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THE INFLUENCE OF PERPETRATOR IDENTITY ON ADOLESCENT SCHOOLGIRLS' SEXUAL HARASSMENT COPING STRATEGIES IN MBULU TOWN COUNCIL, MANYARA REGION

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ABSTRACT

The widespread reports of school adolescents being victimized by sexual harassment have raised concerns towards understanding how adolescents cope with such incidents. This study assessed the influence of perpetrator identity on the likelihood of schoolgirls employing certain sexual harassment coping strategies. The utilized a descriptive cross sectional design. The target population constituted of adolescent ordinary level secondary schoolgirls in Mbulu Town Council and the sample size was 400 girls. The sampling procedure was a two stages cluster sampling. The data were collected using a questionnaire and analyzed by binary logistic regression using the Statistical Package for Social Science software version 27. Perpetrator identities were found to influence coping strategies adopted by schoolgirls. Harassment from senior students was likely to elicit normalization coping strategy whereas stranger harassment was less likely to elicit engagement coping strategy. Harassment from classmates, senior students and strangers was likely to prompt detachment coping strategy whereas help-seeking coping strategy was a likely response towards non-teaching staff harassment. It was recommended that adolescents should be provided with educational programs on sexual harassment which include information on consent, boundaries and personal rights so as to mitigate the tendency of normalizing harassment particularly in peer relationships. Also, the programs should emphasize the usage of help seeking rather than other strategies regardless of the identity of the perpetrator.

KEYWORDS: Sexual harassment, coping strategies, perpetrator identity, adolescent schoolgirls

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is known to constitute a range of acts which are included within the realm of unwanted verbal, non-verbal, physical behaviours that not only abuse individuals' sexual dignity but also create a hostile, humiliating and intimidating environment [1] - [3]. The acts further extend to offering of rewards in exchange for sex as well as threats aimed at compelling an individual to cooperate sexually [4]. Girls from various countries have disclosed their experiences of sexual

harassment and how it affects them [5], the strategies girls choose to cope with these experiences are determined by various influential factors. Focusing exclusively on the influence of perpetrator identity on sexual harassment coping strategies, this study aims to contribute to the knowledge base on sexual harassment coping strategies by unravelling the complexities of how school adolescent girls respond to sexual harassment within the school environment. The perpetrator identity refers to who the perpetrator is, whether it is a same class student, teacher, stranger, higher class student or non-teaching staff. Therefore, understanding how these identities influence adolescent girls coping strategies provides valuable insights into the ways schoolgirls respond to harassment based on the relationship with the perpetrator.

The concept of coping varies, ranging from the notion of neutralizing stress or protecting oneself against harm to a vital aspect of adaptation and survival which involves recognizing, assessing and learning from stressful situations [6]. Generally, the management of thoughts, feelings and actions in order to navigate through unwanted/stressful/harassing situations can be considered as coping. Some coping strategies facilitate positive outcomes whereas others tend to worsen or make the stressful situation more intense [7]. Though, the effectiveness of a coping mechanism is contingent to various factors such as perceived manageability of the harasser/stressor, presence of ample coping resources and nature of the resulting outcomes. With regards to sexual harassment coping strategies, the determinants which have been identified to influence the selection of a certain coping strategy are culture, difference in power between perpetrator and victim, severity of the harassment incident, organizational status, economic situation of both the victim and harasser, individuals' perception of what a sexually harassing behaviour is and social perception anxiety [8] – [12]. Though most of these studies were concentrated on work place sexual harassment, therefore the determinants for sexual harassment coping strategies listed were obtained from studying sexual harassment in work place environments.

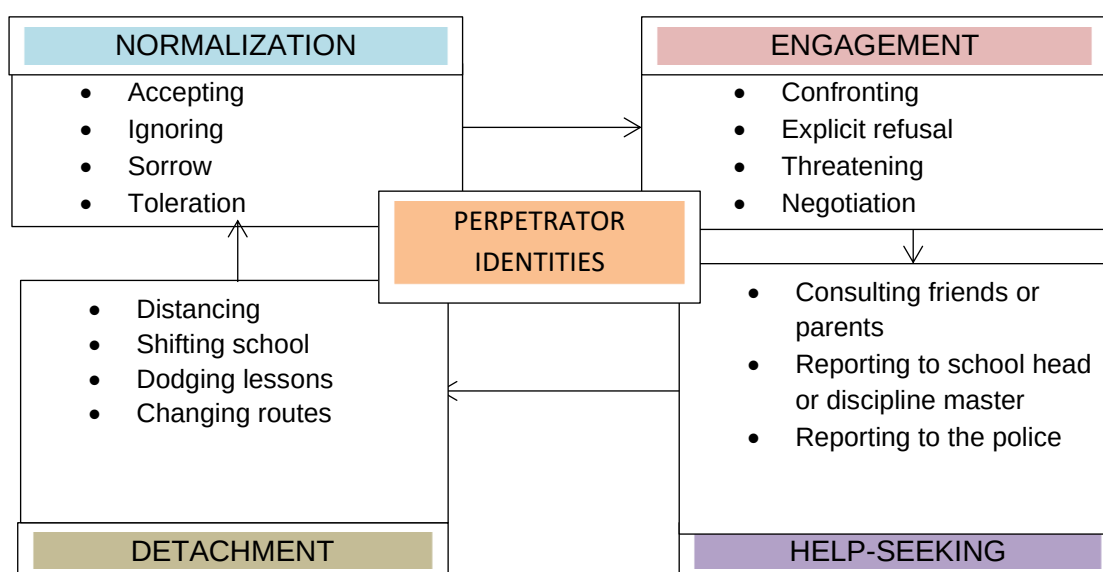
Various researchers have delved into the exploration of sexual harassment coping strategies and classified into groups the diverse responses individuals show in the face of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment coping strategies can be categorized into two general groups, the external coping strategies and the internal coping strategies [13]. External coping strategies operate by the harassed taking tangible actions which actually solve the problem, this may therefore involve seeking support from authorities, notifying someone, avoiding the perpetrator or directly confronting the perpetrator. On the other hand, internal coping strategies involve the victim enduring the harassment by downplaying it, often viewing it as a joke or males' natural trait. The internal and external coping strategies were also utilized in a study on sexual harassment coping in Norwegian newsrooms although the terms problem focused and emotion focused were used instead [14]. Emotion focused coping align with internal strategies where victims regulate emotions and mental domains to cope with the situation, while problem-focused coping corresponds to external strategies aimed at addressing and eliminating the problem. The emotion focused coping strategies are further grouped into behavioural and cognitive strategies depending on whether the response to

harassment manifests as actions aimed at expressing emotions or regulating emotions by changing thoughts and interpretations [5]. A further categorization delineates four coping strategies in response to sexual harassment [6], individuals may adopt normalization strategy which entails downplaying harassment incidents, accepting them as part of the school norm or staying silent despite being distressed by the incident. Also, the detachment strategy is discussed which generally involves avoidance actions such as distancing from perpetrators, disengaging from activities or places prone to harassment or even considering to change the academic settings. Another category is engagement strategy which manifests in confronting harassers directly, expressing criticism or firmly rejecting inappropriate behaviour. The final category is the help seeking strategy which involves seeking support from friends, parents, school administration or law enforcement agencies. This “four groups” classification was used for data collection in this study.

The guiding framework displaying perceived interrelationship between perpetrator identities and coping strategies

The conceptual framework delineates an empirical investigation, designating perpetrator identities as predictor variables and each coping strategy as a distinct outcome variable. Positioned at the core, "perpetrator identities" are envisioned to have an influence on the four coping strategies by either facilitating or inhibiting their likelihood of employment. This structured framework sets the stage for subsequent empirical testing, aiming to validate the assumed relationship that, the identity of the perpetrator determines whether a victim is likely to employ a certain sexual harassment coping strategy or not.

Figure 1: Perceived interrelationship between perpetrator identities and sexual harassment coping strategies



METHODOLOGY

Research approach and design

The study utilized a quantitative approach so as to facilitate drawing of objective conclusions and identification of patterns within the data through statistical analysis. Employing a descriptive cross sectional design, the data were gathered at a single point in time using a questionnaire and analysed by an inferential statistic method so as to describe and understand the relationships between the variables in the study. Specifically, the relationship to be understood was in regard to whether harassment from particular perpetrator identities influenced schoolgirls' employment of certain sexual harassment coping strategies.

Population and sampling

The study was conducted in Mbulu Town Council, with a focus on ordinary level secondary schoolgirls as the target population. Employing a quantitative approach, a two-stage cluster sampling method was utilized to ensure a representative sample for the investigation. In the first stage, five schools were randomly selected from a list of 14 secondary schools within Mbulu Town Council. This initial step aimed to capture a diverse representation of schools within the geographical area under study. Subsequently, in the second stage, 80 girls from each of the chosen schools were selected, resulting in a total sample size of 400 girls. The selection process involved randomly choosing 20 girls from each class (from Form 1 to Form 4) within each of the selected schools.

Data collection tools

The instrument employed for data collection was a close-ended questionnaire, designed to investigate instances of sexual harassment encountered by secondary schoolgirls within the past school year. The questionnaire included specific inquiries regarding the identity of perpetrators involved in these incidents. The provided identities encompassed classmates, senior students, teachers, strangers, and non-teaching staff, aiming to capture a comprehensive overview of potential sources of sexual harassment within the school environment. Furthermore, the questionnaire incorporated coping strategies which were in four groups; normalization, engagement, detachment and help seeking. Under each category of the coping strategies, three guiding statements were included. These statements served as prompts, prompting the girls to indicate whether they had employed a particular coping strategy or not in response to the encountered sexual harassment situations. The items were close ended, the use of close ended items in the questionnaire facilitated ease of response for respondents and a time saving means of data collection.

Data analysis

Binary logistic regression was employed to analyse the influence of perpetrator identity on each coping strategy; Help Seeking, Engagement, Normalization, and Detachment. Each coping strategy was an outcome variable, while the perpetrator identities; classmates, senior students, teachers, strangers, and non-teaching staff were the predictor variables. For the purpose of control, the demographic variables age and living arrangement were also included as predictors in the model. The logistic regression equations provided coefficients, odds ratios, Wald values, and p-values for

each perpetrator identity, offering insights into their influence on the likelihood of employing specific coping strategies. Multicollinearity was also tested by the Pearson correlation coefficient and the resulting correlation matrix revealed very low correlation coefficients among the predictors. Overall, the inferential statistic method utilized was appropriate due to its potential to provide the influence of multiple factors or predictors on a variable having two possible outcomes.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from the respondents, ensuring voluntary involvement. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained to safeguard respondents' privacy. Additionally, necessary permissions were obtained from relevant government authorities to conduct the study, ensuring compliance with regulatory protocols. The research adhered to guidelines promoting the well-being and rights of the schoolgirls, reflecting a commitment to ethical research practices.

RESULTS INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

Demographic information

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are outlined in Table 1 below. The study targeted adolescent girls in secondary school, categorized into early adolescents (13-14 years), middle adolescents (15-16 years), and late adolescents (17-18 years). The corresponding numbers of girls for each age range were 176, 174, and 50, respectively. Late adolescents were fewer in number due to the sampling focusing solely on ordinary level secondary girls, with each class providing 100 girls. Regarding residence, 272 were day students, while 128 were boarding students.

Table 1: Demographic information of the respondents

Age	Early adolescents	Middle adolescents	Late adolescents	Total
	176	174	50	400
Grade level	Form 1	Form 2	Form 3	Form 4
	100	100	100	100
				400
Living Arrangement	Day student	Boarding student		
	272	128		400

The influence of perpetrator identity on sexual harassment coping strategies

Normalization

The results, as presented in table 2, reveal a statistically significant association between experiencing harassment from senior students and an increased likelihood of employing normalization coping

strategy ($\beta = 0.640$, $p = 0.004$). Schoolgirls who were harassed by senior students were 1.897 times likely to utilize normalization coping strategy than those who were not. This suggests that schoolgirls subjected to harassment by senior students may be likely to normalize the harassment possibly by ignoring or tolerating the encounters. These findings align with a study among South African girls, where majority normalized harassment perpetrated by their school peers [15]. Similarly, Canadian secondary school girls have been reported to demonstrate a tendency to normalize sexual harassment from either senior class peers or same class peers [16]. The inclination to normalize harassment may arise from students perceiving sexual harassment as a normal part of school life, leading to underreporting [17]. Additionally, the fear for further victimization from peers could also be a possible driving factor for schoolgirls' normalization of sexual harassment from peers [18].

Table 2: The influence of each perpetrator identity on normalization coping strategy

Normalization						
Variables in the Equation						
Predictors	β	Odds ratio	S.E.	Wald	Df	Sig.
Classmates	-0.130	0.878	0.219	0.354	1	0.552
Senior students	0.640	1.897	0.221	8.425	1	0.004
Teachers	0.082	1.085	0.267	0.094	1	0.759
Strangers	0.004	1.004	0.218	0.000	1	0.984
Non-teaching staff	-0.360	0.698	0.269	1.785	1	0.182
Age	-0.048	0.953	0.179	0.072	1	0.789
Living arrangement	-0.075	0.928	0.261	0.083	1	0.773
Constant	-0.465	0.628	0.188	6.097	1	0.014

Detachment

The results in Table 3 suggest that there is a statistically significant association between experiencing harassment from classmates, senior students and strangers and an increased likelihood of employing detachment coping strategy. The corresponding coefficients and p values are ($\beta = 0.463$, $p = 0.044$), ($\beta = 0.659$, $p = 0.003$) and ($\beta = 0.591$, $p = 0.009$). The odds ratio indicate that schoolgirls who encountered harassment from any of these identities were approximately 2 times more likely to display detachment coping strategy than those who did not. This could have been through actions like distancing from the perpetrator or avoiding places noted to be harassment hotspots. Notably, the senior students' identity had the highest Wald value (8.614), signifying its stronger association with detachment coping strategy than other significant predictors. In compliance with this study's findings, instances of detachment coping mechanism such as, altering routes to and from school to

avoid harassment from strangers and school peers are reported among Nepalese secondary schoolgirls [19]. Similarly, American schoolgirls have been found to avoid places, change routes, disguise themselves to avoid recognition due to sexual harassment from strangers in public places, these actions indicate a tendency of detachment [20]. Moreover, the current study also found age to significantly influence detachment strategy ($\beta = -0.456$, $p = 0.02$), for every year of age, the odds of employing this strategy decrease by a factor of 0.634. This shows that as adolescent girls get older the likelihood of employing this strategy decreases.

Table 3: The influence of each perpetrator identity on detachment coping strategy

Detachment						
Variables in the Equation						
Predictors	β	Odds ratio	S.E.	Wald	Df	Sig.
Classmates	0.463	1.588	0.230	4.062	1	0.044
Senior students	0.659	1.933	0.225	8.614	1	0.003
Teachers	0.525	1.690	0.271	3.750	1	0.053
Strangers	0.591	1.806	0.225	6.916	1	0.009
Non-teaching staff	0.250	1.284	0.270	0.860	1	0.354
Age	-0.456	0.634	0.197	5.378	1	0.020
Living arrangement	0.361	1.435	0.266	1.844	1	0.174
Constant	-1.522	0.218	0.220	47.685	1	5E-12

Engagement

The results in table 4 point out engagement coping strategy to have been a less likely response by schoolgirls towards stranger harassment ($\beta = -0.665$, $p = 0.003$). Those who encountered harassment from strangers were 0.514 times less likely to employ engagement strategy compared to those who did not. This means that schoolgirls are less likely to respond to harassment from strangers by actively engaging with the perpetrator through confrontation, issuing threats and warnings or negotiation. It is important to note that typical responses from females towards stranger harassment are usually avoidance and ignoring [22], these responses do not fit under engagement coping mechanism. This complements the findings of this study which show that this strategy is less likely to be used towards stranger harassment. Though, in some cases, responses towards stranger harassment reflecting engagement coping strategy do surface. For instance, some Swedish schoolgirls have been reported to respond to stranger harassment by physically pushing them away in cases of close contact and verbally refusing unwanted sexual advances [5]. This indicates that although schoolgirls are less likely to employ engagement coping strategy when the perpetrator is a stranger, they may sometimes resort to this strategy.

Table 4: Influence of each perpetrator identity on engagement coping strategy

Engagement						
Variables in the Equation						
Predictors	β	Odds ratio	S.E.	Wald	Df	Sig.
Classmates	0.231	1.260	0.222	1.088	1	0.297
Senior students	0.285	1.330	0.225	1.603	1	0.205
Teachers	-0.172	0.842	0.269	0.407	1	0.523
Strangers	-0.665	0.514	0.224	8.843	1	0.003
Non-teaching staff	0.070	1.073	0.269	0.069	1	0.793
Age	0.259	1.295	0.187	1.915	1	0.166
Living arrangement	-0.511	0.600	0.264	3.753	1	0.052
Constant	0.576	1.780	0.191	9.084	1	0.003

Help seeking

Table 5 below highlights that harassment perpetrated by non-teaching staff is associated with increased likelihood of employing help seeking coping strategy ($\beta = 0.664$, $p = 0.024$). The odds ratio indicates that schoolgirls who experienced harassment from non-teaching staff were 1.942 times as likely to seek help than those who did not. Consistent with this study's findings, the Department of Education reports that sexual harassment allegations presented by UK schoolchildren against school non-teaching staff rank second after physical abuse allegations [23]. This suggests the utilization of the help-seeking coping strategy through reporting sexual harassment incidents to authorities when harassed by non-teaching staff individuals. However, several studies have noted that the help-seeking strategy is often the least employed by female students, especially when the perpetrator holds a position of power, such as a teacher or non-teaching staff [24] - [26]. Though, help seeking has been identified to yield positive results in mitigating sexual harassment and bullying in schools [27]. Since harassment by non-teaching staff is associated with an increased likelihood of employing help seeking strategy, combating such harassment could possibly be easier.

Table 5: The influence of perpetrator identity on help seeking coping strategy

Help Seeking						
Variables in the equation						
Predictors	β	odds ratio	S.E.	Wald	Df	Sig.
Classmates	0.128	1.137	0.272	0.222	1	0.638
Senior students	-0.012	0.988	0.268	0.002	1	0.965
Teachers	0.492	1.635	0.300	2.697	1	0.101

Strangers	0.143	1.153	0.266	0.287	1	0.592
Non-teaching staff	0.664	1.942	0.295	5.068	1	0.024
Age	-0.368	0.692	0.230	2.566	1	0.109
Living arrangement	-0.144	0.866	0.306	0.222	1	0.638
Constant	-1.796	0.166	0.246	53.523	1	2.56E-13

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Derived from the obtained results, the deduction arises that detachment coping emerges as a common response when the perpetrator embodies identities such as a classmate, senior student or stranger, indicative of a self-protective mechanism centred on avoiding perpetrators from these identities. Notably, seeking help demonstrates a higher likelihood in instances where the perpetrator embodies a non-teaching staff identity, while engagement less surfaces when the perpetrator is a stranger, reflecting a non-proactive approach in responding to harassment from unfamiliar individuals. However, the association of normalization with harassment from senior students raises concerns, highlighting a worrisome trend of accepting and normalizing sexual misconducts within peer relationships. Interventions should focus on educating girls to prioritize help seeking strategy over others regardless of who perpetrated the harassment. The tendency to normalize peer perpetrated sexual harassment should also be discouraged by these educational programs through inclusion of information on the effects of normalizing sexual harassment. Also, the programs should emphasize matters related to consent, boundaries and respectful behaviours within school environments. Moreover, the targets of the program should not only be students, but also members of the teaching staff, non-teaching staff and other community members especially those residing or performing any sort of activities in close proximity to schools.

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