

Psychological Implications of sexual exploitation and Harassment on Student Interns

Tamuka Davira¹, Anne-Fa6ith Majoni², Munyaradzi Chidarikire³, Innocent Mwapangira⁴, Shepherd Gudyani⁵

Lupane state University

tdavira707@gmail.com, tamukadavira339@gmail.com

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Abstract: The study explores the psychological implications of sexual exploitation and Harassment on student interns. The study highlights that sexual exploitation and harassment have become a perennial issue within the corridors of higher and tertiary education and this has negative implications on student performance. The researchers highlight that sexual exploitation of students can not only be relegated to higher learning institution corridors but sexual exploitation has also permeated the industries where students are attached. In exploring this study, the researchers made use of Herman (1992)'s Trauma and Recovery theory which stipulates that an unwanted event such as war, sexual exploitation, or rape can affect a person's psychological functions. Thus there is a need to address such traumatic experiences by coming up with vibrant mechanisms. Hence the research uses this theory to highlight that sexual exploitation and harassment of student interns negatively affects the psychological makeup and being of student interns. A qualitative research design was used for this study and participants were purposively selected. Findings from the study highlight that sexual exploitation and harassment psychologically affect students' attachment as it leads to poor academic performance, increased incidence of depression and self-blame, suicidal tendencies, and the spread of diseases among others. The research highlighted that there is a need to establish stringent laws to safeguard student interns as well as provide a social support system for student interns who have been psychologically affected and impacted by the issue under study.

Keyword: Sexual exploitation of student interns, sexual harassment in higher education, psychological impact of sexual harassment, academic performance and mental health of students, protection and support for victims of harassment

Introduction

Globally issues of sexual exploitation and harassment in institutions of higher learning have become pervasive as alluded to by (Rosiana,2023, Mushininga,2023, Canadian Federation of Students – Ontario report,2025 and Cantor et al,2019) who posit that sexual exploitation is having negative effect higher education learning and threatens access to education and attainment of academic excellence. These issues of sexual exploitation do not only disrupt on-campus learning, evening students on attachment are threatened as the issue of sexual exploitation and harassment seemed to be following students even in the corridors of internship or on work-related learning. This has the capacity to affect the student's psychological makeup.

Sexual exploitation and abuse have significant psychological consequences, particularly for

students in higher education settings. Rosiana (2023) highlights that experiences of sexual abuse often result in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which negatively impacts cognitive functioning. PTSD, in turn, compromises academic performance and overall achievement. Similarly, Omobuwa and Farinloye (2022) establish a strong connection between sexual violence and post-traumatic distress, emphasizing its detrimental effects on students' academic success. While these studies provide valuable insights into the psychological impact of sexual abuse within higher education, they primarily focus on students in academic settings rather than those engaged in attachment programs or work-related learning.

Expanding on this discussion, research by Mohammadi et al. (2014) explores the experiences of interns in an educational hospital in Iran, revealing various forms of sexual harassment, including verbal, physical, and non-verbal abuse. Similarly, Iftikhar, Tawfiq, and Barabe (2014) document the prevalence of sexual harassment among student interns in Saudi Arabian hospitals. Their findings indicate that female students frequently experience emotional exploitation, gender-based discrimination, and workplace harassment. Furthermore, students on attachment often face sexual exploitation not only from supervisors and educators but also from male peers and members of the communities they serve. These studies predominantly focus on identifying the different forms of sexual abuse encountered by students in professional training environments.

Building upon this body of work, the present study aims to explore the psychological effects of sexual harassment on students engaged in work-related learning. While previous research has identified the prevalence and nature of sexual harassment in professional settings, this study specifically examines its impact on cognitive and emotional well-being. Understanding these psychological implications is crucial for developing targeted interventions that support students' mental health and academic success during attachment programs. A study by Ali & Rigal (2019), explored sexual harassment issues faced by nursing students during clinical practices. The study noted that the nurses on clinical attachment suffered from verbal abuse while others were forced to endure groping (unwanted touching). A similar study by McKenna, Smith, Poole, and Coverdale (2002) highlighted that nurses from clinical practices in New Zealand suffered from sexual exploitation. The studies also noted that the prevalence of sexual exploitation and harassment in medical facilities had psychological implications on the nurses in clinical trials in both Egypt and New Zealand. The net results showed that in some instances it resulted in absenteeism in the workplace, while other nurses decided to abandon their profession leading to career change. It is important to note that indeed the above research highlighted the implications of sexual exploitation on students on attachment, however, the point of departure is that these studies are relegated to one single variable, students from the medical field. However, this study is not focused on clinical students only because they are not the only people who are affected when they are on attachment. The research seeks to broaden and show that various types of students from different fields are equally impacted by this scourge. Moreover, the research seeks to highlight that sexual exploitation in the workplace affects the student's psychological makeup and that all types of students are affected whether one is from the clinical department, agriculture, humanities, or engineering, all are equally affected by sexual exploitation in the workplace.

In Zimbabwe, existing research on sexual exploitation has predominantly centered on learners in university and college settings, with limited attention to the psychological impact of such experiences on students undergoing attachment training. A study by Dube, Ncube, and Mlotshwa (2021) examined perceptions of sexual harassment and the factors influencing reporting

among students in two higher education institutions in Bulawayo. Their findings underscore the prevalence of sexual exploitation in various forms—physical, verbal, and non-verbal—within university spaces. The study also highlights the psychological toll of such experiences, including heightened anxiety, trauma, and potential disruptions in academic engagement and personal development. However, this research does not extend to the lived experiences of students on attachment, a population particularly vulnerable due to power imbalances.

Previous studies (Mabhandu, 2016; Chinyemba & Bvekerwa, 2012; Muchinako & Muridzo, 2015) have extensively examined the challenges faced by students on attachment. Their findings highlight structural and systemic barriers such as a shortage of placement opportunities, delayed academic supervision, and resource constraints during the attachment period. Further research (Mabhandu, 2021; Chinyemba & Bvekerwa, 2012; Muchinako & Muridzo, 2015) has identified additional impediments to student placement that adversely affect both student learning and professional development. However, these studies exhibit a theoretical gap by failing to conceptualize the intersection of power dynamics and vulnerability in student attachment. Additionally, there is a methodological gap in that existing research does not employ frameworks that explicitly examine gendered experiences and the psychosocial impact of workplace exploitation. More critically, a knowledge gap exists regarding the issue of sexual exploitation during attachment and its long-term implications for both personal and professional development. This study aims to address these gaps by investigating the prevalence, nature, and consequences of sexual exploitation in student attachment experiences, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of student welfare in professional environments.

Sexual exploitation remains a critical issue affecting student interns across various sectors, particularly within the hospitality and tourism industry. Mkono (2010) provides an important foundation for understanding the prevalence of sexual harassment and exploitation among hospitality student interns, highlighting that perpetrators include hotel managers, co-workers, and customers. However, while the study effectively documents the nature and sources of exploitation, it primarily focuses on identifying perpetrators and types of harassment, leaving critical gaps in understanding the psychological impact of such experiences on student interns' professional development. Building on this foundation, scholars such as Fitzgerald et al. (1997) and McDonald (2012) have extensively explored the effects of workplace sexual harassment, demonstrating that it leads to significant psychological distress, reduced self-efficacy, and diminished career aspirations. Similarly, Cahill and Cortina (2001) argue that sexual exploitation in professional settings not only affects emotional well-being but also hinders the integration of theoretical knowledge into practical experience, a crucial component of professional growth. This aligns with the work of Cortina and Berdahl (2008), who highlight how sexual harassment disrupts career trajectories by eroding confidence and increasing attrition rates among affected individuals. Unlike Mkono's (2010) study, which is sector-specific, this research adopts a broader approach, examining students from multiple disciplines including hospitality and tourism, engineering, and the arts to analyze the intersection of sexual exploitation, psychological well-being, and professional development. The goal is to bridge the gap in the existing literature by examining how sexual exploitation impacts students' ability to merge academic theory with workplace practice, a critical factor in their transition into professional roles.

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of student interns regarding sexual harassment and exploitation in workplace settings. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 36 participants, including human resources professionals, two female councilors, lecturers, and student interns, ensuring that only those with relevant insights were included (Flom, 2022; Nikolopoulou, 2023; Houston, 2024). Data was collected through semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions, allowing for in-depth exploration and follow-up to capture detailed responses (Houston, 2024; Weller et al., 2018). Thematic analysis was conducted to systematically identify and categorize emerging patterns, ensuring a rigorous interpretation of the findings. This approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the psychological and professional implications of sexual harassment on student interns

Result And Discussion

All the participants interviewed during the research agreed that indeed sexual exploitation and harassment have negative implications on students' attachment. The implications highlighted range from psychological implications, health implications as well as affecting both educational and professional development of a student on attachment.

Impact of sexual harassment and exploitation on Students on Attachment

1. Sexual Harassment as an Avenue for STIs and HIV/Aids Contraction

The issue of sexual exploitation breeds diseases and leads to the contraction of diseases such as STIs & HIV/Aids in the workplace. Some of the bosses who assert themselves on students engage in unsafe sex with students and do not want to use protection during sexual intercourse. This leads to these young women or students attaches contracting sexually transmitted diseases or HIV/Aids in the long run. In the words of another research participant by the name of TV said

I know of a certain friend of mine who was forced into this sexual harassment and exploitation issue. She complained that the boss did not want to use protection, and in the end she became pregnant, the boss was not willing to take care of the child she ended up aborting. To make matters worse, by the time we returned to finish the final year she was now sickly and had contracted sexually transmitted diseases. It was such a painful scenario

2. Sexual Exploitation and Harassment, Stress and Depressive Anxiety among Student Attaches

A person who undergoes the trauma of sexual exploitation and harassment may begin to show signs of stress and depression. Thus, it negatively impacts the psychological makeup of a human being. During the research, most of the female participants highlighted that some of the people who went through the trauma of sexual violence, exploitation, and harassment, exhibited a science of suffering from stress and depressive mood swings. This is very dangerous because it may lead to the students withdrawing away from people or lead to suicidal thoughts as they feel used and violated. The notion that sexual exploitation led to stress and depressive moods was also articulated by (Azhar & Abdullah., 2023, and Dworkin et al., 2018) and this has the impact of led to more victims blaming themselves instead of reporting such incidences so that they can be addressed.

3. Impoverished Self-Esteem and loss of dignity

Every woman prides herself on dignity. However, the issue of sexual exploitation, violence and harassment, strikes at the core of a woman's dignity. Thus, an abused girl or woman loses self-esteem, as postulated by (Azhar & Abdullah.,2023). With the loss of self-esteem, the confidence a

woman is supposed to have is also affected (Kahay., 2020 & Kim et al ., 2017) and begins to feel ashamed of herself and not only does she feel ashamed but also begins to feel guilty about herself as well (Ali and Alwan., 2023, Anwar., 2022, Anwar et al., 2022., Van et al., 2020). As she begins to feel ashamed of herself, elements of self-blame creep in and thinks that the sexual exploitation has happened because she has called it upon herself or begun to hate her looks thinking that if she was ugly, she could not have gone through such a traumatizing period as noted by Bell et al (2014). Some of the participants highlighted that they also said that those who have suffered from sexual exploitation and harassment constantly blame themselves. Moreso others highlighted that they felt violated and used as noted by (Bell et al, 2014). As another participant said

I feel used and cheap. So, it means I am is just a dumping site for his sperm. As women we are being used, tomorrow others are going to come to the same institution and when he feels he wants to dump his sperm he just uses any girl because he is the boss.

This statement is a clear indication of someone who felt used by a person who has no control over his sexual orgies.

4. Sexual Exploitation, Harassment, Unwanted Pregnancies and Abortion

Incidences of sexual harassment and exploitation often lead to unwanted pregnancies and abortion. This is because in most cases the sexual predators do not want to use contraceptives and in most cases promise to take care of the lady in the event of her getting pregnant. A participant who chose to call herself XZY said

Many of these ladies are forced by sexual predators not to use contraceptives under the guise that they will take care of the baby in the event of the lady getting pregnant. However, most of these sexual predators then dump the lady the moment she mentions that she is pregnant, and these ladies have no option except to terminate the pregnancy. The challenge is that some of them do this abortion via illegal means to the extent that they may die, or the baby may die, or both succumb to death or if the lady survives, she will no longer be able to bear children again because the womb might be infected and affected by the illegal procedures that they would have used.

Another scenario the researchers were made aware of by their research assistants, was a sexual violation case that happened in a certain company, where a lady on attachment was impregnated by a company boss, the boss denied the pregnancy and ended up dumping the lady. The young lady at one time thought of committing suicide. That young lady was letter provided counselling services by a certain organization to deal with her issue.

Thus this harms women's health. The views echoed by the above participant are similar to those aired by Muoghalu and Olaoye (nd). Furthermore, this affects women's psychological fitness as highlighted by (Taivo, Omole & Omole., 2014 & Mapuranga, Musodza and Tom., 2015).

5. Sexual Exploitation and Change of Behavior

Some of the people who face sexual exploitation are forced to change their behaviour. Scholars such as Kim et al (2017) further posit that people who suffer from sexual exploitation may be forced to have behaviour changes. They may begin to experiment with drugs as noted by Wolif (2017) as a means of trying to deal with sexual exploitation. Some of the male participants who took part in the study highlighted that they noted that some of these females who were sexually harassed at the workplace began taking drugs, and their work ethics changed as they began coming to work late or fake sickness. One male participant by the name of JK had this to say

I am worried about my friend VX, when we came for attachment, she was enthusiastic and wanted to pursue her goals, but ever since she was sexually exploited by the boss, her character has changed. She no longer cares about her health and is always scruffy. Her language has turned from a sweet language to a vulgar. She now sleeps with every man around; I hope she does not take this behaviour back to the

Institution. She now thinks everything can be bought by sex.

This is an indication of a concerned classmate who is worried about the sudden behaviour change.

6. Sexual Exploitation, Harassment and Loss of Trust in Authorities and Institutions

Due to incidences of sexual harassment and exploitation, most women have lost trust in institutions and authorities. This is because these institutions are supposed to impart knowledge and protect students, yet they have become havens for sexual harassment and exploitation of these vulnerable women. Moreso, it not only leads to a lack of trust in the authorities and institutions, but it also leads most women to view all men as evil. Those girls who will have been sexually harassed and exploited view men as evil, because they have resentment towards men for what they were forced to go through. Other women who saw their female counterparts being sexually harassed and exploited will also have a negative attitude towards men which leads to negative labelling and adages such as *all men are the same*, an adage which negatively depicts and labels all men having the same bad behaviour. This is an affront to men because all men are not the same, they are capable men who do not receive any form of joy by molesting or sexually abusing women. Thus, this has a negative effect in straining social relations as alluded to by Hassain, Menih & Adenyika (2014).

Impact on Academic Performance.

1. Dropouts and Change of Careers

During the research, we noted that sexual exploitation and harassment lead to students dropping out of both academic institutions and changing careers. Some of the attachés interviewed highlighted that some of their friends dropped out from both attachment and career paths as noted by the following statement from attachés.

Vamwe vakatosiya basa racho uye university education vaakutoita zvimwe. Zvose izvi zvakakonzereswa nenyaya yekumbunyikidzwa kuti vaite zvebonde. Zvatoreva kuti zvotokanganisa upenyu hwemunhu. (some of the students dropped out from the attachment and changed career paths and some went to the extent of dropping out from pursuing higher education.

This means that this issue of sexual harassment has a net effect on student attachés lives.) These sentiments are similar to the sentiments highlighted by Koi, Auka & Kihaha (2018) who stated that some of the female attaches in the field of medical health and in the field of tourism, ended up changing their career path due to sexual exploitation and harassment in the workplace. The same views were echoed by McKenna, Smith, Poole & Coverdale (2002) and Ali & Kegal (2019) who highlighted that student attaches ended up losing the zeal to work in Egypt and America. This has thus affected them in pursuing careers that would offer self-actualization in life.

2. Impact of Sexual Exploitation on Professional Development

Sexual exploitation and Harassment create a hostile working environment. This is because sexual exploitation makes the working environment hostile as alluded to by Gudyani, Davira, and Jaka – forthcoming.

3. Promotes a Culture of Absenteeism

The issue of sexual exploitation and Harassment in the workplace breeds a culture of absenteeism at the workplace. This leads to permanent workers at the workplace and subsequently attaches to coming up with flimsy reasons for not attending work. One student on attachment highlighted that due to the prevalence of sexual exploitation at the workplace, some student

attachés began paying medical doctors a fee to be provided with fake sick leave off days, as a means of running away from such toxic environments. According to Akkus & Cinkir (2022), the absenteeism of students has negative effects on their pass rates as they are not able to grasp certain concepts on their own. Furthermore, absence presents a challenge to the company because this disturbs the company workflow in terms of production levels. Not only does it affect company production levels, but it also has negative effects on the attainment of competent skills on the attaché he /she was supposed to learn. Thus, this environment is an anathema to building professional and work skills for the student attaché.

4. Promotes a culture of Presenteism.

Another problem associated with sexual violence is that it promotes a culture of presenteism. Some of the human resource personnel from companies/organizations to which the students were attached highlighted that, the issue of sexual exploitation presents a challenge of presentism. The human resource personnel who chose to be named GD highlighted that

The issue of sexual exploitation affects student attachés because this leads to presenteism which is a major challenge in the workplace

The statement by the GD the resource personnel, concurs with what was said by a student attaches by the name TM who highlighted thus

What I saw from my own eyes is that this culture leads to presenteism. There was a student who faced sexual exploitation. The manager would say at the workplace to that girl, I wants to see you at work at 6 a.m. That lady later developed a system of just being present at work, though the zeal was no longer there. Even if she was sick, she would just come to work. She was asked by some friends why she came to work even though you are not feeling well, and she would say to present myself to the boss since that is what he wants.

Presenteism is a threat towards ensuring efficiency in the workplace as cited by Pappas (2024) who states that presenteism can be caused by a toxic work culture such as an environment where sexual exploitation and harassment are rife. The impact of presentism according to Pappas (2024) is that it leads to decreased work as it has a net effect on mental health. Furthermore, scholars such as Won, Kim, Kim, Yang, Park and Leem (2022) posit that presenteism may influence future absenteeism. It is important to note that in companies or organizations where presenteism is practiced reduces worker's concentration and efficiency and productivity are affected (Karanika, 2021, Hump., 2004 Lohaus & Haberman., 2019).

5. Poor Performance and Subsequent Failure

This issue may lead to poor performance in the workplace. The students on attachment who suffer from sexual exploitation are not capable of performing to their full potential, as noted by Mapuranga, Musodza and Tom (2015) as they feel devalued because of the sexual harassment experience they would have undergone. This means that they will underperform in the workplace as lauded by (Bell et al., 2014, Ali and Alwalm., 2023 & National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine., 2018). Due to the psychological trauma of undergoing sexual exploitation, it may lead to self-harm in the workplace. In instances where the student attachés are working with heavy machinery, they are bound to suffer from accidents as they lose concentration while they think about the traumatic events that will have occurred to them, (Kearney & Gilbert., 2012; Aftab, Basari & Qsim., 2023).

Another issue to note is that it leads to forced failure, as the supervisors deny students their achievements because they declined to fall in love with them. During the research, the researcher interviewed a participant by the name DG who had this to say

Sexual harassment led to forced failure. There is a student whom I know who was failed on workplace assessment because she refused to know how to the love demands of the workplace supervisor. Thus, this led to forced failure on the student.

6. Undermines Professional Development and Learning

The issue of sexual exploitation undermines professional development and proper learning. The student is not able to learn properly as sexual favors hinder proper learning processes. This is because, by the time the student wants to learn proper procedures of how proper work should be conducted, the boss may say

Don't worry I will teach you a letter, or I will do it for you

A story is told of a certain teacher-student who was placed on attachment in a certain rural area and fell in love with the headmaster. The headmaster did everything for her including how to design a scheme book, record of marks and even in terms of assessing school learners. We doubt that, that teacher upon finishing her attachment learnt anything concrete and whether that person can execute her duties properly.

Another participant who was interviewed highlighted that this issue of sexual exploitation is very bad because it kills creativity and innovation. The participant highlighted that

You know what these issues of sexual exploitation and harassment kill the drive for innovation and entrepreneurship in the workplace. In some circumstances, you may work flat out at home to come up with a noble idea, but because you are in love with the boss at work, all your effort is attributed to the boss. A certain lady whom I know faced such. She worked out a new idea at her workplace she was attached, and the idea was brilliant, and when the boss praised her work, other workmates said haaa what can the boss say, he is now attributing his great idea to her girlfriend. This hurt the lady to the core. Even her ideas and innovations were attributed to the boss, despite her burning the midnight oil to come up with such brilliant ideas.

Thus, indeed this affects the drive towards innovation in the workplace as nobody recognizes their work.

7. Promotes a Culture of Power Abuse

The prevalence of sexual violence, exploitation and harassment breeds a culture of abuse of power. This is because as working environments embrace sexual exploitation and harassment within themselves, it nourishes that culture in institutions, be they academic or work environments. As the learners are experiencing sexual violence and the perpetrators are left to go Scot-free, other young men or women seeing such happening can begin to embrace abuse of power as something good. Hence abuse of power becomes rampant as they gain promotions in the workplace, they begin to use power in a wrong manner as they witness others using it without facing any form of punishment. The notion that sexual exploitation creates and perpetuates a culture of abuse within the workplace is in line with Bandura's social learning theory which states that behaviour is learned and if a person learns bad behaviour he internalizes it and applies it letter for use. The same notion is articulated by (Saengritin and Viryavjak et al, 2020, Dornbos et al, 2008 and Fuller et al, 2005)

Conclusion

From the empirical evidence derived from the research, it was noted that sexual exploitation and harassment is rampant and not much has been chronicled about it. It was noted that sexual exploitation and harassment affect students attaches self-esteem, leads to contracting of diseases, absenteeism becomes the order of the day and a new traction in the workplace is gaining momentum, that traction is presenteism in the workplace. It was also noted that it makes the working environment toxic. Thus, there is a need to come up with strategies to address this

phenomenon.

Way forward to Ending the Scourge of Sexual Violence and Exploitation in the Workplace for Students on Attachment. Due to the prevalence of sexual exploitation and harassment as a phenomenon, it has negative implications on academic performance and professional development. Thus, there is a need to come up with strategies and means to address this phenomenon. There is a need to

- Conduct more research that establishes the prevalence of this phenomenon. This research can be quantitative to understand the prevalence rates and the probable magnitude of students affected as well as highlighting the quantitative impact of this phenomenon on work performance and production levels.
- There is a need to provide support systems such as psycho-social services to the victims of sexual exploitation and harassment.
- Universities or colleges with students on attachment should conduct constant assessments and follow-ups on students on attachment as a means of curbing this issue which has devastating effects.
- Set up designated reporting mechanisms such as suggestion boxes which would allow those abused to report their plight.
- Strengthen national laws on sexual abuse and harassment in the workplace. Thus, the laws should provide deterrent measures for the perpetrators

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