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Institutional Neglect and Sexual Harassment Against Sexual Minority Individuals at a Tertiary Institution in Nigeria

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Abstract

Sexual minorities in Nigeria face systemic discrimination that extends into tertiary institutions, where silence and institutional neglect perpetuate stigma and abuse. This institutional inaction reinforces a culture of impunity and highlights the urgent need to understand the mechanisms through which institutional structures and cultures contribute to the well-being or harm of this vulnerable student population. This qualitative study employed a narrative phenomenological approach to explore the perceptions of policy makers and peer supporters about sexual harassment among sexual minority students in a higher education institution in Nigeria. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit seven institutional decision-makers on student affairs, and four peer supporters for sexual minority individuals in the institution for in-depth interviews. The analysis revealed a profound disconnect. While the university perceives no problem due to a lack of formal reports, the lived experiences of students point to a cycle of harassment, vulnerability, and institutional betrayal exacerbated by the university's neglect. The findings expose a cycle where the institution's chosen method of "seeing" through formal complaints perpetuates epistemic injustice, validating the need for mandatory structural reforms over incremental sensitization to genuinely ensure safety and dignity for all students.

Keywords: sexual harassment; sexual minority; higher education institution; institutional response



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1. Introduction

Sexual minority students in higher education institutions (HEIs) across Nigeria navigate a complex and often hostile socio-legal landscape. The most significant factor shaping the experiences of sexual minority students is the explicit criminalization of same-sex relationships. The Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act (SSMPA) of 2014 goes beyond banning marriage; it criminalizes the formation and support of LGBTQ+ organizations and the public display of same-sex amorous relationships (Federal Republic of Nigeria 2013). Researchers

(Sogunro 2022; Human Rights Watch 2016) argue that the SSMPA has legitimized and intensified homophobia, creating a culture of impunity where perpetrators feel empowered to harass and blackmail sexual minorities, knowing victims have little legal recourse. The law effectively frames sexual minority individuals as criminals, stripping them of legal personhood and protection.

The legal framework is reinforced by a powerful socio-cultural stigma driven by religious conservatism and patriarchal norms (Human Rights Watch 2016; Ajayi-Lowo 2018; Brabant-Viciano 2022), and the Nigerian universities are microcosms of the wider society, where heteronormativity is strictly enforced (Alabi and Adebisi 2025). National laws criminalizing same-sex relationships create a climate of significant vulnerability, which can permeate university campuses where students who deviate from gender and sexual norms face ostracism, bullying, and physical violence from both peers and staff (Mapayi et al. 2023).

Within this context, the institutional role of HEIs in either mitigating or exacerbating the risks faced by these students is important. These social structures, like university policies, or the lack thereof, can systematically prevent sexual minority individuals from harassment and provide them with safety and justice (Botvin 2004; Clancy et al. 2020). Yet, with progressive laws, institutional culture can remain deeply homophobic (Wilk 2022). In Nigeria, existing research on sexual harassment has overlooked the unique experiences of sexual minority students, particularly in environments where their very identity is legally and socially stigmatized. This creates a gap in understanding the chasm between institutional policies and the lived realities of these students.

In higher education institutions across Africa, sexual minority students often face pervasive vulnerability and marginalization. Even in contexts with protective legal frameworks, such as South Africa, research indicates that institutional cultures often remain heteronormative, and LGBTQ+ students continue to experience marginalization and a lack of adequate institutional support (Jonga 2025). In other African nations with restrictive laws, such as Kenya, a study reported that sexual minority students navigate higher education under a constant threat of exposure, blackmail, and violence, with university authorities often turning a blind eye or being complicit in the discrimination (Karisa et al. 2025). A prior report from Nigeria notes similar experiences (Okanlawon 2024). In these environments, heteronormativity remains entrenched, and minority students report feeling marginalized in both academic and residential settings (Mapayi et al. 2025; Nduna et al. 2017). Institutional policies often frame sexual harassment in binary, cis-heteronormative terms, thereby rendering same-sex harassment invisible (Motaung and Tomodi 2025).

This study is underpinned by Institutional Betrayal Theory (Freyd 2013; Smith and Freyd 2014) and Institutional Courage Theory (Freyd and Becker-Blease 2024). Institutional Betrayal Theory explains how harm occurs when institutions are trusted to ensure safety and justice, but instead neglect, are silent, or blame survivors. In contrast, Institutional Courage Theory highlights how institutions can act ethically by promoting transparency, accountability, and compassion. Guided by these frameworks, this study was designed with the following theoretical propositions: First, the perpetuation of harm wherein the institutional culture and structures of the university, operating within a hostile national legal framework, will actively perpetuate the harm and vulnerability of sexual minority students through neglect and inaction, constituting institutional betrayal. Second, the epistemic disconnect, that a disconnect will exist between the institution's official perception of the problem (reliant on formal reports) and the lived reality of students (conveyed through community networks), resulting in epistemic injustice. Third is the path to safety, indicating that meaningful safety and inclusion for sexual minority students will require a deliberate shift from incremental, awareness-based solutions ("sensitization") to mandatory, structural

reforms aligned with the principles of institutional courage. These propositions provide a focused lens for analyzing the data.

This study addresses this gap by examining the environment for sexual minority students at a specific tertiary institution in Nigeria. It aims to understand the mechanisms through which institutional structures and cultures contribute to the well-being or harm of this vulnerable student population. The research question guiding the research is: How do the perceptions of institutional response held by university policymakers compare with the lived experiences of harassment and neglect described by those supporting sexual minority students?

2. Materials and Methods

This section details the methodology for the component of a larger research project focusing specifically on the reports by institutional policy makers and sexual minority peer supporters. The prior element in the project had reported on the lived experiences of sexual minority students who are survivors of sexual harassment.

2.1. Study Design

This qualitative study employed a narrative phenomenological approach to explore the perceptions of policy makers and peer supporters about sexual harassment among sexual minority students. This approach enabled exploration into the thoughts of policymakers and peer supporters, how and why they arrived at their perceptions, considering their lived experiences, moral frameworks, and socio-cultural contexts. It bridged personal experience and social meaning, which is essential when addressing sensitive, value-laden issues like sexual harassment among sexual minority students ([Smith et al. 2021](#)). Data collection occurred between February and June 2024 at a HEI in Southwestern Nigeria.

2.2. Research Team and Reflexivity

The research team consisted of multidisciplinary senior researchers and mental health professionals with expertise in public health, psychology, and qualitative methods. The team also comprised a rich mix of three females and six males with diverse sexual orientations. Most of the team had previously worked with sexual minority individuals. Most had prior professional or advocacy experience with Nigerian sexual minority communities. This “insider/outsider” mix enriched the analysis but required careful management of perspectives. Our positionality, particularly our awareness of systemic injustices, directly informed the study’s critical framework, leading us to interpret institutional neglect as active harm (Institutional Betrayal). We consciously incorporated this stance, arguing that in this context, neutrality would obscure the very power dynamics under investigation. To ensure rigor, we engaged in structured reflexivity through team discussions and maintained reflexive journals to interrogate our influence. Furthermore, the research assistants (OO, KJO, and OA) received specialized training for trauma-sensitive engagement with participants.

2.3. Participant Selection

A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit two distinct groups for in-depth interviews. Seven institutional policymakers were selected based on their professional roles and capacity to influence policy, specifically targeting mid- to senior-level positions in units dealing with student welfare, discipline, or policy formulation to ensure direct institutional knowledge and authority. Simultaneously, four peer supporters were recruited based on their recognized familiarity with the lived experiences of sexual minority students and their active involvement in advocacy and support, identified as trusted confidants within the community through prior engagement or snowball sampling. Given the legal risks in Nigeria, recruitment prioritized sensitivity and confidentiality, with institutional

access facilitated by the Directorate of Student Affairs for policymakers and confidential channels used to approach peer supporters. To ensure participant safety and confidentiality in this sensitive context, detailed demographic data (e.g., specific job titles, exact years of experience) have been intentionally omitted to prevent the re-identification of participants and the institution.

2.4. Data Collection

Once potential participants were identified, the study team contacted them directly via telephone to share detailed information about the study. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before data collection. To maximize comfort and safety, participants were given the option to choose their interview modality (in-person, telephone, or online video call). All peer supporters and some policymakers opted for audio-only phone calls, while a few participants chose in-person interviews.

In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide. The interviews, which lasted approximately 70 min, explored the understanding of the concept of sexual harassment among sexual minorities; the perceptions about legal and support framework for survivors of sexual harassment among the university community, and the need for sexual and gender diversity training on Nigerian campuses. All interviews were audio-recorded, and the research team confirmed the participant's privacy at the start of each call to ensure they could speak freely.

2.5. Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and imported into ATLAS.Ti Version 24 for analysis. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted based on the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke ([Braun and Clarke 2006](#)) to generate themes directly from the transcripts. The transcribed data were coded, and emerging themes were later reorganized into themes and sub-themes based on the centrality of ideas. To enhance trustworthiness, the findings were collaboratively reviewed by multiple researchers, with areas of divergence resolved through discussion among the study leads. Confirmability was further enhanced by using anonymized direct quotes and maintaining a formal audit trail detailing methodological decisions from recruitment through analysis. The reporting of the study findings was guided by the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guidelines ([Tong et al. 2007](#)).

2.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the study institution (IPH/OAU/12/2445). Paramount importance was placed on participant confidentiality and safety. All data was stored on encrypted, password-protected computers accessible only to the lead investigators.

3. Results

A total of seven in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants at the HEI who occupied positions related to policy-making, student welfare, and mental health. Participants were purposively selected for their institutional knowledge, influence, and capacity to provide informed perspectives on the subject matter. The participants represented a range of mid-career to senior-level academics and administrators, alongside a student representative of the central Student Union body. There were four females and three males. In addition, four in-depth interviews were also conducted with key informants identified for their expertise and experience working with sexual minority individuals in Nigeria.

This synthesis of the interviews integrated the perspectives of university policy makers and community-based peer supporters to provide a view of the environment for sexual mi-

nority students at the HEI. The analysis reveals a profound disconnect: while the university perceives no problem due to a lack of formal reports, the lived experiences of students point to a cycle of harassment, vulnerability, and institutional betrayal exacerbated by the university's neglect. The analysis identified six themes (1) The Nature of the Problem: Invisibility vs. Pervasive Reality, (2) Institutional Response: Policy Vacuum vs. Active Avoidance, (3) Barriers to Reporting: Acknowledged Fears vs. Lived Dangers, (4) Consequences: Academic and Mental Health Impacts, (5) Coping Mechanisms: Inadequate Internal and External Support, and (6) The Path Forward: Sensitization vs. Systemic Transformation.

3.1. The Nature of the Problem: Invisibility vs. Pervasive Reality

Officials consistently framed the issue as non-existent or hidden, blaming students for not coming forward while peer supporters detailed a rampant and multifaceted crisis of harassment, driven by exploitation and prejudice.

"I have not heard of any such report. . . so I think the first thing is about researching to really understand to what magnitude. . . it occurs." Policy Maker 5

"They Cover Up. . . it is like a pretence, we pretend that it is not there, whereas it is there." Policy Maker 1

"Because they know that. . . some of us are actually, you know, they can actually have their way out, because some of us are desperate to survive. . . " Peer Support 3

"Some heterosexual men. . . pretended to be gay. . . because they wanted to target a transgender woman. . . to lure her so that they can abuse and assault or attack. . . " Peer Support 2

"The lecturer would make comments like. . . 'look at his breast, this this this'. . . and everybody will laugh. . . That alone is sexual harassment." Peer Support 2

3.2. Institutional Response: Policy Vacuum vs. Active Avoidance

Policymakers acknowledged that existing structures are not designed for or applied to sexual minority cases. On the other hand, community experts characterized the institutional stance as a conscious refusal to act.

"As far as I have been engaged with that committee. . . we have only had more of lecturers harassing female students. . . But for the sexual minority. . . I don't know." Policy Maker 1

"The universities, they can't touch it with a long pole. . . the university system is not immune. . . from the influences of the larger society." Peer Support 1

"There are committees in the university, but they are not inclusive. . . to respond to sexual violence as it concerns sexual minorities." Peer Support 1

3.3. Barriers to Reporting: Acknowledged Fears vs. Lived Dangers

Some policymakers correctly identified the fear of exposure as a barrier. Community experts, on the other hand, detailed how the system itself is a source of danger, confirming these fears.

"I doubt that anybody would come forward to report. . . because it is going to expose them further to discrimination." Policy Maker 4

"People are afraid of facing secondary victimisation. . . the lecturer starts blaming them, 'why are you too a sexual minority?'" Peer Support 2

"You can't respond to what you don't believe in." Peer Support 1

3.4. Consequences: Academic and Mental Health Impacts

Both groups identified severe consequences, but the peer supporters provided visceral, firsthand accounts that give depth to the policymakers' observations. The observed impact ranged from impact on mental health to impact on academic performance and on identity and social isolation.

"It causes mental health issues. . . it causes low self-esteem, it causes lack of confidence. . . it can even lead to drugs." Peer Support 3

"We also see that people will always move towards certain courses that can protect. . . You see, a lot of LGBTQ persons might not really want to be in that space. But they have to be there to hide." Peer Support 1

"It brings about denial of self; they want to conform to what people want so that they can also be shielded against them." Peer Support 1

3.5. Coping Mechanisms: Inadequate Internal and External Support

The synthesis reveals that individuals are forced to rely on fragile, informal support systems due to a lack of robust institutional frameworks. This results in coping strategies that are both a lifeline and a potential source of harm.

"They cope within the community themselves. . . they have a community that provides that support." (Locus Parentis) Peer Support 1

"Part of the coping mechanism is that you just drown your sorrow. . . it also gives them a sense of. . . euphoric boldness." (Substance Abuse) Peer Support 1

3.6. The Path Forward: Sensitization vs. Systemic Transformation

A fundamental tension exists in the proposed solutions, highlighting a gap between awareness-raising and the deep, systemic reform needed to ensure safety and equality. The profound challenge facing any reform effort is crystallized by deeply entrenched prejudice within the very systems meant to protect. A participant also noted that the views about homosexuality are not an isolated opinion but a significant ideological barrier that makes sensitization insufficient without an unwavering institutional commitment to dismantling such harmful narratives and ensuring actual safety and inclusion.

"Sensitization. . . is very, very important. . . for people to know that these people have rights." Policy Maker 1

"It is about the committee being inclusive to really say that in our definition and investigation, are we also putting into consideration issues of same sex?" Peer Support 1

This view, which frames homosexuality as a "deformed mind" and a "social cancer," represents the significant ideological barrier that any reform effort must confront, demonstrating why mere sensitization is insufficient without a firm institutional commitment to inclusion and safety. Policy Maker 6

4. Discussion

The synthesis creates a powerful narrative that can be rigorously framed through the lenses of Institutional Betrayal Theory (Freyd 2013; Smith and Freyd 2014) and its antidote, Institutional Courage (Freyd and Becker-Blease 2024). The lived experiences of sexual minority students, as conveyed by the peer supporters, directly refute the institutional narrative of "no problem here." The university's inaction, justified by national law and a culture of "pretense," is not a neutral position; it is an active institutional betrayal, defined as an institution's failure to prevent or respond supportively to trauma and discrimination perpetrated upon those dependent on it. This betrayal manifests in the "compounded

inequities”: students face harassment from peers, lecturers, and even within their own community, and are then denied any pathway to justice or support. This dual trauma—first from the initial harm and second from the institution’s dismissive response—directly exacerbates their mental health distress, academic struggles, and social alienation, a well-documented outcome of institutional betrayal ([Smidt et al. 2019](#)).

The study demonstrates strong methodological rigor by using the COREQ guidelines to ensure transparent and credible reporting. Its core strength lies in the triangulation of perspectives between university policymakers and community-based peer supporters, effectively exposing institutional disconnects and providing a multidimensional understanding of the issue. The analysis illuminates the complexities of institutional neglect. By focusing on sexual minority students in a legally and socially hostile Nigerian context, the study addresses a gap in the literature.

One of the limitations of the study, however, is that the absence of direct student voices means that findings rely on second-hand accounts from peer supporters, offering valuable but indirect insights. As a single-institution case study, generalizability is limited, though the findings provide transferable lessons for similar contexts. Furthermore, as detailed in the reflexivity statement, our positionality and advocacy backgrounds inevitably shaped the interpretation of the data, framing institutional inaction through the theoretical lens of active harm. We argue that this critical stance is a strength of the study, as it makes visible the power dynamics that a neutral stance would obscure. Our rigorous reflexive practices, including team debriefings and journaling, ensured that this stance was applied consistently and transparently as part of our analytical framework, rather than as an unexamined bias. Despite these limitations, the study was able to provide some insights into the inequalities experienced by sexual minorities attending HEI in a diverse equality-hostile country.

The core findings of this research, which confirm our proposition, point to a fundamental epistemic injustice. Policymakers, operating within a framework shaped by hostile national laws and heteronormative assumptions, validated their stance through the absence of formal reports. Conversely, peer supporters, whose lived experience and proximity to the student community provided unique insight, detailed a crisis. This disconnect points to an active process where the institution refuses to acknowledge forms of evidence and testimony that fall outside its narrow, legally sanctioned paradigm, and betrays students by refusing to acknowledge their testimony. The institution’s chosen method of “seeing” systematically erases the very students it claims to serve, committing what [Freyd \(2013\)](#) describes as “betrayal blindness” on an organizational scale. This directly impacts the mental health, academic success, and social belonging of affected individuals ([Woodford et al. 2014](#)).

The data challenge the notion of institutional “neutrality,” revealing that inaction is a form of action that actively endorses the status quo and constitutes betrayal. The lack of belief in the legitimacy of sexual minority identities becomes a justification for neglect. This institutional stance directly fuels the severe academic and mental health impacts documented by both groups. The reliance on substance abuse and fragile peer networks as inadequate internal and external support is a direct consequence of this systemic failure, highlighting how the university abdicates its duty of care and forces students into unsafe and unsustainable coping mechanisms.

The tension in the final theme encapsulates the central challenge and demonstrates why mere policy suggestions are insufficient. The policymakers’ suggestion of “sensitization” is revealed as insufficient when confronted with the deeply entrenched ideology exemplified by a policymaker who framed homosexuality as a “deformed mind” and a “social cancer.” This finding demonstrates that without addressing the underlying culture of betrayal, incremental approaches are doomed to fail. Prior studies had also identified that such workshops often fail to address deep-seated homophobia and can devolve into

tick-box exercises if they are not part of a broader, mandatory structural transformation that includes accountability mechanisms (Francis and Monakali 2021).

While the data challenge neutrality and superficial calls for sensitization, other factors reinforce institutional silence. Legal constraints significantly undermine reporting and redress. Currently, Nigeria lacks a robust, enforceable national law specifically protecting sexual minority students from sexual harassment in tertiary institutions (Adejonwo-Osho 2024). Administrative restrictions within universities may further entrench silence. Without transparent complaint procedures or safe reporting channels, students are discouraged from speaking up (Mapayi et al. 2023). In addition, political pressures and power dynamics within the academic system reinforce institutional inaction. The Academic Staff Union of Universities publicly opposed the 2020 National Anti-Harassment Bill, arguing that it violated university autonomy. The taboo and legal risk associated with sexual minority identities might discourage institutions from acknowledging harassment against LGBT students (Okanlawon 2017). This political quagmire can deter proactive measures, training, or policy reform, especially in more conservative regions or institutions.

The institutional silence and active avoidance documented in this study are not unique to Nigeria. Across the Global South, where homophobic national laws intersect with conservative social norms, universities frequently replicate societal prejudices. For instance, studies in Southern African countries have similarly found that university policies are either non-existent or framed in heteronormative terms, rendering sexual minority students invisible and without recourse (Francis et al. 2018). There are similar reports from the Global North, resulting in sexual minority students making choices of HEI based on the perceptions of safety, acceptance, and tolerance (Glazzard et al. 2020).

Therefore, despite these significant legal and political headwinds, the path forward must be a deliberate, structural commitment to institutional courage, which Freyd and Becker-Blease (2024) define as an institution's commitment to seek out and act upon truth, despite the potential for reputational or financial cost. This includes publicly acknowledging the existence of harassment against sexual minorities, ensuring accessible and confidential reporting systems, and implementing survivor-centered disciplinary procedures. It requires moving beyond the policymakers' tentative suggestions to embrace the peer supporters' clear call for mandatory, systemic reform aligned with the principles of courage. This includes explicitly incorporating sexual orientation and gender identity protections into the university's anti-harassment policies and disciplinary procedures, and ensuring their enforcement. Instead of hiding behind the absence of formal reports, the institution must proactively and anonymously survey the campus climate to listen to student experiences, thereby accepting ethical responsibility for the data. Compulsory training for all staff, particularly those on disciplinary committees, must move beyond mere "sensitization" to address implicit bias, institutional homophobia, and the dynamics of institutional betrayal and courage (Bonomi 2019). In addition, establishing official collaboration with trusted sexual minority individuals and non-governmental organizations to provide safe, confidential support and advisory services, thereby creating a courageous bypass of the current internal barriers (Klein et al. 2023).

This case study serves as a call to action for higher education institutions operating in hostile socio-legal environments, as equity cannot be achieved through passive adherence to majoritarian norms. Protecting the most vulnerable members of the academic community requires the moral courage to challenge prevailing prejudices and to build institutional structures that actively affirm safety and dignity for all students, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Freyd and Becker-Blease 2024; LaVelle et al. 2023).

5. Conclusions

This study reveals the harmful mechanisms through which institutional structures, cultures, and governance practices in a Nigerian tertiary institution intensify the vulnerability of sexual minority students. It highlights a cycle where the institution's chosen method of seeing only through formal complaints perpetuates epistemic injustice, because targeted students feel unsafe using these systems. This leaves students without support and allows harm to continue unchecked. The study results imply that real change will not come from a few awareness programs or voluntary efforts and advocate for a deliberate, structural commitment to institutional courage. This requires concrete, actionable steps that Nigerian universities can implement, even within the challenging socio-legal context. Subsequent studies should identify how to establish systems and structures on campus that promote a climate of safety and equity and protect all students.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

HEI Higher Education Institutions

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