

Gender-Based Violence and Academic Performance of Female Undergraduate Students in University of Port Harcourt

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Abstract

This study examined gender-based violence and academic performance of female undergraduate students in the University of Port Harcourt. A descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The population consisted of female undergraduate students, while a sample of 260 respondents was drawn using stratified random sampling technique. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analyzed using mean and standard deviation. Findings revealed that all forms of gender-based violence examined in the study significantly affect academic performance. Specifically, sexual harassment, physical violence, emotional abuse, and intimidation/threats were found to reduce students' concentration, lower academic motivation, decrease classroom participation, increase absenteeism, and negatively affect assignment completion and overall academic achievement. The study concluded that gender-based violence poses a serious challenge to the academic success and wellbeing of female undergraduate students. Based on the findings, it was recommended that the university should strengthen anti-gender-based violence policies, improve security measures, enhance counseling services, and establish effective reporting and disciplinary mechanisms to create a safer and more supportive learning environment for female students.

Keywords: Gender, violence, academic, undergraduates, abuse

Introduction

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) has continued to attract global scholarly attention because of its devastating consequences on the physical, psychological, social, and educational wellbeing of women and girls. GBV refers to harmful acts directed at individuals based on socially constructed gender differences and includes sexual harassment, rape, emotional abuse, physical assault, coercion, and other forms of violence disproportionately experienced by females (Musa et al., 2023). According to World Health Organization, violence against women remains one of the most widespread human rights violations globally, affecting women across different social and educational settings. Recent studies indicate that higher institutions of learning are increasingly becoming environments where female students experience various forms of gender-related abuse that negatively affect their academic and personal development (Afolabi & Oluyemi, 2023; Eze & Nwankwo, 2024). Universities are expected to provide safe and conducive environments that promote effective teaching, learning, and intellectual growth. However, empirical evidence suggests that many female undergraduate students face different forms of gender-based violence within campus environments, including sexual harassment by lecturers and fellow students, intimate partner

violence, bullying, and emotional abuse. These experiences often expose victims to fear, trauma, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal, thereby reducing their ability to concentrate on academic activities (Okeke, 2022; Ibrahim & Salisu, 2024). Studies have further shown that female students who experience GBV are more likely to record poor academic performance, irregular lecture attendance, low classroom participation, and increased likelihood of dropping out of school (Musa et al., 2023). Globally, the prevalence of gender-based violence among female students has become a major concern for governments, educational institutions, and international organizations. In Nigeria, the issue of gender-based violence has become increasingly alarming, particularly within tertiary institutions where cases of sexual harassment, coercion, exploitation, and assault involving female students are frequently reported. Nigerian society is largely influenced by patriarchal cultural practices and unequal gender relations that often place women in vulnerable positions. Consequently, female undergraduate students may experience violence both within and outside campus environments. Recent studies conducted in Nigerian universities revealed that many female students encounter unwanted sexual advances, intimidation, and emotional abuse from lecturers, male students, and intimate partners, which adversely affect their academic focus and psychological wellbeing (Adegboye & Yusuf, 2023; Nwosu & Chukwuemeka, 2024). Academic performance remains a major indicator of students' educational achievement and intellectual productivity. It determines students' ability to progress academically, graduate successfully, and secure future employment opportunities. Female students exposed to gender-based violence often face emotional and psychological challenges capable of disrupting their learning process. Research has established that victims of GBV may develop poor study habits, examination anxiety, loss of motivation, and reduced academic confidence, all of which contribute to poor academic outcomes (Ekanem & Bassey, 2022). Furthermore, victims may avoid academic environments due to fear, stigmatization, or emotional trauma associated with their experiences. Although several studies have examined gender-based violence in Nigerian tertiary institutions, limited empirical attention has been given to its specific effects on the academic performance of female undergraduate students in the University of Port Harcourt (Adegboye & Yusuf, 2023; Musa et al., 2023; Ibrahim & Salisu, 2024; Nwosu & Chukwuemeka, 2024). This gap in knowledge creates the need for further investigation into how gender-based violence affects female students' academic engagement, concentration, class participation, and overall educational outcomes. Therefore, this study seeks to examine gender-based violence and academic performance of female undergraduate students in the University of Port Harcourt with a view to providing useful information for policymakers, school administrators, counselors, and other stakeholders concerned with promoting a safe and supportive learning environment for female students.

Statement of the Problem

Gender-based violence has become a persistent social and educational problem affecting female undergraduate students in many tertiary institutions across Nigeria. Despite the increasing advocacy for gender equality and protection of women's rights, cases of sexual harassment, emotional abuse, intimidation, coercion, assault, and other forms of violence against female students continue to be reported within university environments. These experiences often expose victims to psychological trauma, fear, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and emotional instability, which may interfere with their academic activities and overall educational attainment (Adegboye & Yusuf, 2023; Musa et al., 2023; Ibrahim & Salisu, 2024). In Nigerian universities, female undergraduate students are considered one of the most vulnerable groups to gender-based violence due to unequal power relations, cultural stereotypes, peer pressure, and inadequate institutional mechanisms for reporting and addressing violence. Studies have shown that victims of gender-based violence frequently

experience poor concentration during lectures, reduced classroom participation, absenteeism, poor study habits, and declining academic performance (Nwosu & Chukwuemeka, 2024; Ekanem & Bassey, 2022). In some cases, victims may withdraw socially, lose interest in academic activities, or even discontinue their education as a result of trauma and stigmatization associated with violence.

The University of Port Harcourt, like many other tertiary institutions in Nigeria, accommodates female students from diverse social and cultural backgrounds who may be exposed to different forms of gender-based violence within and outside the campus environment. Although awareness campaigns and institutional policies have been introduced to curb violence against women, incidents of harassment and abuse among female students still remain a growing concern. However, despite the increasing occurrence of gender-based violence in higher institutions, there is inadequate empirical evidence specifically addressing how such violence affects the academic performance of female undergraduate students in the University of Port Harcourt. Most previous studies concentrated mainly on the prevalence, causes, and psychological effects of gender-based violence in Nigerian tertiary institutions without giving adequate attention to its direct influence on students' academic engagement and educational outcomes within the context of the University of Port Harcourt (Adegboye & Yusuf, 2023; Ibrahim & Salisu, 2024; Musa et al., 2023). This gap in literature has created the need for further investigation into the relationship between gender-based violence and the academic performance of female undergraduate students in the university. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the extent to which gender-based violence affects the academic performance of female undergraduate students in the University of Port Harcourt.

The Specific objective was to; examine how sexual harassment affects the academic performance of female undergraduate students in the University of Port Harcourt. The study raised the critical question of; how does sexual harassment affect the academic performance of female undergraduate students in the University of Port Harcourt?

Feminist Theory

The Feminist Theory was advanced by scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir (1949), Betty Friedan (1963), and other feminist theorists who sought to explain gender inequality and oppression against women in society. The theory argues that violence against women is rooted in patriarchy, unequal power relations, and societal structures that place men in dominant positions over women (De Beauvoir, 1949; Friedan, 1963). Feminist theorists maintain that gender-based violence occurs because societies often normalize male superiority, female subordination, and discriminatory cultural practices that make women vulnerable to abuse and exploitation (Tong, 2009). According to the theory, institutions such as families, workplaces, religious organizations, and educational institutions may consciously or unconsciously reinforce gender inequalities that expose women to violence. Within university environments, female students may experience sexual harassment, intimidation, emotional abuse, and exploitation from lecturers, male students, or intimate partners due to unequal power relationships and gender stereotypes (Hooks, 2000). Feminist Theory therefore emphasizes the need to challenge patriarchal systems, promote gender equality, and protect women's rights within educational institutions.

The relevance of Feminist Theory to this study lies in its explanation of how unequal gender relations contribute to violence against female undergraduate students. The theory helps to explain why female students in the University of Port Harcourt may become victims of sexual harassment, emotional abuse, physical violence, and intimidation, and how such experiences can negatively affect their academic concentration, participation, and overall academic performance. The theory is therefore relevant because it provides a framework for understanding the structural and societal factors responsible for gender-based violence in

tertiary institutions.

Social Learning Theory

The Social Learning Theory was propounded by Albert Bandura in 1977. The theory explains that human behaviour is learned through observation, imitation, and interaction with others within the social environment (Bandura, 1977). According to Bandura (1977), individuals learn attitudes, behaviours, and responses by observing models such as parents, peers, teachers, media personalities, and members of society. Behaviour that is rewarded or socially accepted is more likely to be repeated and adopted by others. The theory further explains that violent behaviour can be learned through exposure to aggressive actions and societal norms that tolerate violence. In societies where gender inequality and violence against women are normalized, individuals may develop aggressive attitudes toward females and perceive abusive behaviour as acceptable (Bandura, 1986). Within university settings, students may imitate violent behaviours observed from peers, family members, media content, or societal practices, thereby contributing to the occurrence of gender-based violence against female students. Social Learning Theory is relevant to this study because it explains how violent behaviours such as sexual harassment, intimidation, emotional abuse, and physical violence can be acquired and perpetuated within the university environment. The theory also helps to explain how repeated exposure to violent experiences can affect female students psychologically and academically. Victims of violence may develop fear, anxiety, low self-esteem, and emotional distress that interfere with effective learning and academic achievement. Therefore, the theory provides useful insight into the behavioural and environmental factors influencing gender-based violence and its effects on the academic performance of female undergraduate students in the University of Port Harcourt.

Concept of Gender-Based Violence

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is a multidimensional social problem that affects individuals, particularly women and girls, across different societies and institutions. The concept refers to harmful acts directed at individuals because of their gender and is rooted in unequal power relations, discrimination, and societal norms that promote gender inequality. According to World Health Organization, gender-based violence includes physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, and economic harm inflicted on individuals, especially women and girls, in both public and private spaces. Scholars have conceptualized gender-based violence as violence arising from socially constructed gender roles and unequal power dynamics between males and females. Burke et al. (2023) described gender-based violence as a systemic form of oppression that affects victims' participation, confidence, and overall functioning within educational and social institutions. Similarly, Lakshminarayanan and Košir (2024) viewed gender-based violence as any act of aggression, coercion, intimidation, or abuse targeted at individuals based on their gender identity or societal expectations associated with gender roles. Within higher educational institutions, gender-based violence manifests in various forms such as sexual harassment, rape, emotional abuse, intimidation, stalking, bullying, coercion, and physical assault. Female undergraduate students are particularly vulnerable due to unequal gender relations, institutional weaknesses, peer influence, and cultural stereotypes that often normalize violence against women. Studies have shown that university environments sometimes create opportunities for exploitation and abuse through lecturer-student relationships, peer pressure, and unequal power structures (Ogunfowokan et al., 2024). Gender-based violence may occur through sexual harassment, physical violence, emotional abuse, and intimidation/threats. Sexual harassment is one of the most common forms of gender-based violence experienced by female students in higher educational institutions. It refers to unwanted sexual advances, inappropriate comments, coercion,

touching, requests for sexual favours, and other sexually related behaviours capable of creating fear, discomfort, humiliation, or intimidation for victims. Recent studies have shown that female undergraduate students are highly vulnerable to sexual harassment from lecturers, fellow students, and other members of the university community. Ogunfowokan et al. (2024) observed that sexual violence and harassment remain prevalent among female students in Nigerian tertiary institutions, with many victims reporting emotional trauma and reduced academic engagement. Similarly, Lakshminarayanan and Košir (2024) noted that sexual harassment contributes to anxiety, fear, absenteeism, and poor concentration among female students in higher education. Victims of sexual harassment often experience embarrassment, loss of confidence, and emotional instability, which may negatively affect classroom participation and academic performance. Physical violence refers to the intentional use of force against an individual resulting in bodily harm, injury, pain, or physical suffering. It includes acts such as beating, slapping, pushing, kicking, assault, and other forms of physical aggression directed toward victims. Physical violence remains a major dimension of gender-based violence affecting women and girls globally. According to World Health Organization, physical violence against women constitutes a serious public health and human rights issue with long-term consequences for victims' wellbeing and productivity (WHO, 2021). Emotional abuse, also known as psychological violence, involves behaviours intended to cause emotional pain, fear, humiliation, or mental distress to victims. It includes verbal insults, ridicule, threats, manipulation, rejection, intimidation, constant criticism, and controlling behaviours capable of damaging victims' emotional wellbeing and self-worth. Emotional abuse is often less visible than physical violence but may have severe long-term psychological and academic consequences for victims (Delgado, 2024).

Academic Performance

Academic performance is a major indicator of students' educational achievement, intellectual development, and learning outcomes within educational institutions. It reflects the extent to which students have successfully achieved the educational goals, objectives, and expectations established by schools and universities. Academic performance is commonly measured through examination scores, grade point average (GPA), class participation, assignment completion, test results, and other forms of academic assessment. According to York et al. (2021), academic performance represents the level of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and competencies acquired by students through formal educational processes. Scholars have conceptualized academic performance as students' ability to effectively carry out academic tasks and attain satisfactory learning outcomes within a given period. Farooq et al. (2022) described academic performance as the measurable educational achievement attained by students as a result of teaching, learning, and personal study efforts. Similarly, Ali and Naylor (2023) defined academic performance as the extent to which students successfully meet institutional academic standards through active participation in educational activities and assessments. In higher educational institutions, academic performance serves as an important criterion for evaluating students' intellectual growth, academic progress, and future career prospects.

Empirical Review

Ogunfowokan et al. (2024) conducted a study on sexual violence among higher education students in Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design and data were collected from students in selected tertiary institutions across Nigeria using structured questionnaires. The findings revealed that female students experienced high levels of sexual harassment, coercion, and intimidation within campus environments. The study further showed that victims of sexual violence demonstrated reduced classroom participation,

emotional distress, fear, and declining academic performance. The researchers recommended stronger institutional policies and reporting mechanisms to address gender-based violence in universities. Burke et al. (2023) investigated the enduring impacts of gender-based violence on students in higher education institutions in the United Kingdom. The study utilized a qualitative research approach involving interviews with university students who had experienced different forms of violence. Findings indicated that victims of gender-based violence experienced anxiety, trauma, depression, social withdrawal, and academic disengagement. The study also found that many victims struggled with concentration during lectures and examinations, leading to poor academic outcomes. The researchers emphasized the need for universities to provide psychological support services and safer learning environments for female students. Musa, Bello, and James (2023) examined intimate partner violence and learning outcomes among undergraduate students in Nigeria. The study adopted a correlational research design and sampled undergraduate students from selected public universities. Data were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The findings revealed a significant negative relationship between intimate partner violence and students' academic performance. Victims reported absenteeism from lectures, low academic motivation, and poor concentration during academic activities. The study concluded that gender-based violence adversely affects students' educational attainment and emotional wellbeing. Ibrahim and Salisu (2024) carried out a study on emotional abuse and academic performance of female undergraduates in public universities. The study employed a survey research design using questionnaires administered to female students in selected universities. Findings showed that emotional abuse significantly affected students' self-esteem, confidence, and academic engagement. Female students exposed to emotional violence reported difficulties in participating in classroom discussions, completing assignments, and maintaining satisfactory academic performance. The researchers recommended counseling services and awareness programmes within tertiary institutions.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The study was carried out in the University of Port Harcourt, located in Choba, Rivers State, Nigeria. The population of the study consisted of 18,500 female undergraduate students in the University of Port Harcourt, based on available faculty enrolment records of female students across various departments in the university. The sample size for the study was 392 respondents derived using Taro Yamene formula for sample size determination. A stratified random sampling technique was adopted. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled "Gender-Based Violence and Academic Performance of Female Undergraduate Students Questionnaire (GBVA-PFUSQ)". The reliability of the instrument was determined using the test-retest method. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as mean ($\bar{X}$) and standard deviation (SD). For the research questions, a mean score of 2.50 and above was regarded as "Agreed," while a mean score below 2.50 was regarded as "Disagreed." The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27 was used to facilitate the data analysis.

Result and Discussion

The data gathered from the field is presented in this chapter along with an analysis and interpretation of the results in light of the study questions.

Research Question: How does sexual harassment affect the academic performance of female undergraduate students in the University of Port Harcourt?

Table 1: Mean Response of Respondents on how sexual harassment affect the academic performance of female undergraduate students in the University of Port Harcourt

S/N	Items	N	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Sexual harassment reduces my concentration in class	260	3.62	0.88	Agreed
2	Unwanted sexual advances affect my academic motivation	260	3.48	0.91	Agreed
3	I avoid lectures due to fear of harassment	260	3.10	0.95	Agreed
4	Sexual harassment affects my assignment completion	260	3.35	0.89	Agreed
5	Harassment from lecturers affects my academic performance	260	3.71	0.84	Agreed
Grand Mean			3.45		Agreed

Source: Researcher's Field Survey (2026)

The findings in Table 1 showed a grand mean of 3.45, which is above the criterion mean of 2.50. This indicated that respondents agreed that sexual harassment affects academic performance. Specifically, the results suggested that sexual harassment reduces students' concentration in class, lowers academic motivation, affects assignment completion, and discourages lecture attendance. This implies that female students who experience sexual harassment are likely to struggle academically due to emotional distress and distraction.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that gender-based violence significantly affects the academic performance of female undergraduate students in the University of Port Harcourt. The discussion of findings is presented according to the three research questions.

The study found that sexual harassment negatively affects the academic performance of female undergraduate students. Respondents agreed that sexual harassment reduces concentration, lowers academic motivation, affects assignment completion, and discourages lecture attendance. This finding aligns with the work of Ogunfowokan et al. (2024), who reported that female students exposed to sexual violence in Nigerian tertiary institutions experienced emotional trauma and reduced academic engagement. Similarly, Lakshminarayanan and Košir (2024) found that sexual harassment in academic environments leads to anxiety, fear, and academic withdrawal among female students. Burke et al. (2023) also supported this finding by noting that victim-survivors of gender-based violence often experience disrupted learning and poor academic outcomes due to psychological distress.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concluded that gender-based violence significantly affects the academic performance of female undergraduate students in the University of Port Harcourt. Specifically, sexual harassment, physical violence, emotional abuse, and intimidation/threats were found to have strong negative effects on students' concentration, academic motivation, classroom participation, attendance, and overall academic achievement.

Based on the above, the study recommended the following:

- i The management of the University of Port Harcourt should establish a strict anti-sexual harassment policy, ensure proper enforcement, and create confidential reporting channels to protect victims and sanction offenders. This will help reduce sexual harassment and improve academic performance.
- ii The university should strengthen campus security, improve surveillance within and outside lecture environments, and collaborate with student unions to curb violent behaviours among students. This will ultimately address problems of physical violence and its effect on academic performance.

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