

# Sexual Harassment against Female Students in Senior High Schools in the Techiman Municipality of Bono East Region of Ghana

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## Abstract

This study investigated sexual harassment of female students in Senior High Schools in the Techiman Municipality, Bono East Region, Ghana. We mainly adopted the quantitative method of analysis. The participants were chosen using a simple random sampling procedure. 720 female students were chosen from six (6) co-educational senior high schools. A questionnaire was the primary instrument used to collect data. It can be concluded, based on the findings of this study that: (i) that the majority of the participants knew about the issue of sexual harassment of female students in schools; (ii) that verbal sexual harassment was the most common form of sexual harassment; and (iii) that that victims of sexual harassment generally feel uncomfortable, stigmatised, and ashamed after being harassed. It is, therefore, imperative that school authorities and managers of the educational system take decisive steps to manage the issue of sexual harassment and its associated challenges that it presents to both victims and the social image of our educational institutions.

**Keywords:** female senior high school students; knowledge level; Techiman Municipality; sexual harassment.

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## **1. Introduction**

Over the last decade, violence against women and girls has gained international recognition as a serious social and human rights concern that affects virtually every society. Women's violence can take many forms. The prevalence of violence against women (VAW) is estimated differently depending on the type of violence. According to a study conducted in ten countries, including Ghana, between 13% and 62% of women have experienced physical violence from a partner during their lifetime [6]. According to international studies, between 8% and 26% of women and girls have been sexually abused as children or adults. In all cases, these figures are likely to underestimate the true prevalence of abuse, as many women are hesitant to disclose violence out of shame or fear of retaliation, World Report on Violence and Health, prepared for the Gender and Development Group. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) studies in 1993 and 2001 discovered that approximately 80% of students in US public schools had encountered sexual harassment from peers and school personnel. AAUW conducted a follow-up survey in 2002 to determine the prevalence of sexual violence against girls in school and discovered that 83% of girls and 78% of boys had been sexually harassed. In other countries, educational authorities, the general public, and academics have focused their attention on the issue of sexual harassment and violence. For example, [23] observed that shocking reports in South African newspapers between 1999 and 2004 indicated that sexual harassment of female students was a serious problem in a number of schools. It has also been reported that female students in schools had been subjected to a variety of forms of sexual harassment, including sexual abuse and verbal assault by male students and educators [13].

Due to the magnitude of the problem of sexual harassment and violence against students in schools, stakeholders in Ghana's educational system and law enforcement agencies have implemented a variety of measures and directives to address the issue. For example, the Ghana Education Service (GES) established a Girl Child Education Unit within the organization in 1997 and appointed Girl Child Education Officers at the Regional and District levels. These officers are responsible for increasing girls' participation in school and for monitoring gender-based violence against female students in schools. Additionally, the GES has strengthened its Guidance and Counseling Units in each of its regional and district offices throughout the country. Additionally, Guidance and Counseling Coordinators have been appointed in each Senior High School and Elementary School to provide counseling services to students. The Ghana Police Service's Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU) has also expanded its outreach programs in schools and begun collecting systematic data on school-aged children's sexual abuse. School authorities at all levels have been mandated to take disciplinary action against perpetrators of sexual harassment of students in conjunction with their school Governing Councils and Boards of Directors. Teachers found guilty of sexual harassment against school children and students may have their professional certificates revoked and they may be dismissed from the GES in pre-tertiary institutions (Basic School and Senior High Schools). Students who commit sexual harassment against their peers may also be dismissed.

Despite these measures in Ghanaian schools and other similar measures taken by educational authorities and law enforcement agencies in other countries around the world, sexual harassment and violence against students in school continue to be a source of contention for stakeholders in our educational system [2, 3, 27]. Numerous instances of abuse in Ghanaian schools have been discovered [2]. Other studies examined the multiple realities

surrounding Ghanaian adolescents' sexual and reproductive health, revealing that sexual violence (defilement, rape, and coercive sex), as well as teenage pregnancy and abortion, were significant among the common realities, regardless of age or sex [3]. Regrettably, there are few studies that examine sexual violence against adolescents in Ghana or in Sub-Saharan Africa more broadly [27].

All of the foregoing demonstrates unequivocally that, despite the numerous measures implemented to ensure a harassment-free environment in schools, the problem persists in various forms. Given the prevalence of this problem in our schools, particularly in the Techiman Municipality, and the fact that these violations against students go unreported [16], school administrators, parents, educational policymakers, and the general public have raised a number of concerns in an attempt to gain a better understanding and insight into this scourge. In light of this, the current study will examine sexual harassment of female students in senior high schools throughout the Techiman Municipality.

### ***1.1 Purpose of the Study***

The main purpose of the study was to investigate the incidence of sexual harassment among senior high school female students in the Techiman Municipality. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to:

1. explore female students' level of knowledge about sexual harassment in schools
2. establish the type of unwanted sex-related behaviours that students are exposed to in the senior high school environment;
3. examine how female students are affected when they experience sexual harassment in the school.

### ***1.2 Research Questions***

This research was guided by the following research questions.

1. What knowledge do the high school female students in the Techiman Municipality have about the concept of sexual harassment?
2. What are the common types of unwanted sex-related behaviours that students experience in school?
3. How are students affected by the incidence of sexual harassment against them in school?

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1 Theoretical Framework: Theory of Women's Sexual Objectification***

The current study was underpinned by the Theory of Women's Sexual Objectification. The theory of women's sexual objectification is based on Marx's theory of alienation and explains why women are the most frequent victims of sexual harassment and why sexual harassment was previously considered a natural human function [4]. According to the theory, sexual objectification happens when a woman's sexual organs or sexual functions are detached from her body, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or otherwise seen capable of representing her. In other words, women are frequently thought of in terms of the body, of sexuality, and thus are frequently

reduced to the status of "sexual beings not on an equal footing with men" (p. 35). Sexual objectification, proponents argue, is a sort of fragmentation that impoverishes the objectified individual; it also indicates an implicit denial to individuals who are subjected to it that they have capacities beyond the simply sexual.

The objectification theory postulates that the cultural milieu of objectification serves to socialize girls and women to regard themselves as objects to be examined and evaluated on some level [11]. In other words, objectification theory implies that women are more susceptible to sexual harassment because they are primarily thought of in terms of their bodies. Hence, both objectification and its repercussions (specifically, sexual harassment) are detrimental to women.

## ***2.2 Understanding Sexual Harassment***

Sexual harassment is a complex, fluid, phenomenon which does not lend itself to precise legal definition. Somehow, every society defines for itself what constitutes sexual misconduct. A sex-role script or gender regime in this sense captures the ideas or ideology and sets of behaviour that govern interaction between the sexes [8]. Not surprisingly, there are wide disagreements concerning the definition and universality of the concept of sexual harassment.

Numerous definitions of sexual harassment make a clear distinction between unwanted verbal conduct and nonverbal sexual conduct [12, 15, 28]. Some scholars describe these behaviours as sexually suggestive comments, gestures, or unwanted physical contact, such as leering looks, touching, and pestering, as well as the request for a date or sex while job searching. Ultimately, such behavior is detrimental to the "harassed" [12]. Sexual harassment is seen as unwelcome, non-reciprocal male behaviour that asserts a woman's sexual role [15]. It can take the form of staring at, commenting on, or touching a woman's body with the intent of eliciting consent to sexual behavior, date proposals, or demands for sexual intercourse. Of course, this definition is skewed because it views sexual harassment through a female lens, despite the fact that men have been victims of this type of harassment as well. On the other hand, the definition provided by [15] is pertinent to the current study. This is because, in Ghana, it has been determined that the issue of sexual harassment against female students in the Ghanaian educational system continues to be a source of contention for stakeholders in our educational system [1]. Approximately 61% of women in Ghanaian medical schools more likely face sexual harassment [21].

In light of the definitions above, we recognize that sexual harassment manifests itself in a variety of overt and covert ways. Sexual harassment can take the form of fairly inconsequential and inoffensive forms of behavior bordering on social interaction, or it can take the form of extremely serious and offensive behavior. Several of these forms are detailed below:

1. Physical contacts such as sexual assault, unwanted touching of one's private parts, and forced kissing.
2. Unwelcome verbal conduct that includes unwanted suggestions, comments, and advances, sexually explicit phone calls, or sexually explicit jokes and insults. Additionally, it includes derogatory remarks and rumors about a person's sex life or body.

3. Non-verbal conduct that includes unwelcome gestures (such as rude finger signs), unwelcome displays of images/pornographic materials or sex-related films, and sending letters, faxes, short messages on phones, or emails that contain sexually explicit or clear remarks.
4. Gender harassment such as sexist statements and actions conveying insulting, degrading, or sexist attitudes.
5. Sexual bribery, that is, the promise of a reward used to induce sexual activity or other sex-related behaviour.

### ***2.3 What Students Do in the Face of Sexual Harassment***

Although sexual harassment is recognized as a school-related issue, and despite the fact that it has negative physical and psychological consequences for victims, victims rarely report its occurrence. Victims may hold themselves accountable for their circumstances in some instances, while others confide in friends or family members. Only a few individuals make a formal complaint against the offender [9]. Again, it has been revealed that most victims are fearful of reporting the incident to school authorities due to the potential consequences [18, 19]

### ***2.4 Effects of Sexual Harassment in Schools***

Females face grave consequences as a result of peer sexual harassment [7, 20, 24, 25]. Peer sexual harassment can result in a variety of performance difficulties for its victims, including absenteeism, decreased quality of schoolwork, skipping or dropping courses, lower grades, loss of friends, tardiness, and truancy [20].

Peer sexual harassment can have a negative impact on female adolescents' learning. Sexual harassment can cause embarrassment and self-consciousness, compounding feelings of insecurity and lack of confidence [25]. As a result, the victims did not want to go to school, were unable to speak in class, or had difficulty paying attention. Furthermore, research shows that many young women have dropped classes, received lower grades, reduced their desire to socialize, and may even drop out of school altogether [7]. In a related study, similar effects of sexual harassment have been discovered on female students in Ghana [22]. They report that sexual abuse victims exhibit distorted attention in class, lose interest in education, develop fear of their perpetrators, experience stigma, and withdraw from peers and other school activities such as games and sports. Similarly, female victims of peer sexual harassment have worse educational outcomes than male victims as a result of their experiences [7].

### ***2.5 Prevention of Sexual Harassment***

Given the negative consequences of sexual harassment for female victims, schools are required to educate students about sexual harassment and the behaviours associated with it in order to combat the problem. Additionally, schools must publicize and make reporting procedures accessible to students so that they (students) are not intimidated to use them. Stated differently, there should be easily accessible grievance procedures for the nature of sexual harassment and its debilitating effects on the academic community that are communicated to and understood by all members of the academic community. The problem could be avoided if

the school established a confidential, unbiased channel for receiving, investigating, and resolving complaints in one of the following ways: (1) the formation of a sexual harassment committee; (2) the appointment of an internal supervisory body; and (3) the formation of a disciplinary committee with a mandate that could include the prevention of sexual harassment and the prompt investigation of complaints alleging such violations. Moreover, schools need to conduct in-service training to ensure that staff members are aware of sexual harassment-related behaviors and prepared to intervene if they witness it. This will alleviate some of the burdens on the victims. Students, parents, and staff should all be aware of the school's anti-discrimination policy. At the very least, students should understand how it works and how to speak out against sexual harassment. Furthermore, all students and faculty should be made aware that such behavior will not be tolerated. A number of measures have been proposed to prevent sexual harassment in the classroom [5]. They stated that clearly defined definitions of sexual harassment and policies prohibiting such behaviour should be in place. It can be suggested that schools should express in plain language with the following key aspects [5]:

1. A comprehensive definition of sexual harassment.
2. The types of behavior that are considered sexual harassment
3. Sexual harassment's consequences for victims, workplaces, schools, and society as a whole.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1 Research Design***

The study employed a descriptive survey research design. Descriptive survey is the process of distributing the same set of questions (often in the form of a written questionnaire or an ability test) to a large number of individuals via mail, telephone, or in person [10]. The descriptive survey was chosen because it provides the researcher with a wealth of data from a relatively large number of individuals.

#### ***3.2 Population***

The accessible population included all female Senior High School students in the Municipality's five (5) public Senior High Schools, namely: Techiman Senior High School; Yeboah Asuamah Senior High School; Kwarteng Ankomah Senior High School; Gyarko Community Senior High School; Kesse Basashie Senior High School; and Mt. Carmel Girls Senior High School. The total number of female students enrolled in all six (6) public Senior High Schools is 2620 for the 2019/2020 academic year.

#### ***3.3 Sample and Sampling Procedure***

Simple random sampling technique was adopted in selecting respondents from the senior high schools. The lottery method was used to select 40 female students from each level (Forms 1, 2 and 3) in each school for the study. Hence, the researchers used 120 respondents from each school, totaling 720 (as the sample size for this study). The equitable distribution of participants across year groups was designed to ensure that the schools received balanced input from a diverse range of participants.

### **3.4 Pre-testing of the Instrument**

The instrument was pre-tested in two co-educational senior high schools located outside the study area. These schools are located in Ghana's Techiman North District, Bono East Region. Each school selected forty (40) female students from Forms 1 to 3 to complete the questionnaire. The purpose of the pre-test was to verify and confirm the questionnaire's face and content validity in order to amend any aspect that might appear ambiguous to respondents.

### **3.5 Data Collection Procedure**

After obtaining the necessary authorization from the school head, the questionnaire was administered in the selected schools and to the selected students personally with the assistance of several school teachers. This procedure was followed for both the pre-test and the primary data collection. The assistance provided by the teachers aided in the maintenance of respondents' discipline, order, and cooperation.

### **3.6 Data Collection Instrument**

The main data collection used was the questionnaire. This tool is economical because it can be used to collect large amounts of information at a low cost per respondent besides; no interviewer is involved to bias the respondent's answers. The researchers used both the closed-ended and open-ended types of questionnaires.

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

All questionnaires received from respondents were edited and cleaned during the data analysis stage. This ensured that copies that were not adequately responded to, were incomplete, or had inconsistent responses were excluded from the poll of data to be analyzed for the study. After editing and cleaning the data, the questionnaire responses were analyzed using SPSS for Windows Version 16.0. The data were analyzed and presented using simple frequency and percentage distributions to address each of the research questions.

## **4. Results and discussion**

This section discusses the results obtained.

### **4.1 Demographics of Sample Studied**

**Table 1:** Distribution of Respondents by Age

<b>Age</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
13-16 years	284	39.4
17-18 years	366	50.8
19 years and above	70	9.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>720</b>	<b>100</b>

Source; Field survey, 2020

Table 1 illustrates that the majority of participants was between the ages of 17 and 18, indicating that they were in late adolescence. During this stage of human development, fat tissues become a greater proportion of the female (students) body composition, particularly the breasts, hips, buttocks, thighs, and upper hands. These rapid changes in female adolescent students make them appear sexually attractive to potential harassers, making them an ideal group of subjects for the study. Those in the other age brackets (13-16 years and over 19 years), which account for approximately 49% of the sample, were also suitable for the study.

**Table 2:** Distribution of the respondents by residential status.

<b>Residential Status</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Day	232	32.2
Boarding	488	67.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>720</b>	<b>100</b>

Source; Field survey, 2020

Table 3 presents information about the distribution of the participants according to their residential status. From the table, it is observed that a majority of the participants (67.8%) was boarders, with the remaining being day students. Since boarders spend almost all their days in the school environment during schooling sessions (when school is in session), their responses provided us with an idea about the current situation about sexual harassment in schools, considering the fact that they are in the school environment all day throughout the school term. Again, the inclusion of the day students as participants of the study provided the opportunity to compare the experiences of these two groups of participants on the issue of sexual harassment in our schools.

**4.2 Knowledge female students in senior high schools have about sexual harassment**

Items 1 and 2 of the Section B on the questionnaire were used to investigate female students’ level of knowledge about sexual harassment against female students in schools. The results are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

**Table 3:** Analysis of responses on knowledge of Sexual Harassment against female students in school

<b>Knowledge of Sexual Harassment</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Very much (Substantial)	559	77.6
Very much (Limited)	161	22.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>720</b>	<b>100</b>

Source; Field survey, 2020

As presented in Table 3, a whopping majority of respondents had knowledge of the issue of sexual harassment in schools. This is consistent with findings that the majority of students were aware of the issue of sexual harassment in schools and were also aware of their school's sexual harassment policies and procedures for reporting and seeking redress [17]. Students reporting some knowledge of the issue of sexual harassment against



female students is desirable because it demonstrates to educational authorities and parents that our female students are not completely ignorant of the issue and its consequences.

**Table 4:** Responses on how much knowledge female students have about Sexual Harassment

<b>Knowledge of Sexual Harassment</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
I know just a little	221	42.3
I have a good knowledge about it	301	57.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>100</b>

Item 2 was designed to delve deeper into the respondents' understanding of sexual harassment by examining how much knowledge the female student had about the issue at hand. Table 4 showed that the majority of the sample studied (57.7%) knew what the phenomenon actually meant. A sizable portion of the respondents (42.3%) had only a rudimentary understanding of the subject. This is troubling because it suggests that a significant number of female students were not knowledgeable about the issue and/or may have been harassed without knowing.

**4.3 Common types of unwanted/unwelcome sex-related behaviours that students experience in school**

Research Question 2 sought to find out the common type of unwanted/unwelcomed sex-related behaviours that female students experience in school. Item 4 of Section B on the questionnaire, which consists of a total of 16 common types of unwanted/unwelcomed sex-related behaviours was used to investigate this issue.

**Table 6:** Analysis of responses on types of Sexual Harassment against female students

<b>Type of Sexual Harassment</b>	<b>Freq.</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Rank</b>
(a) Someone made sexual remarks or sexually offensive comment about you	84	40.0	7 <sup>th</sup>
(b) Someone looked sexually at you that made you feel uncomfortable	244	67.0	2 <sup>nd</sup>
(c) Someone has been spreading sexual rumours about you	59	33.5	10 <sup>th</sup>
(d) Someone touched or grabbed you which was sexually offensive to you	65	35.2	9 <sup>th</sup>
(e) Someone put pressure on you to go out with him	178	58.4	4 <sup>th</sup>
(f) Someone made sexually offensive gestures towards to you	123	48.5	5 <sup>th</sup>
(g) Someone has been asking you for a sexual relationship	204	62.5	3 <sup>rd</sup>
(h) Someone has been displaying offensive pornographic (sexual) materials or pictures to you	27	22.8	12 <sup>th</sup>
(j) Someone has been exposing parts of his body to you	17	18.2	15 <sup>th</sup>
(k) Someone has made attempts to rape you	39	32.2	11 <sup>th</sup>
(l) Someone engages you in sexual conversation most of the time	77	38.5	8 <sup>th</sup>
(m) Someone has been calling you names, eg., alomo, prostitute	23	20.9	13 <sup>th</sup>
(n) Someone attempted or forced to kiss you	122	48.3	6 <sup>th</sup>
(o) Someone has been rating or commenting on your attractiveness or appearance in public	252	69.5	1 <sup>st</sup>
(p) Someone has been writing sexual messages about you at bathroom, in the classrooms or on the school walls	23	20.9	13 <sup>th</sup>

Source; Field survey, 2020

According to Table 6, the most frequently reported unwanted/unwelcomed behaviors by students are "rating or commenting on one's attractiveness or appearance in public (69.5%), "someone looked sexually at you and made you feel uncomfortable (67.0 %), and "someone has been asking you for a sexual relationship (62.5 %). The findings indicated that perpetrators of sexual harassment against female students in school most frequently harassed their victims by making public comments about their attractiveness. It should be noted that the respondents' first and third most frequently reported types of sexual harassment are verbal sexual harassment, while the second most frequently reported type of sexual harassment against female students is non-verbal sexual harassment. This indicates that female students are more likely to be subjected to verbal sexual harassment in schools than to be subjected to other forms of sexual harassment. These results support the findings of [17] and [29] that the most common form of sexual harassment exhibited against female students in schools were verbal in nature. It has been found that verbal forms of sexual harassment were the most unpleasant experiences that girls experience in their schools [17]. [29] found that over 50% of their respondents were exposed to verbal sexual harassment (including sexualised conversation, attractiveness rating and sexual comments) on daily, weekly and monthly basis. The findings in this study also agree with the finding that, in some selected towns in Ghana, which found that female school children in the Junior High Schools experienced verbal sexual harassment as the most frequent type of sexual abuse [22]. In their study, 65.5% of their female respondents reported that they have been victims to “request for sexual favours” in the school environment.

**4.4 How female students are affected when they experience sexual harassment in the school**

Research Question 3 focused on how sexual harassment against female students affected them in school. To this end, Item 7 of Section D of the questionnaire was used to answer this question. The question was open-ended, and the results are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7:** How the respondents felt after being Sexually Harassed

<b>Summary of responses on effects of sexual harassment</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Felt uncomfortable and ashamed	509	70.7
Caused personal harm to oneself	30	4.2
Felt embarrassed and abused	181	25.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>720</b>	<b>100</b>

Source; Field survey, 2020

As illustrated in Table 7, victims felt uncomfortable and ashamed after being harassed. The implication is that they may fail to report these incidences because of the stigmatization and guilt feeling that they experienced [18, 19, 26]. “Psychological cost” of identifying one’s self as a victim of sexual harassment is so disturbing that victims may keep such experiences to themselves [26]. As reported, majority felt uncomfortable and ashamed of themselves partly because they felt used, humiliated by their harassers and treated badly. Another 25.1% of the respondents stated that they felt embarrassed and abused. This finding is consistent with that of [22] and [14] that victims of sexual harassment generally feel embarrassed, stigmatised, become highly self-conscious of their

environment and sensitive to other people's comments and perception about them.

## **5. Conclusions**

It is concluded, based on the findings of this study that: (i) that the majority of the participants knew about the issue of sexual harassment of female students in schools; (ii) that verbal sexual harassment was the most common form of sexual harassment; and (iii) that those victims of sexual harassment generally feel embarrassed, stigmatized, become highly self-conscious of their environment. It is, therefore, imperative that school authorities and managers of the educational system take decisive steps to manage the issue of sexual harassment and its associated challenges that it presents to both victims and the social image of our educational institutions.

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