Uncovering the untold story: exploring gender disparities in sexual harassment experiences and coping strategies among Ghanaian higher education students

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Isaac Nyarko Adu
Department of Management Science, University of Education Winneba, Winneba, Ghana
Angela Duoduaa Nyarko-Tetteh
Registry, University of Education Winneba, Winneba, Ghana, and
Michael Kyei-Frimpong
Department of Organization and Human Resource Management, University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine students' experiences of sexual harassment (SH) in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ghana as well as their coping strategies.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopted the cross-sectional descriptive survey research design and used the convenience sampling technique to sample 926 students from four public Universities in Ghana. The data collected were analyzed using an independent-sample *t*-test with the aid of IBM SPSS Statistics version 23.0.

Findings – The study found no significant difference in male and female students' experience of gender harassment and unwanted SH. Additionally, female students were sexually coerced considerably more than males. In the case of coping strategies, the study found no significant differences among male and female students use of passive coping strategies. Finally, the study found significant differences among male and female students use of active, self-blame and benign coping strategies.

Practical implications – This implies that specific attention is required when students experience SH since they may be exposed to more aggressive sexual behavior.

Originality/value – The originality of this present study rest on its unique contribution by exploring the prevalent SH and coping strategies among tertiary students in HEIs in Ghana.

Keywords Sexual harassment, Higher education, Coping strategies, Ghana

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Sexual harassment (SH) in higher education institutions (HEIs) is a global problem that has received increasing attention in recent years. It is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that can have serious and long-lasting consequences for the victims and the educational institutions themselves. SH is a form of gender-based violence that occurs in educational institutions, workplaces and other settings. In Ghana, SH is a pervasive problem in HEIs, and there is growing concern about the negative impact it has on students' academic and social lives. According to a survey conducted by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) in 2017, 62% of students in HEIs reported experiencing SH at some point during their studies (CDD-Ghana, 2017). This figure is alarming and highlights the need for urgent

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action to address the issue. SH in HEIs in Ghana can take many forms, including unwanted physical contact, sexual comments or jokes, sexual advances or requests and the use of threats or coercion to obtain sexual favors (Apaak and Sarpong, 2015). These behaviors can occur in a variety of settings, such as in the classroom, on campus, or during internships or fieldwork.

The "BBC Sex for Grades" investigation revealed extensive SH by lecturers at Ghanaian and Nigerian universities, offering grade improvements to female students for sex (Nwakpu, 2022). Released in October 2019, the documentary used secret filming to expose the lecturers' inappropriate advances, sparking outrage and calls for action. Subsequently, several lecturers were suspended, dismissed, or faced charges. The exposé heightened awareness of such misconduct in African Higher Education Institutions, emphasizing the need for preventative measures.

Research has shown that women are more likely than men to experience SH, and the nature of the harassment can differ based on gender (Liss *et al.*, 2013; Ryan and Branscombe, 2013). In HEIs in Ghana, women are more likely to experience SH than men. According to the CDD-Ghana survey (2017), 78% of female students reported experiencing SH, compared to 47% of male students. The nature of SH experiences can also differ based on gender. Women are more likely to experience sexual objectification, such as comments or gestures that focus on their physical appearance or sexual appeal. Men, on the other hand, may experience more homophobic harassment, such as derogatory comments about their sexual orientation or gender identity (Liss *et al.*, 2013; Ryan and Branscombe, 2013). In HEIs in Ghana, female students are more likely to experience sexual objectification, while male students are more likely to experience homophobic harassment. Gender differences in SH experiences can have serious consequences for the victims. Women who experience SH are more likely to suffer from psychological distress, such as anxiety and depression, than men (Meyer and Leonardi, 2020). By understanding the gender differences in SH experiences, policies and interventions can be developed to support the psychological well-being and academic success of all students.

There is a lack of research on gender differences in SH among students in HEIs in Ghana. Most studies on SH in Ghana have focused on workplace settings, with little attention given to the experiences of students in HEIs. Moreover, the existing studies on SH in HEIs in Ghana have largely focused on the prevalence and types of SH, without considering the gender differences in the experiences of students. Very little attention is also given to the coping strategies adopted by victims of SH in research. A study by Asher *et al.* (2017) in Ghana found that SH was prevalent in HEIs, with 62% of the participants reporting experiencing SH. However, the study did not examine gender differences in the experiences of SH. Neither did it examine how victims of SH cope with the situation. Similarly, a study by Foli *et al.* (2021) found that SH was prevalent in HEIs in Ghana, but the study did not examine gender differences in the experiences of SH. Further, research has shown that gender is an important factor in the experiences of SH. Women are more likely than men to experience SH, and the nature of the harassment can differ based on gender (Liss *et al.*, 2013; Ryan and Branscombe, 2013). Therefore, it is essential to study gender differences in the experiences of SH among students in HEIs in Ghana. Studying gender differences in SH among students in HEIs in Ghana and their coping strategies is essential for several reasons. First, it can help to identify the prevalence and nature of SH experiences among male and female students in HEIs in Ghana. This information can be used to develop effective policies and interventions to prevent and address SH in HEIs.

Literature review

Theoretical relevance

This study draws on the feminist theory as its theoretical foundation. Feminist theory has been particularly influential in shaping our understanding of SH and has highlighted how SH

is rooted in gender-based power imbalances. Feminist scholars have argued that SH is a form of gender-based violence that is used to maintain patriarchal power structures and control women (MacKinnon, 1989). According to feminist theory, SH is not an individual act of misconduct, but rather a manifestation of systemic gender inequality that is perpetuated by cultural norms and institutional practices. Studies have consistently found that women are more likely to experience SH than men and that SH often takes on a gendered form, with women being subjected to sexualized comments, gestures and behavior (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1988). Feminist scholars have argued that this gendered nature of SH reflects how women are treated as sexual objects and underscores the need for gender-specific interventions to address SH.

Feminist theory has provided a powerful lens through which to understand SH in HEIs. It has highlighted the gendered nature of SH, the importance of taking a systemic approach to address the issue and the need to challenge cultural norms and institutional practices that perpetuate gender inequality. By taking a feminist approach to addressing SH, HEIs in Ghana can promote gender equality, protect the rights of students and ensure that educational institutions are safe and inclusive environments for all.

Sexual harassment in higher educational institutions in Ghana

The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission defines SH as "unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature and when submission to or rejection of this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects the individual, unreasonably interferes or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive environment". Currently, there is no specific law in Ghana that addresses SH; instead, the Domestic Violence Act, 2007 (Act 732) is used as a blanket law to address these social problems. Nonetheless, implicit in all of these definitions or explanations is the fact that SH is unwelcome sexual behavior and it's damaging to the victim. It should be recognized that SH is not a sexual issue, but rather a form of power abuse. Typically, it takes place in a situation where there are is the imbalance of power relations and the abuser has much more influence than the victim, such when a lecturer mistreats a student (Tenbrunsel *et al.*, 2019).

Harless (2019) defines SH in education institutions as "the use of authority to emphasize the sexuality or sexual identity of a student in a manner which prevents or impairs that student's full enjoyment of educational benefits, climate or opportunities". In HEIs in Ghana, SH appears to be a dynamic and recurring phenomenon. As a result, it is a part of a continuum of various actual and potential kinds of gender-based violence, from bullying and sexist language to sexual abuse, rape, verbal abuse and threats, all of which are likely occurrences in universities and professional training institutes (Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020). Cannon *et al.* (2020) state that, SH in HEIs is global in that it occurs as much in Ghana as in industrialized nations as well as in other sectors of the economy. They find out that victims of SH in medical schools in Ghana, do know what it is and their knowledge is consistent with the definitions of SH.

More so, it has been shown that SH does not only happen among students but also senior members of faculties and those in administrative positions of power (Cannon *et al.*, 2020). Another study by Agyepong (2010) which focused on how female students perceive and dealt with SH in senior high schools in Ghana revealed that a variety of inappropriate activities ranging from unwelcome advances and verbal abuse. Their findings demonstrated that issues pertaining to SH as pervasive among females student in senior high schools in Ghana.

Forms of sexual harassment

Britwum and Anokye (2006) in their book titled "Confronting Sexual Harassment in Ghanaian Universities" assert that the lack of transparency in university operations and

clarity on interpersonal relations creates a fertile environment for various forms of SH. This may include a request for sexual favors either directly or indirectly which sometimes may be in exchange for academic success or promotion. According to Liyanage and Liyanage (2020), "SH in tertiary institutions includes inappropriate sexualized comments or gestures; unwanted physical contacts such as touching, pinching or groping through to threats of exam failure or sexual assault and rape". Aina-Pelemo *et al.* (2021) found that the first form of SH is quid pro quo harassment which usually takes place when a female student is coerced into having sex with the lecturer(s) under the threat of failing a course. It states that "quid pro quo" harassment is equally unlawful whether the student resists and suffers the threatened harm or remains submissive to avoid victimization. Cannon *et al.* (2020) stated that a quid pro quo form of SH occurs when "some male lecturers conceded that they had a *droit de seigneur* or patriarchal entitlement to the sexual favors of their female students". The study also finds that in Ghana, male students attribute female academic success to a quid-pro-quo form of SH. The study further mentions that "transactional sex" or "sexually transmitted grades" is a form of sexual corruption in higher education in Ghana which female students rarely formally report for fear of victimization and stigmatization.

Despite the numerous forms of SH in the SH literature, the authors focused on gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion. Gender harassment is a form of SH that comprises actions that are intended to be offensive, repulsive, or distasteful to a specific gender. This can involve despairing remarks, insults, or jokes about people who identify as a specific gender (Sharizal and Bakar, 2023). Unwanted sexual attention refers to actions unwanted or unwelcomed lewd comments, touching, or request for sexual favors (Karami *et al.*, 2020). Sexual coercion on the other hand highlights the use of threats, force or other forms of manipulation to compel someone to engage in sexual behaviors (Sáez *et al.*, 2019). Based on the pieces of evidence espoused in the literature (Cannon *et al.*, 2020; Meyer and Leonardi, 2020; Liss *et al.*, 2013; Ryan and Branscombe, 2013), the study hypothesized that;

H1a. Female students will significantly experience higher levels of gender harassment than their male counterparts.

H1b. Female students will significantly experience higher levels of unwanted sexual attention than their male counterparts.

H1c. Female students will significantly experience higher levels of sexual cohesion than their male counterparts.

Coping strategies for sexual harassment by victims

Coping refers to attempts by people to manage their stress or take any other action that prevents them from suffering psychological injury (Scarduzio *et al.*, 2018). Several coping mechanisms, from doing nothing to officially disclosing an incident, have been claimed by various academics to be used by SH victims (Draucker, 2019). People frequently use one or more ways to either concentrate on fixing the issue or lessen the stress it causes when they are subjected to harassment. Victims of SH exhibit coping mechanisms that may include evasion, refusal, bargaining, seeking out advocacy and interpersonal coping (Magley and Grossman, 2018). Inspite of the myriad forms of coping strategies espoused above by scholars, the authors of this study intend to focus on the following coping strategies as proposed by Fairchild and Rudman (2008) passive, self-blame, Benign and active. This is due to their widely recognized and accepted nature which allows for easier comparisons with previous studies and its ability to enhance the overall body of knowledge on coping mechanisms in the context of harassment in higher education.

Veletsianos *et al.* (2018) describe ways male scholars cope with harassment into four themes, self-protection (this is a cluster of behaviors engaged before, during and after an incident aimed at reducing or eliminating the occurrence, e.g. increased security settings),

resistance (refusal to accept or remain silent over the incident by attempting to engage the perpetrator in a dialogue), acceptance (recognizing that the problem is unlikely to disappear so coping strategies are focused on an emotional response to harassment) and self-blame (this is where victims feel the need to compromise values, apologize and monitor behavior to minimize experiences of harassment).

Passive coping strategy highlights extricating from stressors, such as ignoring them or anticipating their disappearance on their own (Tan *et al.*, 2020). Self-blame coping strategy is characterized by a propensity to hold oneself accountable for stressors, even when one has no control over them. Also, Benign coping strategies often stem from various factors, such as fear of retaliation, power dynamics, social norms, or the perceived futility of addressing the issue. Individuals may choose to employ benign coping strategies for a variety of reasons, including self-preservation, avoiding conflict, or maintaining a sense of control in an otherwise challenging situation (Van Oortmerssen *et al.*, 2020). Finally, active coping strategy entails taking proactive measures to deal with pressures, such as addressing problems or looking for social support (Huang *et al.*, 2022).

The varied nature of coping strategies adopted by male and female students identified in literature during various forms distress suggest that more studies need to be done in order to establish what pertains in the case of SH. Hence, the authors of this study hypothesize that.

H2a. Female students resort more to the passive coping strategy than their male counterparts when they are sexually harassed.

H2b. Female students resort more to the self-blame coping strategy than their male counterparts when they are sexually harassed.

H2c. Female students resort more to the benign coping strategy than their male counterparts when they are sexually harassed.

H2d. Female students resort more to the active coping strategy than their male counterparts when they are sexually harassed.

Methodology

Design, sample and procedure

The study adopted a cross-sectional descriptive survey research design. This study was conducted in the four largest universities in Ghana namely; the University of Ghana, Legon, University of Education, Winneba, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science, and Technology, and University of Cape Coast. These four universities were chosen for the study since they are the largest universities in Ghana in terms of their student population and facilities. The target population for this study was mainly regular or full-time students. The population is made up of undergraduate students estimated at 140,353 regular or full-time students (UG- 32,059; UCC- 23,537; KNUST- 43,757; UEW- 41,000). The study adopted the convenience sampling technique to sample students based on their availability or being close at hand. This sampling technique was adopted as a result of the busy, tight and rotational nature of the students' lecture periods in the various selected universities. Following the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) method for sample size determination, a sample of one thousand, two hundred (1, 200) respondents from the four universities were selected for the study.

With the help of the research and teaching assistants, a total of 1,200 questionnaires were circulated to achieve a high retrieval rate. As such, 300 questionnaires each were distributed to the four universities. 926 questionnaires were retrieved from the students and analyzed; 270 questionnaires were retrieved from the UG, 236 from KNUST, 215 from UEW and 205 from UCC.

Measures

The SH experience of the participant was assessed using the 24-item Sexual Experiences Questionnaire by Fitzgerald *et al.* (1988). The scale was measured on three dimensions namely; gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion. Sample items include; "*Repeatedly told sexual stories or jokes that were offensive to you*" (gender harassment), and "*Displayed, used, or distributed sexist or suggestive materials (for example, pictures, stories, or pornography which you found offensive)*" (unwanted sexual attention), and "*Made you feel like you were being bribed with some sort of reward or special treatment to engage in sexual behavior*" (sexual coercion). The responses to the experience ranged from 1 "*never occurred*" to 5 "*occurred very often*".

The coping strategies were measured using the Coping with Harassment Questionnaire (CHQ) developed by Fitzgerald (1990). The scale was measured on four dimensions namely; active coping, passive coping, self-blame and benign or inconsequential. Sample items include; "*I talked to someone about what happened*" (active coping), "*I just 'blew it off and acted like I did not care*" (passive coping), and "*I realized he probably would not have done it if I had looked or dressed differently*" (self-blame), and "*I treated it as a joke*" (benign or inconsequential). The responses to the experience ranged from 1 "*not at all descriptive*" to 7 "*extremely descriptive*".

Data analysis

The data retrieved from the students were analyzed using an independent-sample *t*-test with the aid of IBM SPSS Statistics 23.0. The independent-sample *t*-test analysis was conducted to compare the mean scores for male and female students in respect of their perceptions about SH and the coping strategies that they adopt in such instances. Levene's test for Equality of Variances was done to examine whether the variance for the two groups (male and female students) was equally assumed or not.

Ethical consideration

Due to the delicate nature of this study, the research participants signed a permission form and received an information sheet. Only students who submitted their completed written agreement forms were eligible to participate in the study. Participants were not permitted to reveal their identities for secrecy and anonymity (Glasow, 2005) see Table 1.

Results

The Cronbach's alpha values as presented in Table 2 indicate that all the scales for measuring the variables in the study exceeded the conventionally acceptable coefficient of 0.7 (Hair *et al.*, 2010). Also, the results show that the skewness and kurtosis values of the constructs under study fall within the benchmark of −2 and +2 which depict a normal spread of the data (George and Mallery, 2010). In addition, the table also shows the values of the mean and standard deviation of the constructs under study.

Sexual harassments among students

The results as shown in Table 3 compared the SH experiences of male and female students in HEIs in Ghana. The results revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between male experiences (M = 2.40, SD = 0.946) and female experiences (M = 2.32, SD = 0.826; t (679.735) = 1.312, $p = 0.190$, two-tailed) of gender harassment, indicating non-support for *H1a* of this study. Further, analysis showed that the magnitude of the differences in means (mean difference = 0.080, 95% CI: −0.045 to 0.199) was very small (eta squared = 0.002). The study also revealed that there was no significant difference in the experiences of unwanted sexual attention between male (M = 2.10, SD = 0.877) and female

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male		
University of Ghana, Legon	150	56
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology	101	42
University of Education, Winneba	118	55
University of Cape Coast	100	49
Female		
University of Ghana, Legon	120	44
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology	135	58
University of Education, Winneba	97	45
University of Cape Coast	105	51
Age (in years)		
Below 20	221	24
21–30	299	32
31–40	252	27
41 and above	154	17
Programme of Study		
Certificate Programme	104	12
Diploma Programme	189	20
Undergraduate Programme	401	43
Postgraduate Programme	232	25

Source(s): Field Survey (2023)

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents

(M = 2.15, SD = 0.920; t (916) = −0.935, p = 0.350, two-tailed) students, indicating non-support for *H1b* of this study. The magnitude of the difference in means (mean difference = −0.058, 95% CI: −0.181 to 0.064) was very small (eta squared = 0.001). In furtherance, the findings of the study revealed that, there is a statistically significant difference in the experiences of sexual coercion between male (M = 1.68, SD = 1.040) and female (M = 1.82, SD = 0.890, t (692.255) = 2.122, p = 0.034) students. As such, female students are more sexually coerced than male students, indicating support for *H1c* of this study. The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = 0.140, 95% CI: 0.010 to 0.269) was very small (eta squared = 0.005).

Coping strategies among students

The results in Table 4 show that there was no significant difference (t (920) = −1.220, $p > 0.05$) between the use of passive coping strategy by males (M = 2.84, SD = 1.078) and that

Study variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's alpha
Gender Harassment	926	2.37	0.908	0.364	−0.473	0.766
Unwanted Sexual Attention	926	2.12	0.891	0.816	0.335	0.910
Sexual Coercion	926	1.78	0.995	1.444	1.552	0.919
Passive Coping Strategy	926	2.87	1.095	−0.151	−0.794	0.912
Self-Blame Coping Strategy	926	2.39	1.086	0.253	−0.851	0.834
Benign Coping Strategy	926	2.40	0.998	0.135	−0.743	0.855
Active Coping Strategy	926	2.77	1.141	−0.068	−0.796	0.847

Source(s): Field Survey (2023)

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of study variables

Table 3.
Comparison of gender in respect of perceived sexual harassment

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	"Levene's test for equality of variances" F	Sig	t	df	"Sig. (2-tailed) *P*"	"Mean difference"	"95% Confidence Interval of the difference" Lower	Upper	"Practical significance" (*Eta Squared)*
Gender	Male	622	2.40	0.946	9.499	0.002	1.253	924	0.211	0.080	−0.045	0.204	
Harassment	Female	306	2.32	0.826			1.312	679.735	0.190	0.080	−0.040	0.199	0.002
Unwanted	Male	614	2.10	0.877	0.963	0.327	−0.935	916	0.350	−0.058	−0.181	0.064	0.001
Sexual Attention	Female	312	2.15	0.920			−0.920	578.902	0.358	−0.058	−0.183	0.066	
Sexual Coercion	Male	622	1.68	1.040	6.801	0.009	2.011	924	0.045	0.140	0.003	0.276	
	Female	304	1.82	0.890			2.122	692.255	0.034	0.140	0.010	0.269	0.005

Source(s): Field Survey (2023)

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Levene's test for equality of variances F	Sig	T	df	Sig. (2-Tailed) *P*	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the difference Lower	Upper	Practical significance *(Eta Squared)*
Passive Coping Strategy	Male	620	2.84	1.078	1.432	0.232	−1.220	920	0.223	−0.09	−0.244	0.057	0.002
	Female	306	2.93	1.127			−1.201	573.880	0.230	−0.09	−0.247	0.059	
Self-Blame Coping Strategy	Male	620	2.53	1.064	0.575	0.448	5.971	922	0.000	0.44	0.299	0.592	0.040
	Female	306	2.09	1.071			5.959	598.991	0.000	0.44	0.299	0.593	
Benign Coping Strategy	Male	622	2.47	0.996	0.035	0.851	2.777	924	0.006	0.22	0.057	0.330	0.008
	Female	304	2.28	0.989			2.784	605.389	0.006	0.22	0.057	0.329	
Active Coping Strategy	Male	622	2.72	1.109	3.759	0.053	−2.065	924	0.039	−0.16	−0.321	−0.008	0.004
	Female	304	2.88	1.197			−2.012	562.192	0.045	−0.16	−0.325	−0.004	

Source(s): Field Survey (2023)

Table 4.
Comparison of gender in respect of coping strategies for sexual harassment

of females (M = 2.93, SD = 1.127) indicating non-support for *H2a* of this study. The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = −0.09, 95% CI: −0.247 to 0.59) was very small (eta squared = 0.006). Hence, *H2a* was not supported. In addition, the results revealed that there was a significant difference (t (922) = 5.971, $p < 0.001$) between the use of self-blame copings strategy by males during harassment (M = 2.53, SD = 1.064) and that of females (M = 2.09, SD = 1.071), indicating non-support for *H2b*. Thus, The magnitude of the difference in the means (mean difference = 0.44, 95% CI: −0.299 to 0.592) was very large.

For benign coping strategies among male and female students, the results revealed that male students (M = 2.47, SD = 0.996) adopt a significantly higher level (t (924) = 2.777, $p < 0.01$) of benign coping strategies than female students (M = 2.28, SD = 0.989) indicating non-support for *H2c* of this study. The magnitude of the difference in the means (mean difference = 0.22, 95% CI: 0.057 to 0.330) was very large. Furthermore, the results showed that female students (M = 2.88, SD = 1.197) adopt a significantly higher (t (924) = −2.065, $p < 0.05$) level of active coping strategy than male students (M = 2.72, SD = 1.109) during SH. Thus, indicating support for *H2d* of this study. However, magnitude of the difference in the means (mean difference = 0.16, 95% CI: −0.321 to −0.008) was very low.

Discussion

The study aimed at comparing the SH experiences of male and female students in HEIs in Ghana as well as their coping strategies. The finding of the study revealed that there is no difference between male and female students' experiences of gender harassment in HEIs in Ghana, indicating non-support for *H1a*. This result is inconsistent with the findings of Cannon *et al.* (2020) who found that female students are more likely to be harassed than male students with perpetrators being a mix of lecturers, supervisors, classmates, non-classmates and outsiders. Further, Rizo *et al.* (2021) reported in their work that male students are frequent victims of SH in colleges (recording an average of 6.2 incidents of SH in college), although research tends to focus on the perpetrator as male and the victim as female.

Further, the results from the independent sample *t*-test revealed that there is no statistical difference between male and female students being exposed to unwanted sexual attention in HEIs in Ghana, indicating non-support for *H1b* of this study. These findings are inconsistent with that of other studies, (for example, Cortina and Areguin, 2021; Rizo *et al.*, 2021), which revealed in their studies that male students are exposed to unwanted sexual attention. This is a result of unwanted touching, persistent requests for dates by males as well as expression of unwanted and romantic interest in a HEI (Veletsianos *et al.*, 2018). More so, the findings of the study revealed that there is a statistically significant difference between male and female students being sexually coerced in HEIs in Ghana, indicating support for *H1c* of this study. These findings are consistent with the view of Lindquist and McKay (2018) who assert that female students when attending lectures or visiting male lecturers, push for SH by persuading them to help them with their exams or to receive unfair results in the exams by using seductive behaviors or dress codes. Female students' revealing their clothes causes them to be less focused, which makes them more vulnerable to sexual advances than male students.

The findings of the study revealed that there is no statistically significant difference in the use of passive coping strategies between male and female students, indicating non-support for *H2a* of this study. Prior evidence has shown that both male and female students adopt the same strategy to cope with SH (Scarduzio *et al.*, 2018). Similarly (Draucker, 2019) in their study supports the findings of this current study and concluded that no significant difference between male and female students in adopting the passive coping strategy. In addition, male students had significant differences when equated to female students with self-blame coping strategies, indicating non-support for *H2b* of this study. This finding is consistent with Veletsianos *et al.*'s (2018) assertion that male scholars adopt a self-blame coping strategy as a means to deal with

SH. Thus, where the male student feels the need to compromise values, apologize and monitor behavior to minimize experiences of harassment. In furtherance, the findings of the study revealed that male students tend to use more benign coping strategies than female students in HEIs in Ghana indicating non-support for *H2c*. More so, the findings of the study revealed that female students adopt an active coping strategy than male students in higher educational institutions in Ghana indicating support for *H2d* of this study. Magley and Grossman (2018) posit that students who experienced SH engage in coping behaviors that may fall along with a framework of avoidance, denial, negotiation, advocacy seeking, benign and social coping.

Implications for practice

The lack of significant difference between male and female students' experiences of unwanted sexual attention shows that both sexes are equally susceptible to this kind of harassment. Institutions of higher learning in Ghana institute policies and initiatives that address unwanted sexual attention encountered by both male and female students. Female students are more likely to encounter sexual coercion than male students, according to the statistically significant difference in sexual coercion experiences between the genders. HEIs in Ghana should create and execute policies and initiatives that address the sexual coercion that male students face, such as offering counseling and educating people about consent and healthy relationships.

Overall, the study's conclusions highlight the significance of establishing a secure and welcoming learning environment for all students at Ghana's HEIs. This can be done by implementing extensive policies, programs and initiatives that deal with SH and support a climate of decency, equality and non-discrimination.

Recommendations for future research

Future studies on SH among male and female students should take into consideration qualitative methods, thus, to have deep insight into students in HEIs in Ghana. In addition, the responses were the views of male and female students in public tertiary institutions in Ghana. As such future studies can examine perceived SH among male and female students in private tertiary institutions in Ghana. In furtherance, it is also recommended that for the tenacities of having a fair idea about the totality of the harassment situation among students in Ghana, future studies should be done at every level of the educational system in Ghana.

Conclusion

These findings have several practical ramifications, such as the requirement for comprehensive policies, interventions and prevention initiatives that address SH and ensure a secure and welcoming learning environment for all students. In Ghana's HEIs, it is critical to foster an environment where all students may pursue their academic goals without worrying about SH or discrimination. HEIs in Ghana can aid in the development of a society that is more just and equitable by accomplishing this.

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Corresponding author
Isaac Nyarko Adu can be contacted at: inadu@uew.edu.gh