of high school pupils towards sexual harassment by peers in order to see whether anything needs to be done about it.

#### 4.2 Sample

Participants were 100 (females=50%; mean age=17.6; SD=0.5) high school pupils drawn from 5 urban schools (20 from each school) in Swaziland through stratified random sampling. Urban high school pupils were involved in order to find a basis for comparing results with results from similar studies( Mushoriwa, 2008) that involved urban high school pupils.

#### 4.3 Instrument

A survey questionnaire adopted from Mushoriwa (2008) and follow-up interviews were the instruments used to collect data for this study. A questionnaire was preferred not only because of the sensitive nature of the area of investigation, but also because high school pupils are mature and educated enough to meaningfully respond in writing to items relating to sexuality.

The questionnaire used different response formats not only for checking response bias, but also for ensuring that the item format tapped the kind of information required. Subjects were generally required to choose an option, from given ones, that went with their thoughts and feelings regarding sexual harassment by peers. In some cases, subjects were required to give reasons for their choices. This permitted an in-depth analysis of the responses.

Follow-up interviews which were conducted with 25 students randomly selected from the sample group, were meant to probe into subtle and obscure issues in questionnaire responses.

#### 4.4 Validity and Reliability of Instrument.

Although the questionnaire adopted from Mushoriwa(2008) had been tested for validity and reliability and found to be suitable and reliable( $r=0.71$ ), it was necessary to re-test for validity and reliability given that it was being used in a new environment and with a different group of participants. The questionnaire was given to 6 experts who, all agreed that it was valid and reliable( $r= 0.7$ ) The question was then pilot-tested with a group of 20 high school students to if the wording was accessible. After minor modifications and adaptations, the questionnaire was adopted for use with the study sample.

#### 4.5 Assumptions of the Study

The study basically anticipated that:

- there is peer-generated sexual harassment of high school pupils.
- high school pupils view peer-generated sexual harassment positively.

### 5. Results and Discussion

After coding and key-punching the data, the following results were obtained.

**Table 1:** Subjects' Responses to the Questionnaire Items (n=100)

1.	Sexual harassment by peers – occurs in our school	Often 68(68%)	Sometimes 22 (22%)	Never 3(3%)	Not sure 7(7%)	
2.	State any 5 types of sexual harassment that occur in your school					
3.	If you are sexually harassed by your peer, how do you feel?	Happy 30(30%)	Sexually excited 28(28%)	Angry 23(23%)	Humiliated 17(17%)	Not sure 2(2%)
4.	To you, sexual harassment by peers is .....	Acceptable 21 (21%)	Fairly acceptable 56 (56%)	Unacceptable 14(14%)	Completely unacceptable 9(9%)	Not sure 0(0%)
5.	If you were to be sexually harassed, you would prefer sexual harassment by.....	Same sex peer 17 (17%)	Opposite sex peer 70(70%)	None at all 13 (13%)		

		YES	NO
6.	If you are sexually harassed, would you like your teachers to know about it?	39 (39%)	61 (61%)
7.	Parents should intervene when their children are sexually harassed by their peers at school	28 (28%)	72 (72 %)
8.	Sexual harassment in my school is interfering with my school work	15 (15%)	85 (85%)
9.	Playing with friends of the opposite sex increases chances of sexual harassment	38 (38%)	62 (62%)
10.	Overall, sexual harassment by peers should be outlawed in schools	32 (32%)	68 (68%)

## 5.1 Discussion

Items were taken as rating scales and as such, were analysed individually. Interview data were used to supplement and buttress questionnaire responses where applicable.

The study revealed rather high proportions of the incidence of sexual harassment in high schools ( Item1) Sixty-eight percent(n=68) of the study sample(n=100) said that sexual harassment by peers often occurs;22% said it sometimes occurs; 3% said it never occurs while 7% were not sure about it. These results are consistent with findings from previous studies( e.g. Greetje, 2003; Lacasse et al.,2003 ) which have noted widespread sexual harassment of high school students by their peers.

Item 2 required the students to indicate to 5 types of sexual harassment that often occurs in school. From the responses, it was clear that these students knew exactly what sexual harassment involves. Frequently mentioned behaviours were:

Compliments with sexual overtones (e.g. You have nice buttocks or nice legs.),caressing and attempting to kiss, fondling breasts, fingers or legs, pinching buttocks, unwelcome looks, inappropriate patting, sexual advances, writing obscene letters, showing pornographic pictures etc. Interview data indicated that these behaviours mostly occurred in classrooms ,playgrounds and corridors. The fact that these behaviours were displayed in public suggests the less seriousness these adolescent students attached to what they were doing. One girl commented: *We tease each other like that. It is more social than sexual.* This suggests that some students see this as harmless. Normally the acts do not go beyond what the victim can tolerate. Mushoriwa(2008), made similar observations in Zimbabwe where the majority of students (67.5%) in his sample felt that it was not sexual harassment as such; it should be viewed as part of their growing up.In the present writer's view, once the victim does not see the behaviour as unwanted or unacceptable, defining it as sexual harassment becomes problematic.

One boy commented in an interview: *We don't use force but play language..Even girls touch us in unthinkable places, sometimes just to see if we are real men.* It is perhaps for this reason that Grover, Zeff, White & Nangle (2001) argue that adolescence should be a period of sexual experimentation if children's sexual development is to be healthy and normal.

In item 3 where subjects were required to indicate how they would feel if they were sexually harassed by peers, 30% said they would feel happy if this is done by peers rather than by adults, 28% said they would feel sexually excited, 23% said they would feel angry, 17% said they would feel humiliated while 2% were undecided. Taken together and collapsing the categories of 'happy' (30%) and 'sexually excited' (28%) which view sexual harassment by peers positively, these results suggest that boys and girls in the study sample are not against sexual harassment by peers. In line with this, a study by Bremer, Moore & Bildersee (1992) indicates that many adolescent boys and girls do not know how to interpret sexual harassment by peers – as good or bad Loreda et al. (1995) also observed that 15-18-year olds' understanding of inappropriate sexual behaviour was less clear for peers than for adults. This suggests that many adolescents are not disturbed by sexual harassment perpetrated by their peers. As already seen, a study by Mushoriwa(2008) in Zimbabwe found that the majority (67.5%)of the students in the study felt that sexual harassment by peers was acceptable.

Interview data revealed that the majority ( 19%) of those who said they would feel angry when sexually harassed by peers were girls. One young girl commented angrily: What they (boys) do degrades, humiliates and distresses us. It lowers our self-esteem and confidence. This reflects the serious nature of sexual harassment where it is unacceptable. It can create an intimidating, offensive and hostile work environment in which individuals fail to realise their full potential.

Item 10, which links with item 3, required the students to say whether they think peer sexual harassment in schools should be outlawed or not. The majority (68%) of the pupils felt that peer sexual harassment in schools should not be outlawed. Most of the pupils felt that sexual harassment by peers serves important functions such as 'getting into each other's world'; showing that you are attracted to the person, providing an outlet to work pressure, providing necessary practice and experience in handling matters of a sexual nature etc. To many of the students, to outlaw peer

sexual harassment is therefore to deny and disrupt the growing and developing individuals' necessary and useful experiences; resulting in them reaching adulthood rather unprepared.

In an interview, one girl commented : *Criminalising peer sexual harassment may miss the point altogether. It is a part of everyday social behaviour. If you don't want it, you simply tell the harasser assertively and firmly that the behaviour is unwelcome and he/she will stop it. Interestingly, harassers are often friends and the harassment does not normally take place in secluded places..* Comments such as these, coming from the students themselves, make it difficult to define per-generated harassment as sexual harassment.

The above results may explain why in item 4, 21% of the students viewed sexual harassment by peers as acceptable; 56% as fairly acceptable; 14% as unacceptable and 9% as completely unacceptable. The main reason given for overwhelmingly accepting (77%) peer sexual harassment was that since they (students) were on the road to adulthood, it was necessary to learn these adult duties and responsibilities. One boy commented, *'There is nothing wrong with this kind of harassment. We need this experience, though of course, it must be within limits. It has replaced the traditional Hide and Seek that served almost similar functions.* Thus, it would appear that adolescent boys and girls accept sexual harassment by peers; perhaps some do so, as already argued elsewhere in this article, because of pressure from peers to have heterosexual relations. Although some may not initially like it, they eventually come to see it as normal practice at that age as seen from the comments of one boy: *For most of us, sexual harassment by girls has been an everyday experience. They pull up their dresses, lean on us to make us feel their breasts etc but we are now used to it.*

In item 5 where the pupils were asked the type of sexual harassment they would prefer if at all they were to be sexually harassed, 17% indicated that they would prefer same-sex harassment, arguing that this was not 'harmful' to them since it was mere teasing without any sexual connotations. It was clear that these students did not think about the possibility of some of them being gays and lesbians. Seventy percent of the students preferred opposite sex harassment, arguing that it was the norm in society while 13% said they would not want any sexual harassment because it undermines their dignity among other things. One little girl expressed outrage at this sexual harassment : *As we pass in corridors, some stupid boys reach out and touch us .It is so embarrassing that you just feel like ignoring it instead of raising alarm and publicity. It is ridiculous; they must stop treating us like sex objects.* Such anger and outbursts, though expressed by a minority perhaps, send a very strong message about how some students feel about peer sexual harassment.

In item 9, 62% of the students did not think that playing with peers of the opposite sex increases chances of sexual harassment. These male-female interactions were seen as necessary for understanding and appreciating each other. These results again uphold those of previously reported samples; for example, Kovacs, Parker & Hoffman (1996) where it was observed that, because of increasing pressure from peers to develop heterosexual relations, many children want to spend a great part of their time interacting with peers of the opposite sex. It is usually in such groups that they experience emotionally supportive interactions.

Item 6 required the students to say whether, if they were sexually harassed, they would want their teachers to know about it. While only 39% said they would want their teachers to know about it, 61% indicated that they would not want their teachers to know about it unless the harassment is so extreme that it requires them to do so. Generally, most students (72%; item 7) felt that adult interference was unnecessary since most of them were likely to misinterpret what was happening. One boy commented. *I don't see anything wrong with this kind of play unless it becomes violent. Adults forget that it is within human nature to expect perfection from others when we ourselves are far from being perfect.* Thus, it would appear that while many children acknowledge and accept advice from adults, it is perhaps the idea of 'controlled knowledge and experiences' that they tend to view negatively. Notions like these are in agreement with current theorising about the adolescent's cry for freedom and autonomy.

Item 8 required the subjects to indicate whether sexual harassment in their schools was interfering with their school learning. The majority (85%) said it was not interfering with their learning while only 15% said it was interfering. One girl who did not like sexual harassment by peers said: *We suffer sexual harassment quietly; we do not talk about our experiences because of shame, fear of revenge by the perpetrators or fear of being blamed for having started it.* Despite such a comment, generally results in this study indicate that peer sexual harassment in the study sample was within acceptable ranges. Perhaps this explains why peer sexual harassment was generally viewed positively in this study.

## 6. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that various forms of sexual harassment are common in high schools involved in the present study. This sexual harassment which was mostly in a mild form, was acceptable to the majority of the pupils who felt that it is necessary since it is part of growing up and it therefore had developmental functions. These results not only

enhance and increase our knowledge about how adolescent boys and girls think and feel about peer sexual harassment in schools, but also that adults should limit their involvement in peer sexual harassment at school; lest they stifle children's proper sexual development. Furthermore, sexual harassment as seen in this study, does not relay acts of violence ( an issue many adults would be concerned about) and dominance of males over females given that both sexes harassed each other.

## 7. Recommendations

Basing on the findings of the study, it is recommended that:

- the adult world, especially teachers, should, without necessarily interfering, monitor sexual harassment in schools to ensure that it does not reach proportions where it interferes with school learning.
- future research focusing not only on other social and cultural contexts, but also on students at university level, might be of great benefit.

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