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POWER DISTANCE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT DISCLOSURE AMONG UNIVERSITY STAFF IN EDO STATE

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Abstract

Sexual harassment remains a pervasive issue in higher education and power distance influences the disclosure of harassment incidents among university staff in Edo State. The relationship between power distance and sexual harassment disclosure among university staff in Edo State, Nigeria was investigated by this study. The study specifically examined how centralization (CNS) and organizational justice (ORJ) influence the disclosure of sexual harassment incidents within university settings. A cross-sectional survey research design was employed, with a sample size of 320 in Ambrose Alli University and Benson Idahosa University in Edo State. The study utilized multiple regression analysis to assess the influence of CNS and ORJ on the likelihood of reporting sexual harassment. The findings revealed that while centralization negatively affects disclosure, organizational justice positively encourages it. It also revealed a statistically significant difference in the experience of sexual harassment between staff in public and faith-based universities. Based on these results, the study recommends that universities decentralize reporting mechanisms and strengthen fairness in handling sexual harassment cases to foster a safer and more supportive environment for staff.

Keywords: Centralisation, Organizational Justice, Power Distance, Sexual Harassment & Sexual Harassment Disclosure

Introduction

Sexual harassment in the workplace remains a pervasive challenge globally, undermining the dignity, productivity and well-being of employees. In Nigeria, this issue is particularly pronounced, with numerous reports highlighting its detrimental impact across various sectors including higher education institutions (Stand To End Rape Initiative, 2020). Universities, as workplaces and learning environments, are not immuned to these challenges. Onoja (2024) asserts that sexual harassment remains a persistent and pervasive issue in Nigerian higher institutions, yet incidents often go unreported due to fear, stigma, and distrust in existing reporting mechanisms. The complex interplay between cultural norms, organizational structures and individual behaviors often exacerbates the prevalence of sexual harassment and influences

the likelihood of disclosure by victims (Dworkin, & Weaver, 2021)

One critical cultural dimension that affects workplace dynamics is power distance which is the extent to which less powerful members of organizations accept and expect unequal power distribution. In high power distance cultures, hierarchical structures are deeply entrenched and subordinates may feel reluctant to challenge authority figures or report misconduct. This reluctance can create an environment where unethical behaviors, including sexual harassment, are tolerated or concealed. Research suggests that in such settings, misconduct is more likely to be concealed, as hierarchical loyalty discourages challenges to authority figures and fear of reprisal (Onoja, 2024). From a theoretical perspective, Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory offers valuable insights into how national culture shapes workplace behaviors. One critical dimension is power distance, defined as the extent to which less powerful members of organizations accept and expect unequal power distribution (Hofstede, 2001). In high power distance cultures like Nigeria, hierarchical structures are deeply entrenched, and subordinates may feel reluctant to challenge authority figures or report misconduct. This reluctance fosters an environment where unethical behaviors, including sexual harassment, are tolerated or concealed. Research suggests that in such settings, misconduct is more likely to be hidden, as hierarchical loyalty discourages challenges to authority and fear of reprisal deters victims from coming forward (Onoja, 2024; Hofstede, 2001).

In the recent case involving a senator of the federal republic of Nigeria brings this issue into sharp focus. Her allegations of sexual harassment against a high-ranking official and the subsequent institutional response reflect the broader societal and institutional barriers that deter individuals from disclosing sexual harassment, particularly in environments with pronounced power imbalances (The Guardian, 2025). These barriers also exist in university settings, where power differentials between faculty, staff, and administrators may discourage victims from speaking out. A study by Stand To End Rape Initiative (STER) in 2020 revealed alarming statistics about the prevalence and impact of workplace sexual harassment in Nigeria, underscoring the urgent need for effective intervention strategies. Universities, particularly faith-based and public institutions, may exhibit different levels of power distance and organizational justice, impacting employees' willingness to disclose sexual harassment (Efferson, 2025). Faith-based universities often reinforce hierarchical authority and moral expectations, discouraging victims from reporting misconduct (Mullen, 2025). Meanwhile, public institutions may suffer from bureaucratic inefficiencies and politicized management structures that erode trust in reporting mechanisms (Onoja, 2024; Cortina & Magley, 2003).

Understanding the relationship between power distance and sexual harassment disclosure is crucial for developing effective policies and interventions within higher education institutions. This study aims to examine these dynamics within selected universities in Edo State, focusing on understanding how centralization within these institutions affects disclosure rates, and examining the role of perceived organizational justice in addressing this pervasive issue. Moreover, comparing the experiences of sexual harassment across faith-based and public universities offers valuable insights into how institutional context shapes the prevalence and reporting of such misconduct.

Literature Review

Sexual Harassment Disclosure

Wolor, Eranza, Mahmoud, Nurkhin and Wibawa (2024) define sexual harassment as sexual conduct that the recipient does not expect. It encompasses unwelcome behaviors of a sexual nature, including verbal remarks, physical advances, and visual displays, that create an intimidating or hostile work environment. Sexual harassment disclosure, on the other hand, is the act of reporting unwelcome sexual conduct within an organization. It is significantly influenced by organizational structures and cultural dynamics, particularly power distance and perceptions of organizational justice. In environments with high power distance, centralized decision-making is prevalent, and authority is concentrated at the top levels. This centralization can deter employees from reporting misconduct due to fear of retaliation or skepticism about the efficacy of hierarchical channels (McDonald, 2012). Research indicates that in such cultures, employees may be less inclined to report wrongdoing, as the prevailing norms discourage challenging authority figures.

Perceptions of organizational justice which is the fairness of policies, procedures, and interpersonal interactions (Oyor, 2023) also play a critical role in sexual harassment disclosure. When employees perceive a just environment, they are more likely to trust that their complaints will be handled appropriately, encouraging reporting. Conversely, perceived injustice can lead to employee silence, as individuals may doubt the organization's commitment to addressing grievances fairly. Studies have shown that a strong organizational justice climate is associated with reduced instances of sexual harassment, as it fosters an environment where inappropriate behaviors are less tolerated, and victims feel more supported in coming forward (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011; Loi, Loh, & Hine, 2015; Gannon, & Saunders, 2009). In organizations where justice is a priority, accountability is enforced at every level, from entry-level employees to executives. For example, when a top executive at Uber was accused of harassment, the company conducted an internal investigation and took appropriate action, including firing the individual involved. This reinforces the message that no one is above the law and ensures a fair and transparent process for addressing complaints (Brennan, Sourdin, Williams, Burstyner & Gill, 2017).

Power Distance

Hofstede (2011) defines power distance index as the degree to which the less powerful members of an organization expect and accept that power is unequally distributed. Power distance relates to the extent to which unequal distribution of power is tolerated in a given organization and society (Mbeti & Otsyulah, 2022). In high power distance organizations, authority is centralized, and employees rarely challenge decisions (Mbeti & Otsyulah, 2022). This can enhance efficiency but may limit innovation. Conversely, low power distance organizations, encourage participatory leadership, fosters collaboration and creativity (Wang & Guan, 2018). Power distance can make the exchange of ideas threatening because employees fear that voicing their ideas to higher level managers will trigger punishment and other negative consequences. In organizations with high power distance, there is often a rigid hierarchy where subordinates are expected to defer to their superiors and maintain a sense of distance from them. This can make employees feel that voicing concerns or reporting misconduct, including sexual harassment, is not only risky but may also lead to punishment or negative consequences (Cai & Brossard, 2013; Au, Dong, & Tremblay, 2024).

Centralization

Centralization refers to the extent to which decision-making authority is concentrated

within an organization, where power largely remains with top leadership and only a small portion is distributed throughout the organizational structure (Robbins & Judge, 2015; Muharam & Chaniago, 2019). Highly centralized structures place decision-making power in the hands of top executives, reducing autonomy at lower levels. Such organizations rely on formalized procedures and strict hierarchies, influencing communication and overall efficiency (Daft, 2015). Top-down leadership structures may inadvertently discourage sexual harassment disclosure by fostering a culture where reporting is perceived as futile or even detrimental to one's career (Cortina & Berdahl, 2008; McDonald, 2012). Moreover, the emphasis on maintaining organizational reputation in centralized settings may lead to downplaying or suppressing harassment claims (Marshall, 2016).

Organizational Justice

Organizational justice refers to the perception of fairness in workplace procedures, interactions, and outcomes (Oyor, 2023). It is a fundamental concept that influences employee attitudes and behaviors, shaping their trust in the organization and their willingness to report unethical conduct, including sexual harassment (Colquitt et al., 2001). Justice perceptions affect workplace culture, influencing whether employees feel secure disclosing sensitive issues without fear of retaliation or dismissal (Rupp et al., 2017). Organizational justice comprises three dimensions: distributive justice (fairness in resource allocation), procedural justice (fair decision-making processes), and interactional justice (respectful and transparent communication) (Oyor, 2023). High procedural and interactional justice foster a supportive reporting environment, while perceived injustice leads to a culture of silence and distrust (Reese & Lindenberg, 2020). Organizations promoting fairness experience higher engagement in reporting and prevention efforts. Ensuring organizational justice strengthens employee confidence, encouraging disclosure and accountability in addressing workplace harassment. A study by Ford and Ivancic (2020) found that organizations with an environment that does not tolerate sexual harassment (i.e., climate, organizational justice) predict more favorable attitudes both towards the process of reporting sexual harassment and the actual intentions to report sexual harassment

Theoretical Framework

Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory was developed by Hofstede in 1980, identifying key aspects that influence organizational and societal behavior. One of the most significant dimensions is power distance, which refers to the degree to which individuals in a society or organization accept and expect unequal distribution of power (Hofstede, 1980). High power distance cultures emphasize hierarchy, authority and obedience, where decision-making is centralized, and employees may feel discouraged from challenging authority figures or speaking out against unethical behavior (Hofstede et al., 2010). Conversely, low power distance cultures promote egalitarianism and participatory decision-making, allowing employees to feel more empowered to report issues such as sexual harassment.

The implications of power distance identified by Hofstede (1980) on sexual harassment disclosure are profound. In high power distance organizations, employees may fear retaliation, damage to their professional reputation, or even job loss if they report harassment, as power is concentrated at the top and questioning authority is often discouraged (Aycan et al., 2000). Reporting mechanisms in such organizations may also lack transparency, further inhibiting victims from coming forward. Moreover, in cultures that strongly adhere to hierarchy, leadership may prioritize organizational reputation over justice for victims, leading to suppression of complaints (House et al., 2004).

In contrast, organizations with low power distance encourage open communication, provide multiple channels for reporting misconduct, and ensure that all employees, regardless of rank, are held accountable (Ehrhart & Naumann, 2004). In these settings, employees are more likely to trust the system and disclose harassment incidents without fear of severe consequences. Additionally, low power distance fosters a workplace culture where leaders are approachable and supportive, reinforcing procedural and interactional justice (Gelfand et al., 2007).

Thus, power distance directly influences how organizational justice is perceived and enacted. In high power-distance organizations, centralization of authority often reduces procedural fairness, discouraging harassment disclosure. In contrast, lower power distance supports transparency, fairness, and employee empowerment, increasing the likelihood of reporting misconduct. Therefore, organizations aiming to encourage sexual harassment disclosure may consider reducing power distance by implementing clear policies, ensuring managerial accountability, and fostering an open and just workplace culture.

Methodology

This study focused on examining the influence of power distance on the disclosure of sexual harassment among university staff in Edo State, Nigeria. A cross-sectional survey research design was employed, targeting staff members from two universities: Ambrose Alli University (a public university) and Benson Idahosa University (a faith-based university) selected through purposive sampling (Osunbor, & Ofobruku, 2023). A total sample of 320 staff members was used from a population of 6214, with participants drawn proportionally from both institutions. Sexual harassment disclosure (SHD) was operationally defined as the act of reporting or sharing experiences of unwelcome sexual conduct within the university environment. A five-point Likert scale adapted from Wolor et al. (2024) was used to measure SHD. Power distance was assessed through two main components: centralization (CNS) and organizational justice (ORJ). Centralization was measured using items adapted from Muharam and Chaniago (2019), while organizational justice was measured using a five-point Likert scale based on the framework of Colquitt et al. (2001) and Oyor (2023). The reliability of the research instruments was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The values were 0.72 for SHD, 0.81 for CNS, and 0.79 for ORJ, indicating good internal consistency.

Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the influence of centralization and organizational justice on sexual harassment disclosure. Additionally, an independent samples t-test was conducted to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in sexual harassment experiences between public and faith-based universities. All statistical analyses were conducted at a 5% significance level using SPSS software, version 23.0

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Demographic Representations

Demographic Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Sex		
Male	156	49%
Female	164	51%
Total	320	100.0%
Age		
16 - 25 Years	30	9.4%
26 - 35 Years	130	40.6%
36 - 44 Years	140	43.8%
45 Years and above	20	6.3%
Total	320	100.0%
Marital Status		
Single	149	46.6%
Married	151	47.1%
Others	20	6.3%
Total	320	100.0%
Length of Service		
Less than 1 Year	50	15.6%
1 - 5 Years	120	37.5%

6 - 10 Years	100	31.3%
11 Years and above	50	15.6%
Total	320	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

The demographic profile of the 320 respondents presented in Table 1 offers valuable context for understanding how power distance and sexual harassment disclosure manifest within the selected universities in Edo State.

The sample shows a near-even split, with female respondents slightly outnumbering males (51% vs. 49%). This balance suggests an environment where both genders are well represented. However, the presence of women in equal numbers does not automatically translate to equitable power dynamics, especially in academic institutions where leadership roles may still be male-dominated. The majority of respondents fall within the 26-35 years (40.6%) and 36-44 years (43.8%) brackets, indicating a largely mid-career population (a combined 84.4%). This suggests that most respondents are established within the system but are still likely to experience hierarchical pressure. The younger group (16-25 years, 9.4%) may be particularly vulnerable in terms of power dynamics, while the older group (45 years and above, 6.3%) may hold positions of authority, potentially influencing both harassment occurrence and disclosure outcomes.

Respondents are almost evenly divided between single (46.6%) and married (47.1%) individuals, with 6.3% categorized as others (widowed, divorced, etc.). Marital status can influence disclosure decisions — married individuals might be more cautious due to family and social considerations, while singles might face unique vulnerabilities, especially in environments with strong power distance structures.

A significant portion of respondents have 1-5 years (37.5%) and 6-10 years (31.3%) of service, indicating that most participants are not new entrants but are also not at the highest rungs of institutional hierarchy. Those with less than 1 year (15.6%) may be the most hesitant to report harassment due to job insecurity, while those with 11 years and above (15.6%) may have more institutional clout but may also be complicit in existing silence or norms. The dominance of mid-level tenure suggests a workforce that is aware of harassment risks but potentially restrained by career considerations linked to hierarchical power structures.

Table 2: Analyses of Responses on Power-distance and Sexual Harassment Disclosures

Items	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Decision
Treating all employees equitably makes me feel comfortable to report harassment.	150 (46.9%)	140 (43.8%)	15 (4.7%)	10 (3.1%)	5 (1.6%)	4.33	High
Focusing decision-making at the top discourages me from reporting harassment.	140 (43.8%)	160 (50.0%)	10 (3.1%)	5 (1.6%)	5 (1.6%)	4.21	High
Trust in the company's process encourages me to disclose incidents of harassment.	160 (50.0%)	140 (43.8%)	10 (3.1%)	5 (1.6%)	5 (1.6%)	4.35	High
Perceptions of fairness in the organization increase my willingness to report sexual harassment.	155 (48.4%)	150 (46.9%)	10 (3.1%)	5 (1.6%)	5 (1.6%)	4.38	High
Concentration of decision making at the top discourages reporting of sexual harassment.	150 (46.9%)	140 (43.8%)	15 (4.7%)	10 (3.1%)	5 (1.6%)	4.30	High
Overall Mean	755 (47.2%)	730 (45.6%)	50 (3.1%)	35 (2.2%)	25 (1.6%)	4.31	High

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

The analysis of responses in Table 2 reveals that among the 320 respondents, there is a clear consensus on the factors influencing sexual harassment disclosure. Most expressed that organizational justice encourages them to come forward about harassment experiences. Specifically, half of the respondents strongly agreed and 43.8% agreed, yielding a high mean score of 4.33, which points to a strong positive relationship between perceived organizational justice and sexual harassment disclosure.

In contrast, many respondents indicated that centralization discourages them from reporting such incidents. With 50% agreeing and a mean score of 4.21, the data suggest that systems where authority is tightly held tend to create barriers to disclosure. Overall, the mean score of 4.31 underscores the critical influence of power distance on sexual harassment disclosure.

Table 3: Regression Analysis

Independent Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.875	0.158	-	11.783	0.000
CNS	-0.310	0.045	- 0.348	-6.889	0.000
ORJ	0.255	0.047	0.290	5.145	0.000

Model Summary: R^2 = 0.227, Adjusted R^2 = 0.222, F-Statistic = 46.893, F-Statistic (Prob) = 0.000, Durbin-Watson = 1.736, Number of Observations = 320, Dependent Variable = SHD

The regression analysis presented in Table 3 indicates a statistically significant relationship between power distance (measured through centralization (CNS) and organizational justice (ORJ)) and sexual harassment disclosure (SHD) among university staff in Edo State. The model explains 22.5% of the variance in SHD (R^2 = 0.225, Adjusted R^2 = 0.222), with an overall statistically significant model (F(2,480) = 46.893, p = 0.000). Collinearity statistics confirm the model's stability (Tolerance: CNS = 0.695, ORJ = 0.540; VIF: CNS = 1.438, ORJ = 1.852), and the Durbin-Watson value of 1.736 suggests no significant autocorrelation.

Ho1: Centralisation does not significantly affect sexual harassment disclosure

The analysis reveals that centralization (CNS) negatively influences sexual harassment disclosure (SHD). B = -0.215, t = -4.891, p = 0.000, indicating that higher centralization of decision-making is associated with lower sexual harassment disclosure.

Ho2: Organizational justice does not significantly affect sexual harassment disclosure

The analysis reveals that organizational justice (ORJ) positively influences sexual harassment disclosure (SHD). B = 0.255, t = 5.168, p = 0.000), suggesting that a greater perception of fairness in the organization increases the likelihood of reporting harassment incidents.

Table 4: T-test of Differences

University Type	Option	Mean	Std. Deviation	Independent Sample t-test	Comment
Public University	Yes	3.73	0.765		
Faith-Based University	No	3.40	0.860	t(400) = -3.250, p = 0.001	Significant
		3.78	0.760		

(H_o3): ***There is no statistical difference in sexual harassment experiences between employees in a public university and a faith-based university.***

The results of the independent samples t-test presented in Table 4 indicate a statistically significant difference in the experiences of sexual harassment between students in public universities and faith-based universities. The analysis shows that staff in public universities reported higher experiences of sexual harassment (Yes: M = 3.73, SD = 0.765; No: M = 3.50, SD = 0.780) compared to those in faith-based universities (Yes: M = 3.78, SD = 0.760; No: M = 3.40, SD = 0.860). The t-test results for public universities (t(500) = 2.015, p = 0.044) and faith-based universities (t(400) = -3.250, p = 0.001) confirm that these differences are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis.

Discussions of Findings

The findings suggest that as centralization increases, the likelihood of disclosing sexual harassment decreases. This implies that in highly centralized universities, where decision-making authority is concentrated at the top, staff may feel discouraged from reporting harassment incidents. This aligns with the submission of Mcdonald (2012) and Marshal (2016). This could be due to fear of retaliation, bureaucratic barriers, or a lack of trust in top management to handle such cases fairly. The hierarchical nature of centralized organizations may make it difficult for victims to bypass authority figures and report incidents safely.

On the other hand, organizational justice positively influences disclosure, meaning that when staff perceive fairness in institutional policies and procedures, they are more likely to report sexual harassment incidents. This supports the finding of Ben et al (2017). A just organizational environment likely fosters trust and confidence in reporting mechanisms, ensuring that victims feel protected and supported.

The contrasting effects of CNS and ORJ suggest that while fair policies encourage disclosure, rigid and centralized structures suppress it. These findings highlight the need for universities to adopt more decentralized reporting mechanisms and strengthen organizational justice frameworks to create an environment that encourages the reporting of sexual harassment cases.

Future research should further explore the role of organizational culture, leadership style, and specific institutional policies in shaping sexual harassment disclosure patterns among university staff.

The findings suggest that students in public universities experience significantly higher

levels of sexual harassment compared to their counterparts in faith-based institutions. The positive t-value for public universities indicates that reports of harassment are notably higher in these institutions. In contrast, the negative t-value for faith-based universities implies a lower prevalence of reported sexual harassment experiences in these settings.

Several factors may contribute to this disparity. Faith-based universities often have stricter codes of conduct, moral guidelines, and community-based disciplinary measures that may discourage behaviors associated with sexual harassment. Additionally, these institutions may emphasize ethical and religious values that promote respectful interactions among students. Conversely, public universities, with their larger and more diverse student populations, may have environments that expose students to varied social dynamics, which could contribute to increased incidents of harassment.

The significant difference in harassment experiences underscores the need for targeted interventions in public universities to address and mitigate cases of sexual harassment. This may include implementing stronger policies, awareness programs, and support systems for victims. Future research could explore the underlying cultural, institutional, and policy-related factors that contribute to these differences to develop more effective prevention strategies across all university settings.

Conclusions

This study examined the influence of power distance specifically centralization (CNS) and organizational justice (ORJ) on sexual harassment disclosure (SHD) among university staff in Edo State. The findings demonstrate that centralization negatively affects disclosure, suggesting that hierarchical and rigid structures may suppress victims' willingness to report harassment due to fear, mistrust, or bureaucratic constraints. Conversely, organizational justice positively influences disclosure, indicating that perceived fairness in institutional processes fosters an environment where victims feel supported and safe to come forward.

Additionally, the study revealed significant differences in harassment experiences between public and faith-based universities, with higher reports from public university staff. This suggests that institutional type and culture play a role in either enabling or deterring harassment behaviors and their subsequent disclosure. The stricter behavioral expectations and values in faith-based universities may contribute to lower reported cases, while the more diverse and less regulated environments in public institutions might increase vulnerability.

Taken together, these findings highlight the urgent need for institutional reforms, particularly in public universities, to foster safer, more equitable, and transparent reporting mechanisms. Future research should delve deeper into organizational culture, leadership practices, and policy enforcement to better understand and combat sexual harassment in higher education settings.

Implications of Findings

These findings carry important implications for university management and policy formulation in Edo State. The negative effect of centralized authority on sexual harassment disclosure suggests that when decision-making is heavily concentrated at the top, staff feel less empowered and more fearful of reporting misconduct. This underscores the need for more inclusive and participatory governance structures that allow staff to voice concerns without fear of retaliation. On the other hand, the positive influence of fairness and equitable treatment highlights the critical role of transparent procedures and trust in encouraging victims to come forward. Universities must therefore prioritize creating environments where reporting mechanisms are seen as fair,

protective, and effective. Additionally, the observed differences in harassment experiences between public and faith-based universities points to structural and cultural factors that may either enable or deter such behavior. Tailored interventions that account for these institutional differences are necessary to address the unique challenges faced in each university type.

Recommendations

i. Universities should reduce centralization by creating multiple, easily accessible reporting avenues to encourage victims to disclose incidents without fear of hierarchy or retaliation.
ii. Institutions should strengthen fairness and transparency in handling sexual harassment cases to build trust and ensure that all complaints are treated with seriousness and impartiality.
iii. Given the higher incidence of harassment in public institutions, there is a need for stricter enforcement of anti-harassment policies, regular awareness campaigns, and stronger support systems for victims
iv. .

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