



Women's Hesitancy in Reporting Sexual Harassment in Liberia's Public Sector

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Abstract: Efforts to create a sexual harassment-free workplace have seen many employers design anti-sexual harassment policies, including formalized reporting practices to encourage victims to speak out. However, despite these efforts, sexual harassment complaints remain underreported. This hermeneutic phenomenology study explored women's hesitation in reporting sexual harassment in Liberia's public sector. In-depth semi-structured interviews using Zoom were conducted with 13 women aged 18 and older. Interview data were analyzed thematically using the hermeneutic phenomenological approach. The findings showed that the lack of employment opportunities, fear of public condemnation, the fragile judicial system, and a culture that normalized sexual harassment were impediments to women sharing their sexual harassment experiences. These findings suggest that to encourage more women to share their experiences; there is a need to reduce these impediments that inhibit women from reporting. Doing so could strengthen the effectiveness of these formalized reporting practices.

Keywords: Women, Sexual harassment, Sexual harassment underreporting, Public Sector

1. INTRODUCTION

Efforts to create a sexual harassment-free workplace have seen many employers design anti-sexual harassment policies, including formalized reporting practices to encourage victims to speak out. However, despite these efforts, sexual harassment complaints remain underreported [1], [2], [3]. Many victims, notably women, are reluctant to report their sexual harassment experiences [4]. Khumalo et al. [1] found that fear discouraged women from reporting workplace sexual harassment. They fear that by coming forward, they may lose their jobs [1], [2], their significant others [1], and the possibility of future retaliation from the perpetrators [3], [5].

Underreporting of sexual harassment manifested itself also in the fragile judicial system [6]. The ineffectiveness of the court system in holding perpetrators accountable for their actions resulted in a lack of trust in the judicial system [1], [6]. Hence, many victims do not see the point in taking formal action against the perpetrators. In association with the ineffectiveness of the legal system, sexually harassed women highlighted investigators' indifferent [3] towards them as a reason for their silence. Other researchers highlighted the lack of awareness [7], where some women trivialized the gravity of the harassment as a contributing factor to sexual harassment reporting hesitation. Few researchers associated women's reluctance due to the fear of public attacks [1], [8], [9], leading to women being blamed for the harassment [1], [2], [10]. Recent studies [3], [11], [12] have also described that the culture of silence that normalizes sexual harassment prevents victims from coming forward. Victims fear that by coming forward, they might be viciously targeted.

Data illustrating women's susceptibility to workplace sexual harassment in Africa [1] is lacking, which has increased public skepticism of the issue's severity [3]. Further, with this limited public awareness [1], [2], [9], studies exploring women's hesitation in reporting sexual harassment in Liberia's public sector are needed. In this hermeneutic phenomenology study, we have begun to close this information gap by exploring women's hesitation in reporting quid pro quo workplace sexual harassment. Through reporting firsthand experiences of sexually harassed women in Liberia's public sector, policygeneration that seeks to reduce the overall prevalence of sexual harassment, thus encouraging more women to seek employment, can be achieved.

2. METHODS

This study was guided by the hermeneutic phenomenological research design. Through this approach, we explored participants' lived experiences [13] of workplace sexual harassment during employment or as a 'hiring' conditional requirement. The study participants were working women aged 18 and older from Liberia's public sector workplaces.

2.1. Recruitment and Participants

Upon obtaining ethical approval from Walden's Institutional Review Board [09-08-21-0596668], a local organization in Monrovia, Liberia, advertised the recruitment flyers on their WhatsApp account seeking study participants. Those interested contacted the primary researcher via email and were vetted for eligibility. The primary researcher scheduled agreed-upon interview dates with each participant by phone and email. A total of 13 women agreed to participate.

2.2. Data Collection

Data were collected from in-depth semi-structured interviews, field notes, and audio recorder to capture the phenomenon. Interviews were conducted over a month via Zoom. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for primary questions to be supplemented with secondary discussions based on participant responses [14]. The Zoom interview sessions lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and were audio-recorded for transcript generation. Participants were also invited to evaluate their interview transcripts for accuracy. A total of 12 participants were included in the member-checking process and were sent their transcripts via email. Follow-up meetings were scheduled for those interested in transcript content clarification. Microsoft Word's dictation feature was used to generate transcripts from each audio file playback. Each transcript was further verified against its audio recording for content corrections, and the final transcripts were labeled with a de-identified pseudonym reflective of a common Liberian female name. NVivo v. 12 and field note triangulation were used for thematic analyses and data reliability, respectively.

2.3. Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using the hermeneutic circle. Through this approach, the analysis process started with each participant's transcript and reflective journaling after conducting the interview [15], [16]. The interview transcript was read to gain an insight into each participant's story and to delete filler words and phrases. Following People's [16] recommended approach, the shortest and most eye-catching transcripts were selected to develop preliminary meaning units. Through this process, each participant's transcript was assessed to manually exclude repetitive statements and those unconnected to the research aim. Final meaning units from the interview data were obtained from this iterative review process and coded. These codes were aligned next to the related sections of the text, observing if new codes emerged. Each participant's responses were highlighted and thematically coded using their own transcript. The individual participant stories illustrated their phenomenon of workplace sexual harassment and were used to generate overall experiential themes from the participant group.

3. FINDINGS

Thirteen women from Liberia's public sector participated in the study.

Data analyses produced four main themes. These themes were (a) lack of employment opportunity, (b) fear of public condemnation, (c) fragile judicial system, and (d) the culture of silence.

3.1. Theme 1: Lack of Employment Opportunity

Participants underscored that the lack of job openings prevented working women from reporting sexual harassment cases. They highlighted the challenges of finding a job and noted the importance of having one. Charlesetta mentioned:

Having a job is a big deal. It brings you so much respect among your family members and your community. People just don't talk to you anyhow and knowing you could lose all that respect if you file a complaint against your employer who might use his power to get you fired is a risk nobody wants to take.

Pinky echoed this view:

When I got employed, I became the source of survival for my family, everybody looked up to me to solve their problems, and I can't afford to let them down for my own interest. I just told a few of my friends and kept it moving as if nothing happened.

Participants also described victims' fear of the perpetrators using their authority to blame them, which could impact their future job prospects. Miatta explained, "You are afraid to tell people because your boss might turn the entire thing against you, and because of his status, people will take his words over yours." Musu added, "Employers do communicate whether you know it or not. If you make an allegation against one employer, it feels like an allegation against another. They will use their influence [. . .] to stop you from getting another job." The fear of being unemployed in a country where individuals' prestige and value are dependent upon their financial strengths was considered by participants as contributing drivers not to report.

3.2. Theme 2: Fear of Public Condemnation

Participants divulged that fear of public condemnation made it challenging for them to report their sexual harassment experiences. Kou revealed: "It is like a taboo because if you speak up, you will be criticized; you just bury it inside." Participants also illuminated that they do not see the point stepping forward, especially when the perpetrators are the ones with the power. Pat said: "Whom are you going to tell when the harasser is your boss who controls the organization? This is not America, where institutions have laws that govern their employees, especially female employees, from sexual harassment." Doree mentioned: "It's hard to speak about your experience because you don't want people looking at you funny or calling you all types of names." The thoughts of being the community laughingstock encumbers women from coming forward, which was expressed by OldLady: "Telling people you were harassed is like opening Pandora's Box of ridicules. People will mock you, and you don't want to live the rest of your life being an object of ridicule."

Participants also highlighted that the fear of being rejected by their loved ones deterred them from going public. They described the thought of being ignored by their loved ones as "being worse than the harassment itself." Keb stated: "Most of us are hesitant to come forward because we are afraid to be perceived negatively. Why open about your experience when your loved ones use it against you to break up with you." Lorpu put it this way:

Being sexually harassed is hard, but being isolated by your own people, especially your significant other, makes the situation much harder because you are all alone, and no matter how strong of a person you are, you get affected by it.

3.3. Theme 3: Fragile Judicial System

Participants attributed their decision not to report their sexual harassment experiences to Liberia's fragile judicial system. They explained that police officers' decision to question the credibility of sexually harassed victims' stories resulted in them losing faith in the legal system. Nohn stated: "How can you feel confident that the harassers will be brought to justice when police officers indirectly called you a liar." Lillian asserted:

You go to the police station to file a complaint; the officers will be asking unrelated questions as if they are trying to get you to change your mind. They will brush your case aside as if what you are saying is not important.

The ineffectiveness and corruptness of the judicial system were regarded as an incentive for victims, notably women keeping silent. Participants voiced their frustration with the court system, where sexual harassments cases are often prematurely dismissed without proper investigation. Janet said:

You go to file a case thinking [. . .] justice will be served, only to be let down by corrupt police officers. They see you coming and act like they don't know the reason for your visit simply because the harassers bribed them.

Pinky mentioned:

There's no point pursuing sexual harassment cases unless you have money to waste. Most of the perpetrators have police officers and judges in their pockets. Taking legal action against them is like taking legal action against yourself. You will not win, so what's the point?

3.4. Theme 4: Culture of Silence

Participants underscored that the culture of silence, where the public are indifferent towards sexually harassed women becomes more than enough evidence why reporting is pointless. Pat mentioned: *"You can't be motivated to talk about something when those with whom you are trying to tell aren't, in fact, listening. They act like they are concerned about your situation, but once you are done talking, they do nothing."* The opportunity for public cruelty and ridicule when reporting workplace sexual harassment encumbers women from reporting. Janet mentioned: *"I don't see the point telling people, they tell you if you don't want the job, you should quit."* Keb added: *"People make it seem like being sexually harassed is part of the job, which make some of us think maybe we are overreacting."*

4. DISCUSSION

Hesitation in reporting sexual harassment manifested in several barriers. Participants revealed that women who try to report fear that they might get fired, which could weaken their financial capability to support their families. They illuminated that the struggle in finding reliable employment and the socioeconomic respect that comes with being employed in Liberia encumbers them from sharing. These interview accounts confirm other findings [17], [2] where it was found that a perpetrators' position offered a power dynamic that influenced and silenced sexual harassment victims in the workplace if they spoke about harassing acts toward them.

Consistent with other studies [18], [3], participants illuminated that sexually harassed women also become targets of public attacks, including being abused, ridiculed, and blamed for the harassment, which impedes their motivation to report episodes of sexual harassment. They fear their complaints will be met with public distrust and disbelief. Additionally, the fear of being ostracized by loved ones and sudden breakups of intimate affairs perpetuates silence.

These narratives align with previous studies [1] [3], highlighting the negative ramifications sexual harassment complaints have on women, including the possible damage it could have on women's future marital plans [3].

Reasons for remaining silent were undeniably linked to the fragile judicial system in which corrupt practices make it unlikely that the perpetrators would be brought to justice [6], [10]. Pinky stated: *". . . Most of the perpetrators have police officers and judges in their pockets. Taking legal action against them is like taking legal action against yourself. You will not win, so what's the point?"* Additionally, the Liberian court's unsympathetic conduct toward women's cries for justice [1] and police officers' decision to downplay the trustworthiness of sexually harassed women's stories [10] perpetuate silence.

We also found that Liberia has an employment culture that normalizes sexual harassment. Participants illuminated that workplace sexual harassment is considered a precondition for women's employment. As such, sexually harassed women who attempt to expose the issue often face public backlash and ridicule. These negative ramifications for workplace sexual harassment victims are ample reasons why remaining silent is the best decision confirming findings [19], [3] highlighting the danger women face when attempting to speak openly about their sexual harassment experiences. It is conceivable these sexually harassed women refrained from reporting because they feared that the anticipated harm outweighed the expected benefits from their stories.

5. LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explored women's hesitation in reporting sexual harassment in Liberia's public sector. Hence, these findings cannot be generalized to groups outside the study scope. Additionally, the study relied solely on personal accountings of quid pro quo workplace sexual harassment experiences. Finally, recruitment efforts included a low value gift card, which may have encouraged participation from those that had not experienced the phenomenon of interest.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The study findings suggest that Liberian public sector workplace sexual harassment underreporting does not indicate its nonexistence. Instead, this research shows that underreporting manifests through several societal ills. These societal ills impede women's hesitation in sharing their sexual harassment

experiences and downstream lead to lack of willingness to seek employment opportunities or employment advancement. These findings suggest that public sector organizations’ efforts to create a work environment free from sexual harassment should not ignore these barriers. Addressing these barriers could strengthen the effectiveness of workplace anti-sexual harassment policies, especially in developing nations, giving more women the courage to come forward with sexual harassment complaints, knowing perpetrators would be held accountable.

Table1. *Participants’ Demographic Data*

Participant	Age	Education	Employment Years
Charlesetta	28	Graduate degree	4.5
Doree	34	Graduate degree	10
Janet	30	Bachelor’s degree	3.5
Keb	29	Bachelor’s degree	3
Kou	26	Graduate degree	2
Lillian	31	Graduate degree	5
Lorpu	28	Graduate degree	2.5
Miatta	27	Bachelor’s degree	3
Musu	24	Graduate degree	5.5
Nohn	26	Graduate degree	3
OldLady	23	Graduate degree	2.5
Pat	23	Graduate student	1.5
Pinky	30	Bachelor’s degree	6.5

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