Akpabio denies sexual harassment allegations as Natasha submits petition to Senate

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The Senate President, Godswill Akpabio, has officially denied allegations of sexual harassment leveled against him by Kogi Central Senator, Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan.  
  
Mr Akpabio maintained that he had never sexually harassed Mrs Akpoti-Uduaghan or any woman in his life.  
  
He said this during the plenary on Wednesday.  
  
Mr Akpabio’s response came after Mrs Akpoti-Uduaghan submitted a petition accusing the senate president of sexual harassment, abuse of office, and obstruction of her legislative duties.  
  
“While I am aware that the matters are in court, however, I would like to state clearly that at no time did I ever attempt any sexual harassment on Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan or any other woman, for that matter,” he said.  
  
Repeated case of sexual harassment  
  
This is not the first time Mr Akpabio will face sexual harassment allegations.  
  
In 2020, Joy Nunieh, the former acting managing director of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), accused Mr Akpabio of sexual harassment.  
  
Mrs Nunieh claimed that she slapped Mr Akpabio in response to his sexual advances towards her.  
  
However, Mr Akpabio who was then Minister of Niger Delta Affairs, denied the allegations, describing them as “false, malicious, and libelous.”  
  
Allegations against Akpabio  
  
In an interview with Arise Television on Friday, Mrs Akpoti-Uduaghan alleged that Mr Akpabio made inappropriate advances towards her during a visit to his residence in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, on 8 December 2023.  
  
She claimed that the senate president took her by the hand, led her around his house, and made sexual advances towards her in the presence of her husband, Emmanuel Uduaghan.  
  
She further alleged that Mr Akpabio had, on a separate occasion, insinuated that she should “take care of him” if she wanted her motions to receive favorable consideration on the Senate floor.  
  
However, Ekaette Akpabio, wife of the senate president, has since absolved her husband of the allegations. She also filed two defamation lawsuits against Mrs Akpoti-Uduaghan, demanding N350 billion in damages to her husband’s reputation.  
  
Former Vice President Atiku Abubakar also asked President Bola Tinubu to ensure an independent and transparent investigation into the sexual harassment allegations.  
  
Former Senate President, Bukola Saraki, had also advised Mr Akpabio to submit himself for open investigation in order to ensure fairness and transparent resolution.  
  
Emmanuel Uduaghan, the husband of Mrs Akpoti-Uduaghan, had also confirmed that his wife confided in him about her interactions with Mr Akpabio.  
  
“My mother raised me well”  
  
During the plenary, Mr Akpabio passionately defended himself by saying that his late mother raised him and his siblings with strong values.  
  
“I and my siblings were raised very well by my late single mother. She died in the year 2000, through very difficult times, and I therefore have the highest regards for women. Even at their minds, I sit right here today,” he said.  
  
He added that having “four beautiful daughters” further strengthens his respect for women.  
  
“I also wish to state that I also have four beautiful daughters, so at no time will I ever harass any woman, and I’ve never done so,” he said.  
  
Mr Akpabio also reminded the Senate that he had received numerous awards for gender inclusivity, including the title of “Most Gender-Friendly Governor” during his tenure as Akwa Ibom State Governor from 2007 to 2015.  
  
“In addition, even as a state governor, I was awarded various awards. One of them was the one you wish to know, the most gender-friendly governor in Nigeria. I served between 2007 and 2015, to God be the glory.”  
  
He urged Nigerians to wait for the court’s decision before concluding that he actually committed the sexual harassment.  
  
“In conclusion, I urge all Nigerians, particularly the media and then, of course, the members of the social media, to await the court’s decision, and please do not jump to conclusions on matters of mere allegations.  
  
“I want to thank you for listening to me, and thank my colleagues, because some of the phone calls of support, solidarity, and prayers that the almighty God will step in to vindicate the just. So now, let us get on with the business of the day.”  
  
Natasha submits petitions  
  
Before Mr Akpabio’s response, Mrs Akpoti-Uduaghan had formally submitted her petition against him.  
  
“The Petition is in my name against the president of the Nigerian Senate, Godswill Akpabio for sexual harassment, abuse of office and obstruction of my legislative functions,” she said.  
  
Mr Akpabio directed her to submit the petition, which was then referred to the Senate Committee on Ethics, Privileges, and Public Petitions for investigation.  
  
However, some senators opposed the petition.  
  
Senate Chief Whip, Tahir Monguno, cited Order 40(4), which states that any matter already in court cannot be debated in the Senate.  
  
He urged the Senate to reject the petition.  
  
The Senate Leader, Opeyemi Bamidele, also urged Mr Akpabio to reject the petition outright.  
  
Mr Bamidele, the senator representing Ekiti Central, also urged the Senate to discuss the matter in a closed-door session.  
  
Ekiti North Senator, Cyril Fasuyi, questioned Mrs Akpoti-Uduaghan’s credibility to submit the petition.  
  
Mr Fasuyi recalled that Mrs Apoti-Uduagan had previously accused former Ekiti Governor, Kayode Fayemi, of selling the Ajaokuta Steel Company to a private firm.  
  
Closed-door session amidst international observers  
  
The Senate, however, resolved to continue with its agenda before going into a closed-door session to discuss the issue.  
  
Mr Akpabio noted that international observers were present, making it necessary to maintain decorum before addressing the matter privately.