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## THE INFLUENCE OF PERPETRATOR IDENTITY ON ADOLESCENT SCHOOLGIRLS' SEXUAL HARASSMENT COPING STRATEGIES IN MBULU TOWN COUNCIL, MANYARA REGION

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### ABSTRACT

The widespread reports of school adolescents being victimized by sexual harassment have raised concerns towards understanding how adolescents cope with such incidents. This study assessed the influence of perpetrator identity on the likelihood of schoolgirls employing certain sexual harassment coping strategies. A quantitative cross-sectional descriptive design was utilized in this study. The target population constituted of adolescent ordinary level secondary schoolgirls in Mbulu Town Council and the sample size was 400 girls. The data were collected using a standardized questionnaire and analyzed by binary logistic regression through the use of statistical package for social science software (SPSS). The perpetrator identity "senior students" revealed an association with normalization coping strategy whereas "strangers" revealed an association with engagement coping strategy. The identities "classmates" "senior students" "strangers" and "teachers" revealed an association with detachment coping strategy while "non-teaching staff" was associated with help seeking coping strategy. It is recommended that adolescents should be provided with comprehensive sexuality education so as to mitigate the tendency of normalizing harassment in peer relationships. Moreover, further interventions should focus on emphasizing the usage of help seeking strategy rather than detachment. Lastly, boarding schools could be a potential solution for preventing encounters with strangers to and from school.

**KEYWORDS:** Sexual harassment, coping strategies, perpetrator identity, adolescent schoolgirls

### INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is known to constitute a range of acts which are included within the realm of unwanted verbal, non-verbal, physical behaviors that not only abuse individuals' sexual dignity but also create a hostile, humiliating and intimidating environment [1] - [3]. The acts further extend to offering of rewards in exchange for sex as well as threats aimed at compelling an individual to cooperate sexually [4]. Girls from various countries have disclosed their experiences of sexual

harassment and how it affects them [5], the strategies girls choose to cope with these experiences are determined by various influential factors. Focusing exclusively on the influence of perpetrator identity on sexual harassment coping strategies, this study aims to contribute to the knowledge base on sexual harassment coping strategies by unraveling the complexities of how school adolescent girls respond to sexual harassment within the school environment. The perpetrator identity refers to who the perpetrator is, whether it is a same class student, teacher, stranger, higher class student or non-teaching staff. Therefore, understanding how these identities influence adolescent girls coping strategies provides valuable insights into the ways schoolgirls respond to harassment based on the relationship with the perpetrator.

The concept of coping varies, ranging from the notion of neutralizing stress or protecting oneself against harm to a vital aspect of adaptation and survival which involves recognizing, assessing and learning from stressful situations [6]. Generally, the management of thoughts, feelings and behaviors in order to navigate through unwanted/stressful/harassing situations can be considered as coping. Some coping strategies facilitate positive outcomes whereas others tend to worsen or make the stressful situation more intense [7]. Though, the effectiveness of a coping mechanism is contingent to various factors such as perceived manageability of the harasser/stressor, presence of ample coping resources and nature of the resulting outcomes. With regards to sexual harassment coping strategies, the determinants which have been identified to influence the selection of a certain coping strategy are culture, difference in power between perpetrator and victim, severity of the harassment incident, organizational status, economic situation of both the victim and harasser, individuals' perception of what a sexually harassing behavior is and social perception anxiety [8] – [12]. Though most of these studies were concentrated on work place sexual harassment, therefore the determinants for sexual harassment coping strategies listed were obtained from studying sexual harassment in work place environments.

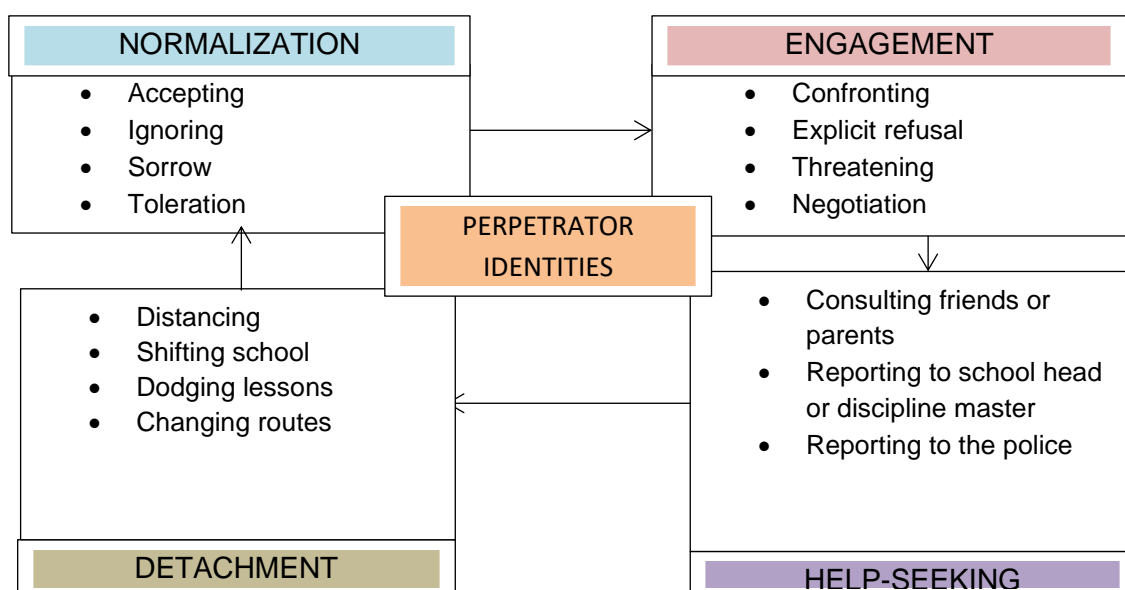
Various researchers have delved into the exploration of sexual harassment coping strategies and classified into groups the diverse responses individuals show in the face of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment coping strategies can be categorized into two general groups, the external coping strategies and the internal coping strategies [13]. External coping strategies operate by the harassed taking tangible actions which actually solve the problem, this may therefore involve seeking support from authorities, notifying someone, avoiding the perpetrator or directly confronting the perpetrator. On the other hand, internal coping strategies involve the victim enduring the harassment by downplaying it, often viewing it as a joke or males' natural trait. The internal and external coping strategies were also utilized in a study on sexual harassment coping in Norwegian newsrooms although the terms problem focused and emotion focused were used instead [14]. Emotion focused coping align with internal strategies where victims regulate emotions and mental domains to cope with the situation, while problem-focused coping corresponds to external strategies aimed at addressing and eliminating the problem. The emotion focused coping strategies are further grouped into behavioral and cognitive strategies depending on whether the response to harassment manifests

as actions aimed at expressing emotions or regulating emotions by changing thoughts and interpretations [5]. A further categorization delineates four coping strategies in response to sexual harassment [6], individuals may adopt normalization strategy which entails downplaying harassment incidents, accepting them as part of the school norm or staying silent despite being distressed by the incident. Also, the detachment strategy is discussed which generally involves avoidance actions such as distancing from perpetrators, disengaging from activities or places prone to harassment or even considering to change the academic settings. Another category is engagement strategy which manifests in confronting harassers directly, expressing criticism or firmly rejecting inappropriate behavior. The final category is the help seeking strategy which involves seeking support from friends, parents, school administration or law enforcement agencies. This “four groups” classification was used for data collection in this study.

**The guiding framework displaying perceived interrelationship between perpetrator identities and coping strategies**

The conceptual framework delineates an empirical investigation, designating perpetrator identities as independent variables and each coping strategy (normalization, help-seeking, engagement, and detachment) as a distinct dependent variable. Positioned at the core, "perpetrator identities" are envisioned to influence the four coping strategies. This structured framework serves as the foundation for exploring the perceived interplay between independent variable perpetrator identities and dependent variable coping strategies. It sets the stage for subsequent empirical testing, aiming to validate or refine the hypothesized relationships, contributing to an understanding of how schoolgirls may employ specific coping mechanisms in response to sexual harassment based on the encountered perpetrator’s identity.

**Figure 1: Perceived interrelationship between perpetrator identities and sexual harassment coping strategies**



## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research approach and design**

The study utilized a quantitative approach so as to facilitate drawing of objective conclusions and identification of patterns through statistical analysis. Employing a cross sectional descriptive survey design, the data were gathered at a single point in time using a survey questionnaire and analyzed by inferential statistics so as to describe, understand and draw conclusions on the influence of perpetrator identity on schoolgirls' employment of certain sexual harassment coping strategies. Generally, an inferential statistic method was utilized due to its potential in providing conclusions about the broad population using sample data.

### **Population and sampling**

The study was conducted in Mbulu Town Council, with a focus on ordinary level secondary schoolgirls as the target population. Employing a quantitative approach, a two-stage cluster sampling method was utilized to ensure a representative sample for the investigation. In the first stage, five schools were randomly selected from a list of 14 secondary schools within Mbulu Town Council. This initial step aimed to capture a diverse representation of schools within the geographical area under study. Subsequently, in the second stage, 80 girls from each of the chosen schools were selected, resulting in a total sample size of 400 girls. The selection process involved randomly choosing 20 girls from each class (from Form 1 to Form 4) within each of the selected schools.

### **Data collection tools**

The primary instrument employed for data collection was a close-ended questionnaire, designed to investigate instances of sexual harassment encountered by secondary schoolgirls within the past 12 months. The questionnaire included specific inquiries regarding the identity of perpetrators involved in these incidents. The provided identities encompassed classmates, senior students, teachers, strangers, and non-teaching staff, aiming to capture a comprehensive overview of potential sources of sexual harassment within the school environment. Furthermore, the questionnaire incorporated coping strategies which were in four groups; normalization, engagement, detachment and help seeking. Under each category of the coping strategies, three guiding statements were included. These statements served as prompts, prompting the girls to indicate whether they had employed a particular coping strategy or not in response to the encountered sexual harassment situations. The use of a close ended questionnaire provided a standardized, efficient and time saving means of data collection.

### **Statistical treatment of data**

Binary logistic regression was employed to analyze the influence of perpetrator identity on each coping strategy; Help Seeking, Engagement, Normalization, and Detachment. Each coping strategy was treated as the dependent variable, while the identities of perpetrator; classmates, senior students, teachers, strangers, and non-teaching staff were treated as independent variables. The logistic regression equations provided coefficients ( $\beta$ ), odds ratios, Wald values, and p-values for each perpetrator identity, offering insights into their influence on the likelihood of employing specific coping strategies. This statistical approach allowed for an examination of the relationships between

perpetrator identity and coping mechanisms, enhancing the understanding of the dynamics surrounding schoolgirls' responses to sexual harassment incidents.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from the respondents, ensuring voluntary involvement. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained to safeguard respondents' privacy. Additionally, necessary permissions were obtained from relevant government authorities to conduct the study, ensuring compliance with regulatory protocols. The research adhered to guidelines promoting the well-being and rights of the schoolgirls, reflecting a commitment to ethical research practices.

## RESULTS INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

### Demographic information

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are outlined in Table 1 below. The study targeted adolescent girls in secondary school, categorized into early adolescents (13-14 years), middle adolescents (15-16 years), and late adolescents (17-18 years). The corresponding numbers of girls for each age range were 176, 174, and 50, respectively. Late adolescents were fewer in number due to the sampling focusing solely on ordinary level secondary girls, with each class providing 100 girls. Regarding residence, 272 were day students, while 128 were boarding students.

**Table 1: Demographic information of the respondents**

Age	Early adolescents	Middle adolescents	Late adolescents	Total	
	176	174	50	400	
Grade level	Form 1	Form 2	Form 3	Form 4	Total
	100	100	100	100	400
Living Arrangement	Day student	Boarding student			Total
	272	128			400

### The influence of perpetrator identity on sexual harassment coping strategies

The analysis, as presented in Table 2, reveals a statistically significant association between senior student perpetrators and an increased likelihood of employing normalization coping strategies. Specifically, with each additional perpetrator from a higher grade level, the odds of utilizing normalization coping strategies increase by approximately 1.90 times. This suggests that individuals subjected to harassment by senior students are more prone to adopting normalization as a coping mechanism, as supported by the significant p-value of 0.0037. Furthermore, the identity of the

perpetrator, senior students, has the highest Wald value (8.42), indicating its high influence towards normalization compared to other identities. These findings align with a study among South African girls, where majority normalized harassment perpetrated by their school peers [15]. Similarly, Canadian secondary school girls have been reported to demonstrate a tendency to normalize sexual harassment from either senior class peers or same class peers [16]. The inclination to normalize harassment may arise from students perceiving harassment as a common occurrence in schools, leading to underreporting [17]. Additionally, the fear of further victimization has been identified as a driving factor for schoolgirls normalizing sexual harassment from schoolboys [18].

**Table 2: The influence of each perpetrator identity on normalization coping strategy**

Normalization							
Variables in the Equation							
Perpetrator identity	B	Odds ratio	S.E.	Wald	Df	Sig.	Exp (B)
Classmates	-0.1301	0.8780	0.2187	0.3536	1	0.5520	0.87
		12	61	57		5	8012
Senior students	0.6400	1.8966	0.2205	8.4249	1	0.0037	1.89
	77	27	2	68		01	6627
Teachers	0.0818	1.0852	0.2668	0.0939	1	0.7592	1.08
	11	51	96	59		03	5251
Strangers		1.0043	0.2176	0.0004	1	0.9840	1.00
	0.0043	6	01			49	436
Non-teaching staff	-	0.6978	0.2692	1.7852	1	0.1815	0.69
	0.3597	21	82	08		11	7821
Constant	-	0.6281	0.1883	6.0967	1	0.0135	0.62
	0.4650	26	3	12		43	8126
	1						

The results in Table 3 suggest that an increase of one perpetrator from classmates, senior students, teachers, and strangers raises the logit of "employed detachment" against "never employed detachment" by 0.462619, 0.65895, 0.524922, and 0.59101, respectively. The corresponding p-values are 0.043847, 0.003335, 0.052794, and 0.008542, all of which are statistically significant. The odds ratios indicate that encountering a perpetrator from any of these identities significantly increases the

odds of coping through detachment by approximately 2 times. Notably, the senior students' identity has the highest Wald value (8.614296), signifying its greater influence in eliciting the detachment coping strategy. Instances of detachment coping mechanisms, such as altering routes to and from school to avoid harassment from strangers and school peers, are also reported among Nepalese secondary schoolgirls [19]. Similarly, rural secondary schoolgirls in Tanzania have been found to employ detachment by avoiding seeking academic help from teachers due to sexual harassment [20]. However, the effectiveness of detachment in mitigating harassment is questionable, especially when the perpetrator is a teacher, given the dependence of schoolgirls on them for academic progress.

**Table 3: The influence of each perpetrator identity on detachment coping strategy**

Detachment							
Variables in the Equation							
Perpetrator identity	B	odds ratio	S.E.	Wald	D f	Sig.	Exp(B)
Classmates	0.4626	1.5882	0.229	4.062	1	0.04	1.5
	19	28	525	446		3847	882
Senior students	0.6589	1.9327	0.224	8.614	1	0.00	1.9
	5	61	513	296		3335	327
Teachers	0.5249	1.6903	0.271	3.750	1	0.05	1.6
	22	26	053	428		2794	903
Strangers	0.5910	1.8058	0.224	6.916	1	0.00	1.8
	1	11	732	061		8542	058
Non-teaching staff	0.2502	1.2843	0.269	0.859	1	0.35	1.2
	86	93	969	5		3879	843
Constant	-	0.2183	0.220	47.68	1	5E-	0.2
	1.5214	9	33	503		12	183
	7						9

Table 4 reveals that "strangers" is the only perpetrator identity that is statistically significant (p-value=0.002942). Encountering harassment from strangers increases the odds ratio of coping through the engagement strategy by 0.514297 times. Furthermore, strangers, with a Wald value higher than other identities (8.843394), emerge as the most influential identity in employing the engagement strategy.

Consequently, the results indicate a greater likelihood of schoolgirls employing the engagement coping strategy when the perpetrator is a stranger. It's worth noting that typical responses from females towards stranger harassment, such as avoidance and ignoring [21], do not align with the engagement coping mechanism identified in this study as the most likely response to stranger harassment. Actions associated with the engagement coping mechanism, such as warning the harasser or explicitly refusing sexual advances, are reported to be rarely employed in response to stranger harassment. Consistent with the findings of this study, Swedish schoolgirls are also identified to employ engagement strategies against stranger harassment, including verbally refusing advances or physically pushing the person away [5].

**Table 4: Influence of each perpetrator identity on engagement coping strategy**

Engagement							
Variables in the Equation							
Perpetrator identity	B	odds ratio	S.E.	Wald	Df	Sig.	Exp (B)
Classmates	0.231103	1.259988	0.221605	1.08755	1	0.297015	1.258
Senior students	0.28496	1.329709	0.225073	1.602949	1	0.205486	1.329
Teachers	-0.17174	0.8422	0.269116	0.407246	1	0.523371	0.8422
Strangers	-0.66495	0.514297	0.223606	8.843394	1	0.002942	0.514297
Non-teaching staff	0.070486	1.07303	0.269092	0.068613	1	0.793366	1.07303
Constant	0.576441	1.779693	0.191257	9.083937	1	0.002579	1.779693

Table 5 below highlights that the most influential perpetrator identity towards eliciting the help-seeking coping mechanism is non-teaching staff, with a Wald value of 5.067504. Furthermore, it is the



only perpetrator identity with a statistically significant p-value (0.02). According to the odds ratio, encountering a perpetrator from non-teaching staff increases the likelihood of employing the help-seeking coping strategy by 1.942426 times. Consistent with this study's findings, the Department of Education reports that sexual harassment allegations presented by UK schoolchildren against school non-teaching staff rank second after physical abuse allegations [22]. This suggests the utilization of the help-seeking coping strategy through reporting sexual harassment incidents to authorities when harassed by non-teaching staff. However, several studies note that the help-seeking strategy is often the least employed by female students, especially when the perpetrator holds a position of power, such as a teacher or non-teaching staff [23] - [25].

**Table 5: The influence of perpetrator identity on help seeking coping strategy**

<b>Help Seeking</b>							
<b>Variables in the equation</b>							
<b>Perpetrator identity</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>odds ratio</b>	<b>S.E.</b>	<b>Wal d</b>	<b>D f</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>Exp(B)</b>
<b>Classmates</b>	0.12	1.136	0.27	0.22	1	0.637	1.1366
	8125	695	2069	1773		692	95
<b>Senior students</b>	-	0.988	0.26	0.00	1	0.965	0.9883
	0.01	318	8424	1916		083	18
	175						
<b>Teachers</b>	0.49	1.635	0.29	2.69	1	0.100	1.6354
	1889	403	9527	6882		545	03
<b>Strangers</b>	0.14	1.153	0.26	0.28	1	0.592	1.1534
	2778	474	6488	7057		113	74
<b>Non-teaching staff</b>	0.66	1.942	0.29	5.06	1	0.024	1.9424
	3938	426	4938	7504		378	26
<b>Constant</b>	-	0.165	0.24	53.5	1	2.56	0.1659
	1.79	927	5521	2256		E-13	27
	621						

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

Derived from the obtained results, the deduction arises that detachment coping emerges as a common response when the perpetrator embodies identities such as a classmate, senior student, teacher, or stranger, indicative of a self-protective mechanism centered on avoiding these identities. Notably, seeking help demonstrates a higher likelihood in instances where the perpetrator embodies a non-teaching staff identity, while engagement primarily surfaces when the perpetrator is a stranger, reflecting a proactive approach to addressing harassment from unfamiliar individuals. However, the association of normalization with senior students raises concerns, highlighting a worrisome trend of

accepting and normalizing sexual misconduct within peer relationships. Interventions should focus on educating girls to prioritize help seeking strategy strategies over others. The tendency to normalize peer perpetrated sexual harassment should also be discouraged through provision of sexuality education programs which include information on coping with sexual harassment. Moreover, to reduce encounters with strangers the possibility of having girls in boarding residence should be considered. The study found engagement to be the most likely used strategy under stranger harassment, this could pose further dangerous outcomes incase schoolgirls attempt to confront or threaten strangers who harass them.

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