The Guardian Nigeria News - Nigeria and World News

Date: 2019-10-11

Source: https://guardian.ng/opinion/sexual-exploitation-of-students/

Sexual exploitation and harassment of students by teachers and administrators are reflections of corrupt education systems.  
  
Sexual exploitation and harassment are not peculiar to systems of education in Nigeria. They are a global issue affecting school systems and students worldwide. Places where control mechanisms are lax, corruption levels are high and fear of reprisal in reporting crimes, especially conducted by those in power are breeding grounds for teachers and administrators to engage in such action without regard.  
  
Sexual harassment is defined as unwanted sexual advances or remarks typically in the workplace, professional or social setting. Sexual harassment and abuse in schools are further defined as unwanted sexual advances, forceful activity, and contact remarks both written and oral and gestures.  
  
  
  
As an expert and researcher of corruption and ethics, I have done various studies on how corruption is socialized. The breakdown of value systems and corruption in institutions of education has led to the socialization of corruption within society. Furthermore, one of the main commonalities shared amongst interviewees for a study I conducted on academic dishonesty in institutions of education was sexual harassment and or sexual assault. It was shocking to discover that 70% of the women I interviewed all had experiences of sexual harassment from their professors or teachers.  
  
For example, the story of Felicia (pseudo name provided to disclose identity), who is 28 years old and attended a University in Nigeria has an experience that is far too common amongst young women. Felicia was a model student at the University; her vigor and excellence in her studies afforded her the opportunity to be chosen by her Professor as his class aide. Her professor mentored her and gave her responsibilities to assist in class. During her interview, she narrated how one day she decided to visit her Professor in his office in school, something she normally did to check in with him regarding class duties. Her professor was senior in faculty ranking and was around 64 years old she narrated.  
  
“One day, I went to his office as normal. We engaged in regular talk about class and the week’s readings. During our conversation, he praised my efforts and commending my work in class. And then he said something to me that surprised me he said, “You know if I was to ever take a second wife, I would choose you.” Felicia narrated how that comment took her by surprise. What happened next took Felicia by surprise. She said, “Then he started coming towards me, he grabbed me with such force. He was an old man but the force he grabbed me with took me a surprise. I started to push him and he let go. He then proceeded to tell me I just like you and want to give you a hug.”  
  
Felicia stated that she immediately left his office but never told anyone about that incident because she feared that she would be punished by the Professor.  
  
Felicia’s experience is no different than what many students have experienced. In an article titled, “Harassment, Sexual Abuse Corrupts Education Worldwide,” it is stated,  
  
Sexual violence in education ranges from low-level gratuitous actions to convey messages of power – such as inappropriate sexualized comments or gestures, or unwanted physical contact … to threats of exam failure, punishment or public ridicule, and sexual assault and rape. In higher education, it often involves sex in exchange for good grades or leaked exam questions, and sometimes also admission to an institution or to a high-status course.  
  
Corruption in institutions of education do not involve just the exchange of money, for students who do not have the financial capability to give money, their bodies become commodities of exchange for preferential treatment, access to course exam answers or admissions into a preferred institution of choice.  
  
  
  
Many African countries are to be a patriarchal society. Sociologist Gerda Lerna defines Patriarchy as the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. In Nigeria, women regardless of religious or tribal affiliation are taught to be submissive to their husbands, are viewed as second-class citizens, and it is generally assumed that a woman’s success professionally or financially is due in large part to the influence, access or financial capital of a male figure in her life.  
  
Respondent Felicia narrated her sister’s story and her experience with sexual harassment at her university. For purposes of protection, Felicia’s sister is named Rebecca. Rebecca failed out of university because she refused to have sex with her professor. Felicia states,  
  
“My sister challenged the institution, the senate committee and did a whole trial and these guys are friends, they are not going to penalize the lecturer because of a student. My sister had a second class lower instead of a first-class upper because this man was a downfall to her whole learning. Female students are afraid to report acts of sexual harassment by those in authority. For instance, if you are in your first year in a university and you are trying to challenge your professor, you will find even other professors telling you are you sure you want to do that because you have three more years. They would say, don’t put yourself under the spotlight like that. People are afraid.”  
  
In addition to a lack of control mechanisms and breakdown of values systems reinforced through some institutions of education in Nigeria, there are effects of patriarchy and power dynamics at play as well.  
  
It is no surprise that such acts committed by those in authority can have negative influences on students. In Nigeria’s tertiary education there has been an increase in cult or gang activity, obscene dressing by female students and drug abuse. The common accusation of many of these lecturers is that they are provoked to commit such acts due to the mode of dressing by their female students, again another fallacy the exploits gender dynamics all while justifying deviant and criminal behavior. If we are to look at the root causes of corruption, let us take a focused look at our school system.  
  
Odugbesan-Omede, is professor of Global Affairs and Politics at the State University of New York Farming State College and a public affairs analyst.  
  
[ad unit=2]