



RESEARCH ARTICLE

SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN URBAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE GAMBIA

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Abstract

Introduction: Sexual harassment is defined as unwanted, non-consensual sexual behaviour, where sexual attention is imposed on an unwilling party. Because of the culture of silence in The Gambia, it is believed that sexual harassment though prevalent in secondary schools; is underestimated like in most other African societies. **Objective:** To determine the prevalence of sexual harassment amongst secondary school students in urban Gambia, the socio-demographic characteristics of victims and perpetrators, and the effect of sexual harassment on the victims and the actions taken. **Methodology:** A pre-tested structured questionnaire was administered to 100 students in each of 3 of the 14 senior secondary schools in urban Gambia. A multistage sampling technique was used to select the study participants. The questionnaire collected information related to the participant's experience of sexual harassment as victims or perpetrators. **Result:** Of the 300 questionnaires distributed, 293 were returned. About 88% of study participants had been victims of sexual harassment, which ranged from verbal forms of abuse to physical forms such as pulling clothes off or being forced to engage in a sexual act. While 86.8% of girls reported being victims of sexual harassment, 90.4% of boys also reported being harassed mainly perpetrated by fellow students. Some victims (29.1%) reported being perpetrators of sexual harassment. **Conclusion:** Sexual harassment is quite common in secondary schools in The Gambia with some victims becoming perpetrators themselves. There is a need for more open discussion of sexual harassment in schools to combat the menace.

Keywords: Sexual Harassment, Secondary schools**INTRODUCTION**

The term "Sexual harassment"(SH) describes an unwanted and unwelcomed behaviour of sexual nature.[1] For an act to be considered as SH, the victim must consider it as unwelcome. Initially coined to refer to workplace behaviour it is increasingly being recognized to occur in other settings of human interactions and communities. In The Gambia SH is defined as unwanted, non-consensual sexual behaviour, where one party imposes sexual attention on another unwilling party.[2] Sexual harassment usually interferes with educational opportunities and may have health consequences. Various forms of SH exist and these include: unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other verbal, nonverbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature. These forms vary in frequency and severity ranging from mild, slightly bearable to very pervasive ones having adverse effects and consequences on the victim. Irrespective of the form SH may take, the aim of the perpetrator is usually to manipulate, intimidate or control the victim. Occasionally, there may be no intention to be offensive to the victim.



Sexual harassment is quite common among secondary school students worldwide. Perpetrators are usually fellow students, teachers or others. Both boys and girls can be victims of SH although the incidence seems to be higher amongst girls. Studies in the United States show that both girls and boys experience SH although it was more common in girls compared to boys (50-80% of girls compared to 40-60% of Boys).[1,3,4] The experiences of girls tended to be more physical compared to boys.[4] In South Africa, girls were found to often encounter highly sexualized verbal degradation in the school environment.[5] In Ghana, a study conducted in 2003 suggested that 6% of the girls surveyed had been victims of sexual blackmail over their class grades, 14% of rape cases had been perpetrated by school comrades, while 24% of boys in the study admitted to having raped a girl or to have taken part in a collective rape.[6] Anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that because of the culture of silence, not much has been documented about the magnitude of sexual harassment in secondary schools in the Gambia.

Students who experience SH may face several devastating medical consequences especially when it is in its pervasive forms. Most often unsafe sexual practices are carried out, which could result in unwanted pregnancies, tendency for illegal or self-administered abortions, and contraction of sexually transmitted diseases with high rates of HIV/AIDS infection among school-aged girls in Africa.[6] Depressive symptoms are more likely to occur in victims of SH which in severe cases may lead to suicide.[7] Some students may give in to sexual advances for fear of punitive measures thereby exposing them to risky sexual practices that are known to be predictive for later sexual behaviour.[8] Similar devastating consequences are seen in the case of rape with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) being common. A number of challenges have been identified as keeping Gambian girls from enrolling and staying in school, amongst these challenges is SH.[9]

In September 2004, the "Policy Guidelines and Regulations on Sexual Misconduct and Harassment in Gambian Educational Institutions" was published, prohibiting SH in schools.[2] However, the protection of students in Gambian secondary schools from SH is weak as there is no systematic monitoring of incidents of SH in schools.[2] The problem of SH at schools in the Gambia is regarded as moderate because of the lack of data and analysis of cases combined with the culture of silence around such questions.[6,10] Society's perception of what constitutes SH remains controversial and it remains highly delicate to define what is considered to be SH in The Gambia.[11] The aim of this study is to identify the burden of SH in urban secondary schools in The Gambia. This study also aims to determine the common forms of SH prevalent in schools; actions taken by victims of SH and the reasons given by students who are perpetrators of SH.

METHOD

A cross sectional study was conducted amongst students in urban secondary schools in the Gambia in the month of March 2013. Of the 49 senior secondary schools in the Gambia, 36 (73.5%) are located in the urban areas. Four secondary schools were randomly selected from the list of secondary schools in urban Gambia. School registers in the selected schools were used to randomly select 100 students enrolled in grades 9 – 12 from each of the selected schools who were present in school on the day of data collection. The selected schools were anonymously referred to as School A, B, C and D.

The data was collected using a self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire was adapted from the American Association of University Women (AAUW) survey Crossing the line (November 2011), AAUW Educational survey Hostile hallways and a study carried out on Sexual harassment against female students in senior high schools in The Kumasi Metropolis, Ashanti region of Ghana, University of Cape Coast.[1,3,12] Confidentiality and anonymity was ensured throughout data collection.



The data obtained was analyzed using Epi info version 3.5.3(CDC Atlanta, Georgia, USA). The test of hypothesis was done using the student t-test for numerical variables and the Chi-square for categorical variables. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 4 schools selected to be part of the study, one of the schools declined participation at the point of data collection after initially agreeing to be a part of the study, so only 3 schools (300 students) were involved in the study. Of these, 294 questionnaires were filled and returned (2.0%) attrition.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the study population. There were more girls (57.5%) than boys (42.5%) in the study. The Girls "Scholarship Scheme" in the Gambia is responsible for their improved enrolment at all educational levels in the Gambia.[2] The increase in enrollment of girls has been particularly striking leading to a slight majority of girls in almost all educational levels in The Gambia.[2]The proportion of respondents in terms of ethnicity and religion is also fairly representative of the true population in the country as a whole.[2,10]

The table also shows that 88.4% of all students (90.4% of boys and 85.6% of girls) had experienced SH. Similar results were obtained from AAUW in 1993 and 2001 where, more than 80% of the students reported that they had experienced SH at least once in their school career.[1,3]This high figure reflects the enormity of the problem and underscores the priority that should be accorded this problem given the negative effects faced by the victims which could be especially challenging for these adolescents to manage.

Students from the Fula ethnic group were more likely to report being sexually harassed compared to other ethnic groups (OR 4.34; p-value 0.0488). Anecdotal evidence in The Gambia suggests that the Fula people are well known to fulfill standards of beauty. The AAUW survey of 1993, 2001 and 2011 established that both boys and girls who were seen as beautiful are at increased risk of being victimized.[1,3]

There was no statistically significant association between SH and gender in the study (X^2 0.1866; p-value 0.0955). This finding is contrary to results obtained from other studies. In one of these studies, girls were found to be more likely than boys to be sexually harassed, by a substantial margin (56 % versus 40 %).[1] Previous research carried out by the AAUW in 2001 showed that girls are sexually harassed more frequently than boys.[3] In South Africa, most studies on SH are limited to girls as there is a stark difference in both the prevalence and invasiveness of the act as compared to boys.[5]In West Africa, as in other African regions, authoritarian school cultures as well as pervasive male-controlled values and norms that encourage male aggression and female passivity are identified as critical underlying reasons for sexual school violence.[6]The reason for this difference as observed in this study could be linked to the culture of silence around such questions in the Gambia.[6] Religiously and culturally, girls in this region are especially not expected to openly discuss or involve themselves in topics related to sex and sexuality. However, the basis of behavior not being immutable; there have been instances of females sexually harassing males hence, alterations in expectations on proper male and female behaviour is not completely out of place.[4]



Table 1: descriptive characteristics of the study population

Variables	SH present	SH absent	p-value
Mean age (years)	17.3 (1.8)	16.8 (1.7)	0.08605
Mean grade	10.6	10.4	0.3913
Religion			X^2 0.9363
Christian	25	4	0.4890
Islam	227	38	
Ethnicity			
Mandinka	85	12	
Fula	55	2	
Wolof	44	4	
Manjago	10	2	
Sarahule	6	2	
Aku	5	2	
Others	47	2	
Not recorded	0	8	
Total	252	42	
Ethnicity			0.0488
Fula	55	2	OR 4.34
Non Fula	203	32	
Marital status			X^2 0.1475
Married	1	1	0.1428
Single	251	41	
Grade			
9	34	5	
10	80	21	
11	86	7	
12	51	9	
Gender			X^2 0.1866
Boys	112	13	.0955
Girls	140	29	

Figure 1 shows the specific types of SH as experienced by the respondents. The most common form of SH as reported by respondents is unsolicited and unwelcomed sexually themed messages usually sent by electronic media like text messages, facebook, e-mails etc. The table shows that verbal forms of SH are the most common forms of SH experienced by students in secondary schools. These results support the findings from the AAUW survey where the majority of students (33%) reported that they encountered unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, and gestures at least once in the school year.[1] In another study conducted in Ghana, 50% of the respondents were seen to have been exposed to verbal sexual harassment (including sexualized conversation, attractiveness rating and sexual comments).[13] These types of harassment can easily go unnoticed by school authorities and therefore not attract attention for chastisement against the perpetrator.

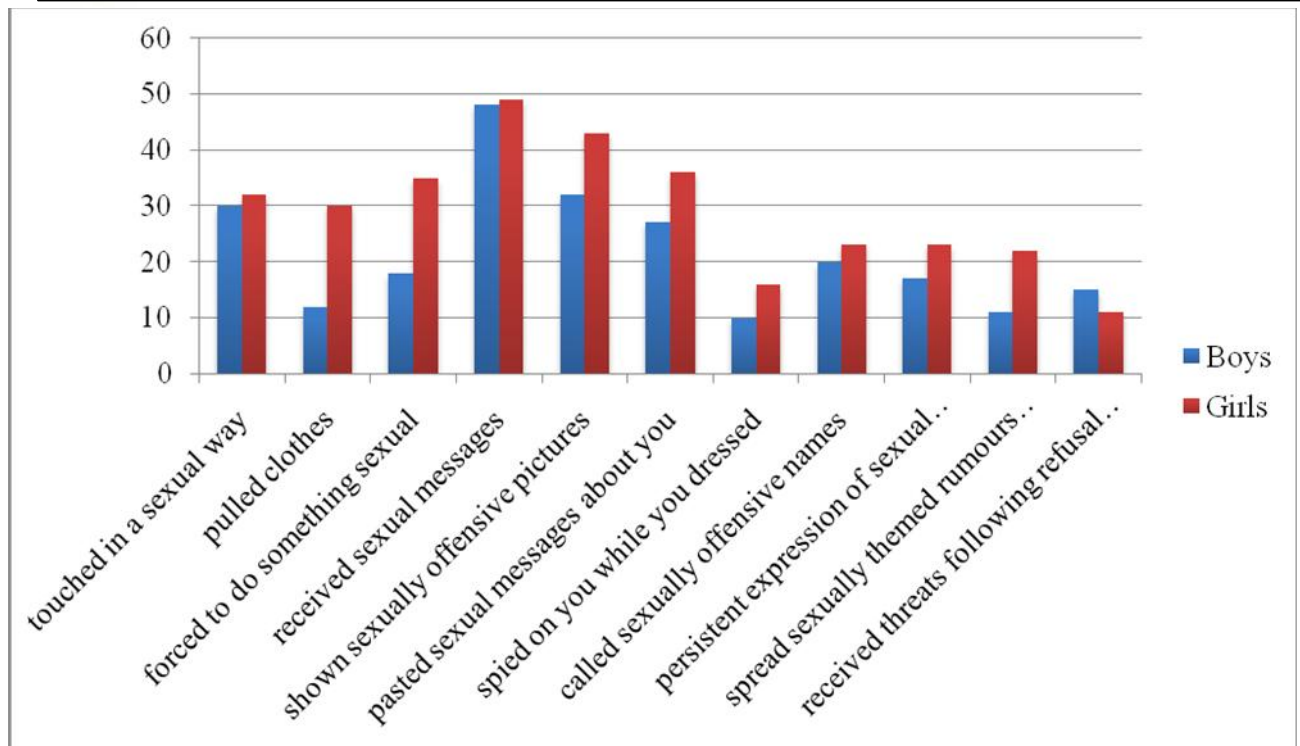


Figure 1: Specific types of SH experienced by study participants

Figure 1 shows that girls are more likely to experience types of SH that require the physical presence of the perpetrator like having their clothes pulled off, being spied on while dressing up and being forced to engage in a sexually themed activity like kissing, caressing etc. The use of verbal sexual harassment is easier to commit against a female student since the physical presence of the harasser may not be needed.[13] For instance, a person may communicate a verbal behaviour by the use of a mobile phone or Internet even while being miles away from the victim. This serves the purpose of perpetrators who want to hide their actions from others or who do not want their requests influenced by any persons present. In addition, usage of internet and phones are a faster and easier means to reach their target at any time and wherever.

Girls were also seen to experience more threats than boys after refusal to compromise to something sexually related (18.6% vs. 11.7%). Given the norms placed on females as being the subordinate gender, it is almost likely that any one will take advantage of this by threatening them so that they could be in a vulnerable state and maybe give-in to the demands.

Figure 1 also indicates that physical forms of SH are the least common. Physical forms of SH are generally found to be less common than verbal harassment, but tend to have stronger negative effect on students.[1] Thus physical SH tend to be more difficult to perpetrate in the school environment where many other students and staff are present.

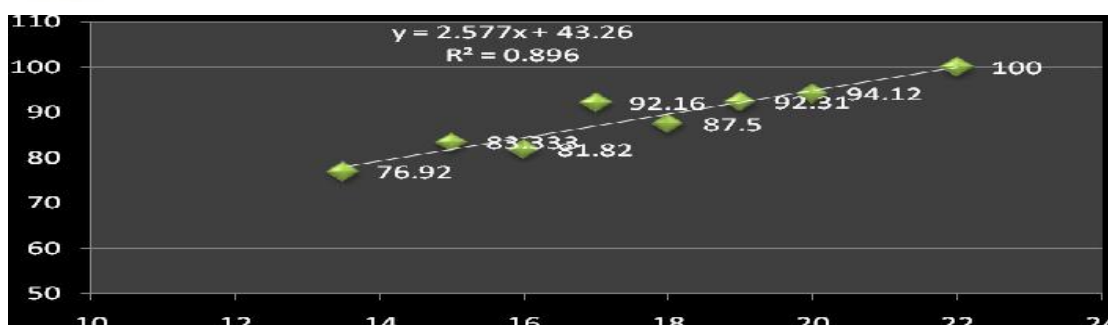


Figure 2: Relationship between age and SH

Figure 2 indicates that there is a relationship between increasing age and SH. This may be due to physical developmental changes that occur as one passes through adolescence as well as the socio-emotional development.[4] Sexual attraction as a result becomes very important during adolescence and motivates cross-gender interactions. As young people mature, such behaviours diminish; though some never learn "proper" sexual behaviour.[4] Inability to express sexual attraction in socially appropriate ways may lead to intentionally or unintentionally engaging in harassing behaviours.

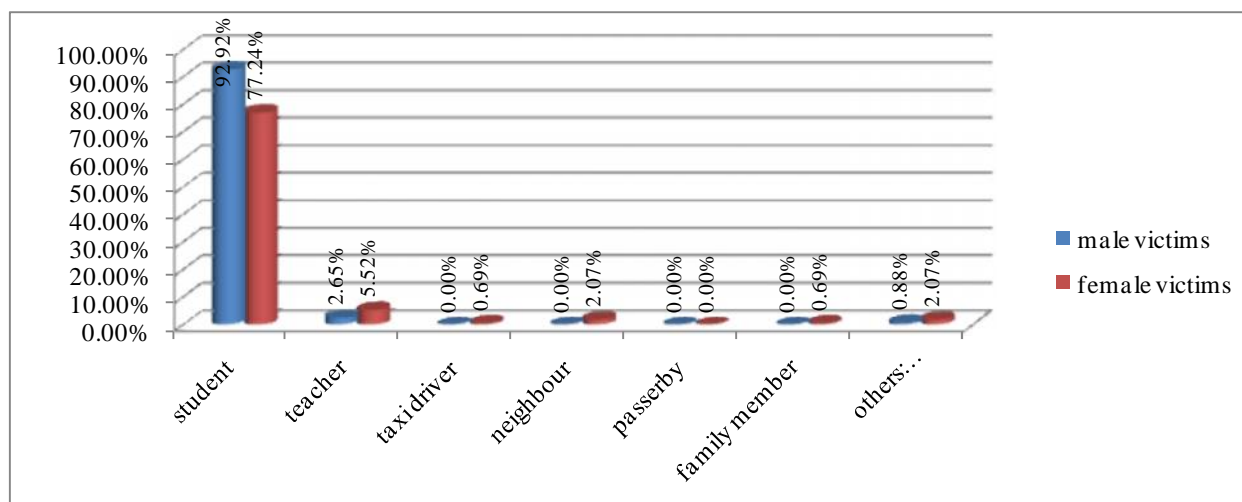


Figure 3: Perpetrators of SH as reported by Victims

Figure 3 reveals that the highest amount of sexual harassment is carried out by students on students (92.9% of male and 77.2% of female victims). These findings are in line with those from the AAUW survey where, nearly all the behaviour documented in the survey was peer-to-peer sexual harassment.[1] In another study, 64.4% of the harassers of victims were students.[13] However, more girls reported being harassed by a teacher compared to boys (5.5% versus 2.7%).

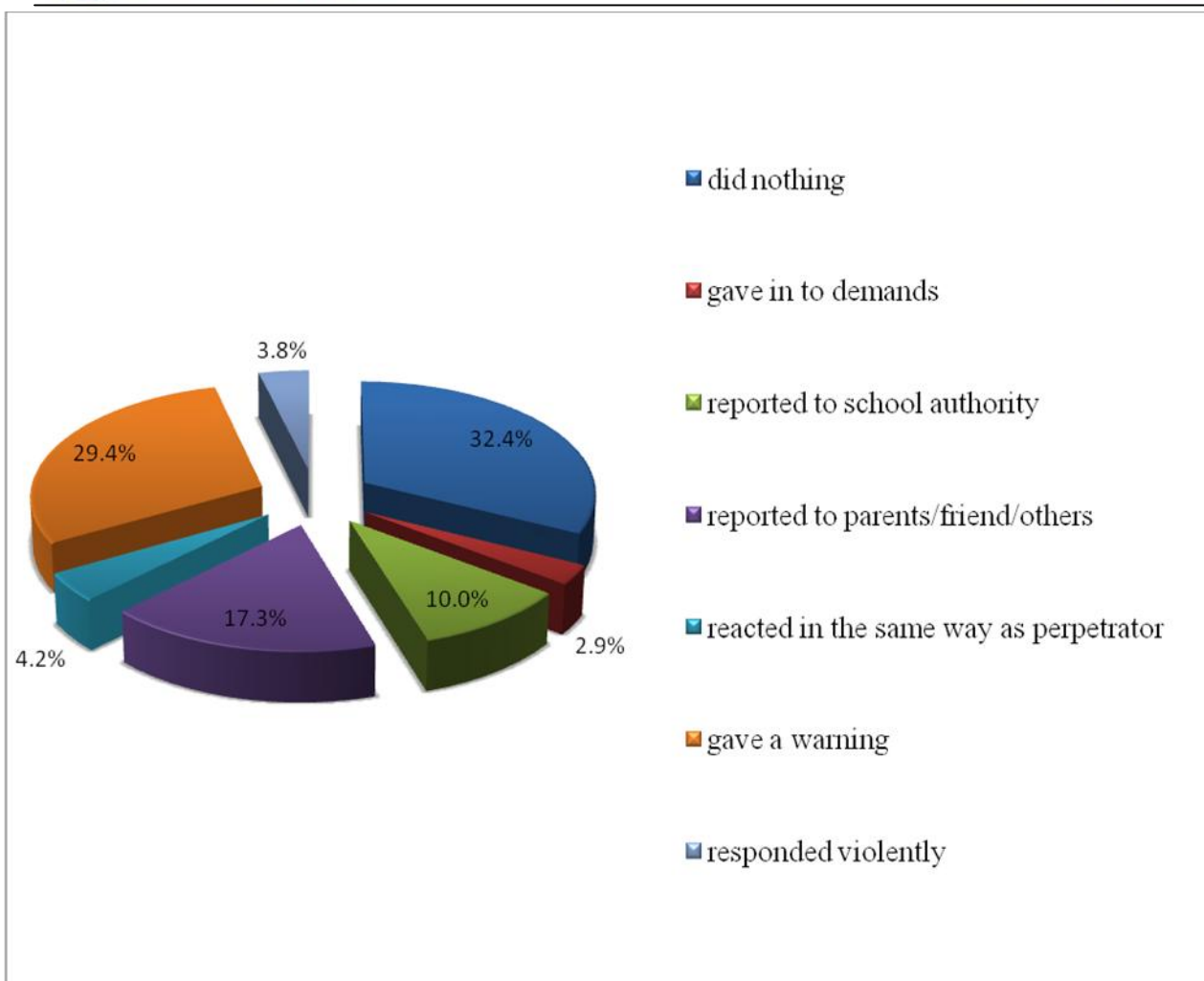


Figure 4: Victim's response at the time of SH

In figure 4, the most common immediate response by victims of SH was to do nothing (32.4%) closely followed by those who warned the perpetrator (29.4%). Only 10.0% of victims reported the incident to the school authority. This is unsurprising since ignoring a harasser may feel like the easiest response for students who are unsure of what to do. Many parents and teachers advise students to ignore harassers especially as they will not consider a harassing behaviour to be very serious unless it is physical.[1] Fear is the biggest factor that silences many victims of SH. Fear of being branded a “troublemaker” among one’s peers weighs heavily on victims, just as fear of retaliation from peers for reporting a fellow student prevents many students from complaining about SH. Also, the absence of any clear reporting procedure and failure of schools to require teachers and other staff to report incidents of SH they witness provide an unfriendly environment for the victims of harassment.[14] The culture of silence around such topics seen as a taboo in this environment could be another reason for silence. However, it is disturbing to have more students reporting ignoring harassing behaviour as they may suffer from repetitive sexual harassment from their harassers expecting that one day it will end.

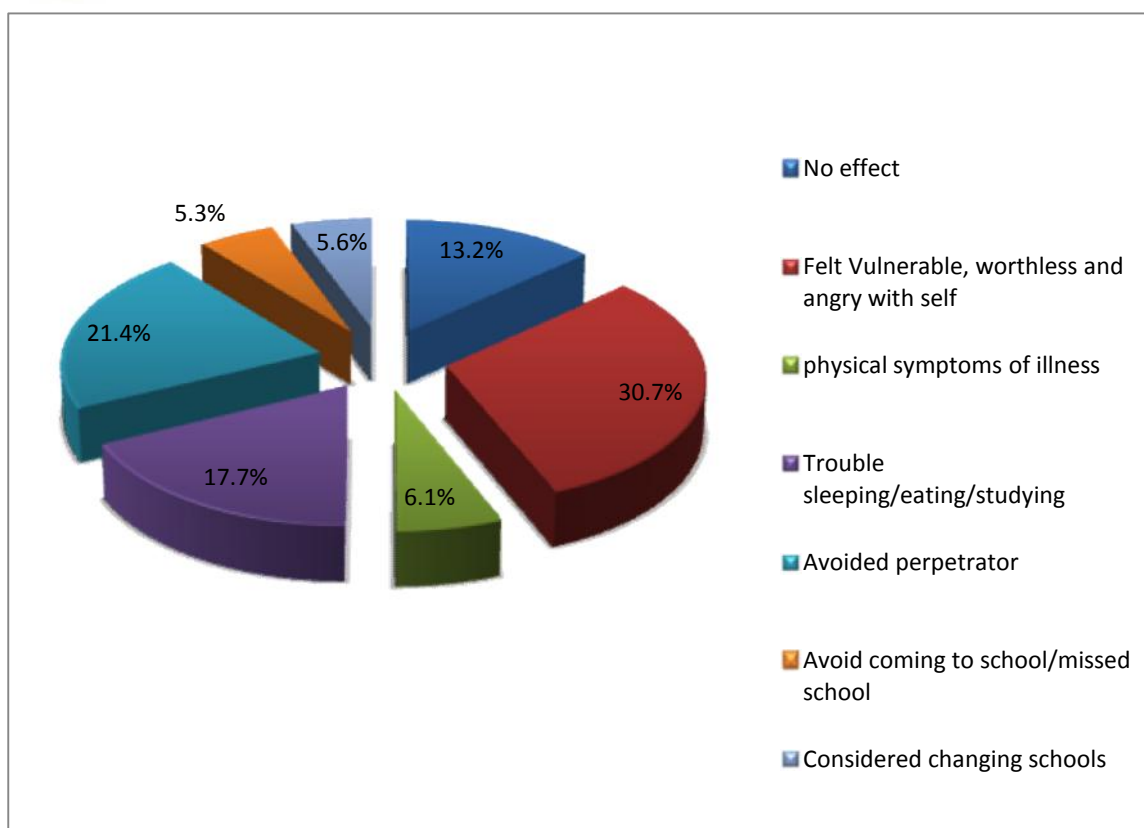


Figure 5 shows the effect of SH on the Victims

Figure 5 illustrates the effects of SH on the victims. While 30.7% reported feeling vulnerable, worthless and angry with themselves, 13.2 % of victims said their experience of SH did not have any effect on them. Avoiding the perpetrator (21.4%), avoiding School or considered changing school (10.8%) and trouble with studying, sleeping or eating (17.7%) were the other effects reported by victims of SH in this study. The emotional toll of SH was the most noticeable impact on victims in a study carried out in the US where, a third of the students reported not wanting to go to school because of sexual harassment.[1] Another study showed that 28.6% of the students reported that the experiences of sexual harassment in school did not affect them.[13] Even though these respondents may have experienced some form of sexual harassment in school, they probably had developed an adaptation towards the problem because they thought there was nothing that could be done about the problem or they saw such experiences as being part of school life. Although victims may decide to keep their experiences to themselves without reporting to anyone, studies have shown that victims who live in self-denial or overlook the occurrence of the incident, experience continued exposure to harassment in the same or greater intensity.[13]



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, SH is quite common in secondary schools in The Gambia with both boys and girls equally reported being sexually harassed. Girls were however more likely to report physical forms of SH. Most victims of SH in the schools did nothing or warned the perpetrators to stop. The emotional effects of SH is seen amongst students in The Gambia with a good number reporting feelings of worthlessness and difficulty studying, eating or sleeping. This data suggests a need for more open discussion of SH in schools to combat the menace.

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