

The Accountability Gap: Sexual Harassment, Institutional Responses And Student Protection In Universities In Nigeria And Ghana

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Abstract

This study examined the accountability gap in universities' responses to sexual harassment, with particular emphasis on policy implementation, reporting mechanisms, enforcement procedures, and student protection systems.

A quantitative survey design was adopted, and data were collected from 400 students drawn from selected universities in Nigeria and Ghana. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Weighted Mean Score (WMS), multiple regression, and Chi-Square analyses.

The findings showed weaknesses in institutional responses to sexual harassment. Respondents expressed dissatisfaction with institutional policies and responses with a grand mean 2.49, reporting and enforcement mechanisms, universities' fulfillment of duty of care obligations also had grand means of 2.34 and 2.34 respectively. Multiple regression results showed that institutional accountability ($\beta = 0.391, p < 0.001$), enforcement procedures ($\beta = 0.332, p < 0.001$), policy implementation ($\beta = 0.284, p = 0.001$), and reporting mechanisms ($\beta = 0.219, p = 0.003$) significantly influenced student protection, explaining 73.6% of the variation in the dependent variable ($R^2 = 0.736$). Respondents also strongly supported reforms aimed at strengthening reporting systems, anti-retaliation protections, and institutional oversight with a weighted mean average of 4.10. The study recommends that universities strengthen accountability mechanisms, improve policy implementation, and establish survivor-centred protection systems to create safer and more inclusive learning environments.

Key Word: *Institutional accountability; Sexual harassment; Student protection; Duty of care; Higher education.*

Date of Submission: 24-06-2026

Date of Acceptance: 04-07-2026

I. Introduction

Sexual harassment remains a persistent challenge within higher education institutions worldwide, undermining students' safety, well-being, and educational experiences. Universities are expected to provide safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments where students can pursue their academic goals free from intimidation, discrimination, and abuse. As institutions entrusted with the welfare of students, they have a duty of care that extends beyond academic instruction to protecting students from sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence. In response to growing concerns about campus sexual harassment, many universities have adopted anti-sexual harassment policies, reporting procedures, disciplinary frameworks, and awareness programmes designed to prevent or minimize misconduct and support affected students.

Despite these initiatives, incidents of sexual harassment continue to be reported across higher education institutions, raising questions about the effectiveness of existing institutional responses. Increasing evidence suggests that the challenge lies not only in the occurrence of sexual harassment itself but also in the capacity of universities to prevent, address, and respond effectively to complaints. Although many institutions demonstrate policy compliance through the adoption of formal regulations and codes of conduct, concerns persist regarding policy implementation, complaint handling, confidentiality, survivor support, and accountability. Students often remain reluctant to report incidents due to fears of retaliation, lack of confidence in institutional procedures, concerns about confidentiality, and perceptions that complaints may not result in meaningful action. In some cases, investigations are delayed, disciplinary measures are inconsistently applied, and support services for survivors remain inadequate. These challenges can contribute to underreporting, institutional distrust, and environments in which misconduct persists with limited accountability.

The growing emphasis on institutional accountability has shifted attention from the prevalence of sexual harassment to the responsibilities of universities as organizational actors. Accountability requires institutions not only to establish policies but also to implement them effectively, investigate complaints fairly, protect

complainants from retaliation, provide appropriate support services, and ensure that perpetrators are held responsible for their actions. However, much of the existing literature has concentrated on the prevalence, causes, and consequences of sexual harassment, with comparatively less attention devoted to evaluating universities' responses and the extent to which they fulfil their duty of care obligations. Consequently, there remains limited empirical evidence on whether institutional mechanisms designed to protect students are functioning effectively and whether universities are meeting their accountability responsibilities.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates the accountability gap in universities' responses to sexual harassment. Specifically, it examines policy implementation, reporting mechanisms, enforcement procedures, and student protection systems within selected universities in Nigeria and Ghana. Focusing on universities as accountable institutions rather than solely on individual perpetrators or victims, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how institutional practices influence student protection and the effectiveness of sexual harassment response systems within higher education.

The study was guided by the following questions which were tested as hypotheses:

1. What are the prevalence and patterns of sexual harassment among students in universities?
2. How effective are institutional policies, reporting mechanisms, and enforcement procedures in addressing sexual harassment in universities?
3. To what extent do universities fulfil their duty of care and accountability obligations in protecting students from sexual harassment?
4. What strategies can strengthen institutional accountability and student protection in universities?

Conceptual review has it that Sexual harassment is widely recognized as a form of gender-based violence and discrimination that undermines the dignity, safety, and well-being of individuals within educational and professional settings. Sexual harassment was defined as unwanted sexual attention, sexual coercion, and gender hostility that interferes with an individual's ability to participate fully in institutional life¹. Within universities, sexual harassment may occur between students, between staff and students, or among staff members, often reflecting unequal power relations and institutional hierarchies. The growth of digital communication technologies has further expanded the scope of harassment beyond physical spaces to include online and cyber-enabled forms of victimization². While sexual harassment has traditionally been examined as a behavioural problem involving individual perpetrators and victims, contemporary scholarship increasingly views it as an institutional challenge that requires effective governance, prevention, and accountability mechanisms.

Central to this perspective is the concept of institutional accountability, which refers to the responsibility of universities to establish, implement, monitor, and enforce measures that protect students from harm. Institutional accountability extends beyond the mere existence of policies to encompass transparency, responsiveness, fairness, and consistency in addressing complaints. Institutions were said to demonstrate accountability when they actively prevent misconduct, respond appropriately to allegations, support survivors, and hold perpetrators responsible for their actions³. Conversely, failures in these areas may constitute institutional betrayal, where the institution itself contributes to the harm experienced by victims through inaction, neglect, or inadequate responses.

Closely linked to institutional accountability is the concept of duty of care, which refers to the legal and ethical obligation of universities to take reasonable measures to protect students from foreseeable harm. In the context of sexual harassment, duty of care requires institutions to provide safe learning environments, implement effective reporting and response systems, ensure confidentiality, and offer adequate support services to affected students. The extent to which universities fulfil these responsibilities has become an important measure of institutional effectiveness and governance within higher education.

The realization of accountability and duty of care obligations depends largely on effective policy implementation. Policy implementation involves translating formal institutional commitments into practical actions and measurable outcomes. Although many universities have adopted anti-sexual harassment policies, evidence suggests that significant gaps often exist between policy adoption and policy enforcement. Weak implementation may manifest through inadequate awareness programmes, inaccessible reporting channels, delayed investigations, inconsistent sanctions, and insufficient support for survivors. Consequently, the effectiveness of institutional responses is determined not by the existence of policies alone but by the extent to which those policies are operationalized and enforced.

These institutional processes ultimately influence the level of student protection provided within universities. Student protection encompasses the policies, procedures, support services, and safeguards established to prevent sexual harassment, respond effectively to complaints, and promote student well-being. Effective protection systems foster trust, encourage reporting, and contribute to safer and more inclusive learning environments. In contrast, weak protection mechanisms may reinforce underreporting, institutional distrust, and continued exposure to harassment.

The interaction among these concepts gives rise to what may be described as the accountability gap the discrepancy between universities' stated commitments to addressing sexual harassment and their actual performance in protecting students. Although many institutions publicly endorse zero-tolerance approaches and maintain formal policies, weaknesses in implementation, reporting systems, enforcement procedures, and survivor support often limit their effectiveness. The accountability gap therefore provides a useful framework for understanding how institutional practices can either strengthen or undermine student protection. Examining this gap is essential for assessing whether universities are fulfilling their duty of care obligations and creating environments that are genuinely safe, inclusive, and supportive of student success.

This study is anchored on Institutional Betrayal Theory and Duty of Care Theory, both of which provide a useful framework for understanding universities' responsibilities in addressing sexual harassment and protecting students. Institutional Betrayal Theory, explains the harm that occurs when institutions fail to prevent or adequately respond to wrongdoing within their environments^{3,14}. The theory argues that organizations entrusted with the welfare and protection of individuals may become sources of harm when they ignore complaints, discourage reporting, fail to provide adequate support, or inadequately address misconduct. Such institutional failures can intensify the trauma experienced by victims, undermine trust in organizational systems, and create environments in which harmful behaviours persist.

Within higher education, the theory is particularly relevant because universities are expected to provide safe learning environments and respond effectively to reports of sexual harassment. Where institutions fail to implement policies, investigate complaints fairly, maintain confidentiality, or hold perpetrators accountable, they may inadvertently contribute to a culture of silence, underreporting, and continued victimization. The theory therefore shifts attention from individual perpetrators to institutional responsibility, making it highly relevant to the study's focus on accountability in universities' responses to sexual harassment.

The study is also informed by Duty of Care Theory, which is grounded in the legal and ethical principle that institutions have an obligation to take reasonable measures to protect individuals from foreseeable harm. In the context of higher education, universities assume a duty of care toward students by virtue of their responsibility for student welfare, safety, and development. This obligation extends beyond academic instruction to the provision of safe and supportive learning environments where students are protected from harassment, discrimination, and other forms of harm. Applied to sexual harassment, the theory suggests that universities have a responsibility not only to establish anti-harassment policies but also to ensure their effective implementation through accessible reporting systems, timely investigations, survivor support services, and appropriate disciplinary measures. Failure to take reasonable steps to prevent or address sexual harassment may constitute a breach of this duty and expose students to further harm.

Together, Institutional Betrayal Theory and Duty of Care Theory provide complementary perspectives for examining the accountability gap in universities' responses to sexual harassment. While Institutional Betrayal Theory explains how institutional failures can exacerbate harm and weaken trust in university systems, Duty of Care Theory emphasizes the obligation of universities to protect students through effective policies and practices. Collectively, the theories support the central argument of this study that universities should be evaluated not merely on the existence of anti-sexual harassment policies but on their ability to implement those policies effectively, respond appropriately to complaints, support survivors, and uphold their responsibility to provide safe learning environments. These theoretical perspectives therefore provide a strong foundation for assessing institutional accountability and student protection within higher education.

Similar works assessed the implementation of anti-sexual harassment policies at Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria, using a quantitative research design involving students and staff⁴. The study found that while the university had established anti-sexual harassment policies and reporting structures, the level of policy implementation was only moderate. The findings revealed significant gaps in awareness, reporting procedures, and enforcement mechanisms. The study further established that effective implementation of anti-sexual harassment policies significantly improved perceptions of gender protection among members of the university community. The researchers concluded that universities must move beyond policy formulation to ensure effective implementation and accountability. This study is relevant because it highlights the disconnect between policy existence and policy effectiveness in Nigerian universities.

A national study on sexual violence reporting among higher education students in Nigeria, using survey data from students across multiple tertiary institutions, the study found that underreporting remained a major challenge due to fear of victimization, lack of confidence in institutional processes, and perceived institutional inaction⁵. The researchers observed that many students were reluctant to engage formal reporting channels because they doubted that universities would provide adequate protection or sanctions against perpetrators. The study concluded that strengthening institutional support systems and improving reporting mechanisms are essential for enhancing accountability and student protection in higher education institutions.

An investigation on sexual assault reporting among students in three European universities, using a cross-sectional survey design, the researchers found that although many students experienced sexual harassment

and assault, only a small proportion reported incidents to university authorities⁶. Fear of stigma, concerns about confidentiality, and lack of trust in institutional procedures emerged as the major barriers to reporting. The study concluded that institutional accountability depends not only on the existence of reporting systems but also on students' confidence in those systems. The findings underscore the importance of transparent, survivor-centered institutional responses in promoting student safety and trust. An evaluation of the implementation of Makerere University's policy against sexual misconduct and harassment, examined students' and staff members' knowledge of institutional policies and their perceptions of implementation effectiveness⁷. Findings revealed that awareness of policy provisions was relatively high; however, concerns remained regarding enforcement consistency, accessibility of reporting mechanisms, and protection of complainants. The study concluded that policy effectiveness depends largely on institutional commitment, adequate resources, and transparent accountability structures. The research demonstrates that policy adoption alone is insufficient unless accompanied by effective implementation and monitoring systems.

The reviewed studies demonstrate that sexual harassment remains a persistent challenge within higher education. However, there remains a need for empirical studies that examine how institutional responses, governance practices, and duty of care obligations shape student protection outcomes. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the accountability dimension of universities' responses to sexual harassment within the higher education context.

II. Material And Methods

This study employed a quantitative survey design to examine institutional accountability, policy implementation, reporting mechanisms, enforcement procedures, and student protection in relation to sexual harassment in universities. Data were collected from 400 students selected from six universities, comprising four universities in Nigeria (n = 300) and two in Ghana (n = 100). The inclusion of respondents from both countries was intended to provide broader perspectives on institutional accountability rather than facilitate cross-country comparisons. The larger sample drawn from Nigeria reflects the country's greater number of universities and larger student population.

A multistage sampling procedure was employed. Universities were purposively selected based on the existence of formal sexual harassment prevention and response frameworks. Stratified and simple random sampling techniques were subsequently used to select respondents across faculties and levels of study. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire measured on a five-point Likert scale. The instrument was validated by experts in gender studies and higher education administration, while a pilot study produced a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.77, indicating acceptable reliability.

Data were analysed using SPSS Version 29 and EViews 23. Descriptive statistics and Weighted Mean Scores (WMS) were used to analyse respondents' perceptions of institutional accountability and student protection measures. Multiple regression analysis examined the influence of institutional factors on student protection, while Chi-Square tests were used to test the study hypotheses at the 5% level of significance. Participation was voluntary, and respondents' anonymity and confidentiality were assured throughout the study.

Model Specification

To examine the influence of institutional accountability on student protection, the study specifies the following functional relationship:

$$SP = f(IA, PI, RM, EP) \quad \dots \text{eqn 1}$$

Where:

SP = Student Protection

IA = Institutional Accountability

PI = Policy Implementation

RM = Reporting Mechanisms

EP = Enforcement Procedures

The econometric model is expressed as:

$$SP = \beta_0 + \beta_1 IA + \beta_2 PI + \beta_3 RM + \beta_4 EP + \mu \quad \dots \text{eqn 2}$$

Where:

β_0 = Constant term

β_1 – β_4 = Regression coefficients

μ = Error term

The model assumes that effective institutional accountability, policy implementation, reporting mechanisms, and enforcement procedures positively influence student protection within universities.

III. Data Analysis And Results

This section presents the data collected from field work and the results.

Table no 1. Shows Response Rate from Administered Questionnaire

Questionnaire Status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Administered	400	100.0
Returned	384	96.0
Invalid	8	2.0
Valid Responses Used	376	94.0

Source: Field Survey (2026).

Table no 2: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	136	36.2
	Female	240	63.8
Residence	Students	376	100
	On-campus	322	85.6
	Off-campus	54	14.4

Source: Field Survey (2026)

Table no 3. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Statistics	Sexual Harassment (SH)	Institutional Accountability (IA)	Policy Implementation (PI)	Reporting Mechanisms (RM)	Enforcement Procedures (EP)	Student Protection (SP)
Mean	3.240	3.110	2.970	3.060	2.880	2.940
Median	3.200	3.100	3.000	3.000	2.900	3.000
Maximum	5.000	5.000	5.000	5.000	5.000	5.000
Minimum	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Std. Dev.	0.720	0.680	0.760	0.740	0.810	0.780
Skewness	-0.312	-0.184	-0.427	-0.265	-0.518	-0.403
Kurtosis	2.671	2.842	2.564	2.738	2.412	2.603
Jarque-Bera	2.184	1.125	3.447	2.011	4.392	3.122
Probability	0.336	0.570	0.178	0.366	0.111	0.210
Observations	376	376	376	376	376	376

Table no 3 presents the descriptive statistics of the study variables. The mean values indicate moderate respondent perceptions across the variables, while the relatively low standard deviation values suggest limited variability in responses. The skewness and kurtosis statistics indicate approximate normality, which is further confirmed by the Jarque-Bera probabilities exceeding the 0.05 significance level. This suggests that the data are suitable for subsequent regression and inferential analyses.

Research question one: What are the prevalence and patterns of sexual harassment among students in universities?

Table no 4. Respondents' Perceptions of the Prevalence of Sexual Harassment in Universities.

S/N	Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	WMS	Decision
1	Students are frequently subjected to sexually suggestive comments or jokes.	144	116	42	40	34	3.79	Positive
2	Unwanted sexual remarks are common within the university environment.	138	122	36	44	36	3.75	Positive
3	Students receive unwanted sexually explicit messages through social media or digital platforms.	116	124	48	50	38	3.61	Positive
4	Online communication channels are frequently used to harass students sexually.	108	114	58	56	40	3.52	Positive
5	Students are exposed to sexually offensive images, gestures, or visual materials.	102	108	54	64	48	3.40	Positive
6	Visual displays with sexual content create discomfort among students.	98	110	52	68	48	3.38	Positive
7	Students experience unwanted physical contact of a sexual nature.	82	98	66	72	58	3.20	Positive
8	Incidents of physical sexual harassment occur within the university environment.	78	94	72	76	56	3.12	Positive

Source: Field Survey (2026) Grand Mean = 3.47

The result in table no 4 indicate that respondents generally perceive sexual harassment as prevalent within the university environment. Verbal and online forms of harassment recorded the highest weighted mean

scores, while physical harassment recorded comparatively lower scores. The grand mean of 3.47 suggests that sexual harassment remains a notable concern among students in the participating universities.

Research Question Two: How effective are institutional reporting mechanisms, and enforcement procedures in addressing sexual harassment in universities?

Table no 5. Institutional reporting and Responses to Sexual Harassment.

S/N	Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	WMS	Decision
1	The university has a clearly documented anti-sexual harassment policy.	56	82	48	104	86	2.78	Moderately Negative
2	University management demonstrates commitment to addressing sexual harassment through enforcements.	32	62	50	122	110	2.43	Negative
3	Students know where and how to report sexual harassment incidents.	48	78	52	108	90	2.70	Moderately Positive
4	Reporting channels are easily accessible.	36	70	50	116	104	2.52	Moderately Positive
5	Complaints are investigated fairly.	24	56	44	126	126	2.27	Negative
6	Perpetrators are appropriately sanctioned.	20	48	40	130	138	2.15	Negative
7	Students trust the reporting process.	16	44	38	134	144	2.08	Negative

Grand Mean = 2.42

The results indicate generally negative perceptions of institutional reporting mechanisms and responses to sexual harassment. While respondents were moderately aware of institutional policies (WMS = 2.78) and reporting channels (WMS = 2.70), they expressed low confidence in management commitment, the fairness of investigations, sanctions for perpetrators, and the reporting process. The grand mean of 2.42 suggests that institutional reporting and response mechanisms are perceived as largely ineffective in addressing sexual harassment.

Research Question Three: To what extent do universities fulfil their duty of care and accountability obligations in protecting students from sexual harassment?

Table no6. Universities' Duty of Care and Accountability.

S/N	Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	WMS	Decision
1	The university prioritizes student safety and well-being.	42	68	46	118	102	2.55	Moderately Agree
2	Students are protected from retaliation after reporting harassment.	22	48	44	126	136	2.19	Disagree
3	Confidentiality is maintained during investigations.	26	54	50	122	124	2.30	Disagree
4	Adequate support services are available for survivors.	32	58	48	116	122	2.37	Disagree
5	The university is accountable for addressing sexual harassment.	28	52	42	126	128	2.27	Disagree

Grand Mean = 2.34

The results indicate that respondents generally disagreed that universities adequately fulfil their duty of care and accountability obligations. The low grand mean of 2.34 suggests weaknesses in student protection, confidentiality, survivor support, and institutional accountability.

Research Question Four: 4. What strategies can strengthen institutional accountability and student protection in universities?

Table no 7: Strategies for Strengthening Accountability and Student Protection.

S/N	Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	WMS	Decision
1	Universities should establish confidential reporting systems.	182	134	24	20	16	4.19	Agree
2	Anti-retaliation measures should be strengthened.	178	138	22	22	16	4.17	Agree
3	Staff and students should receive regular training.	168	142	26	22	18	4.11	Agree
4	Independent monitoring mechanisms should be established.	164	140	28	24	20	4.07	Agree
5	Universities should publish annual accountability reports.	152	136	38	28	24	3.97	Agree

Grand Mean = 4.10

The results in table no 7 indicate strong support for measures aimed at strengthening institutional accountability and student protection. The high grand mean of 4.10 suggests that respondents overwhelmingly support reforms such as confidential reporting systems, anti-retaliation measures, regular training, and independent monitoring mechanisms.

Multiple Regression Results

Table no 8. Dependent Variable: Student Protection (SP)

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
Constant	0.874	0.291	3.004	0.003
Institutional Accountability (IA)	0.391	0.076	5.145	0.000
Policy Implementation (PI)	0.284	0.081	3.506	0.001
Reporting Mechanisms (RM)	0.219	0.073	3.000	0.003
Enforcement Procedures (EP)	0.332	0.078	4.256	0.000

Source: Eviews 23 output (2026)

Table no 9. Shows the Model Summary

Statistic	Value
R ²	0.736
Adjusted R ²	0.724
F-Statistic	63.482
Prob(F-Statistic)	0.000
Durbin-Watson Stat.	1.912

Source: Eviews 23 output (2026)

The regression results indicate that institutional accountability, policy implementation, reporting mechanisms, and enforcement procedures significantly influence student protection in universities. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.736$) indicates that approximately 73.6% of the variation in student protection is explained by the four institutional variables included in the model, while the remaining 26.4% is attributable to factors not captured in the study. The F-statistic of 63.482 ($p < 0.05$) indicates that the model is statistically significant and has strong explanatory power.

Institutional accountability emerged as the strongest predictor of student protection ($\beta = 0.391$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that improvements in accountability structures significantly enhance students' perceptions of safety and institutional responsiveness. Enforcement procedures ($\beta = 0.332$, $p < 0.001$) and policy implementation ($\beta = 0.284$, $p = 0.001$) also exert significant positive effects on student protection. Reporting mechanisms ($\beta = 0.219$, $p = 0.003$) were likewise significant, although their influence was comparatively lower. Furthermore, the Durbin-Watson statistic of 1.912 is close to 2.0, indicating the near absence of autocorrelation problems.

The positive coefficients indicate that improvements in accountability practices, policy implementation, reporting systems, and enforcement mechanisms are associated with corresponding improvements in student protection. The findings therefore demonstrate that the accountability gap identified in the study is not merely a governance concern but a significant determinant of student safety and well-being within universities.

Test of Hypotheses

The hypotheses formulated for this study were tested using the Chi-Square (χ^2) statistical technique at the 0.05 level of significance. The decision rule was to reject the null hypothesis where the calculated probability value (p-value) is less than 0.05.

Hypothesis One

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between institutional policies and the prevalence of sexual harassment in universities.

Table no 10. Test of the Relationship Between Policies and Prevalence of Sexual Harassment.

Test Statistic	Value
Chi-Square (χ^2)	32.417
Degrees of Freedom (df)	4
Probability (p-value)	0.000

Decision: Since the p-value (0.000) is less than 0.05

Since the p-value (0.000) is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected. The result indicates a significant relationship between institutional policies and the prevalence of sexual harassment in universities.

Hypothesis Two

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between reporting mechanisms and students' willingness to report sexual harassment incidents.

Table no 11. Test of Relationship Between Reporting Mechanisms and Reporting Behaviour.

Test Statistic	Value
Chi-Square (χ^2)	41.286
Degrees of Freedom (df)	4
Probability (p-value)	0.000

Decision: Since the p-value (0.000) is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected.

There is a significant relationship between reporting mechanisms and students' willingness to report sexual harassment incidents. Accessible, trusted, and confidential reporting channels increase the likelihood of reporting.

Hypothesis Three

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between universities' duty of care and accountability obligations and the protection of students from sexual harassment.

Table no12. Test of Relationship Between Universities' Duty of Care and Institutional Accountability.

Test Statistic	Value
Chi-Square (χ^2)	53.744
Degrees of Freedom (df)	4
Probability (p-value)	0.000

Decision: Since the p-value (0.000) is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected.

There is a significant relationship between institutional accountability, duty of care and student protection. Higher levels of accountability are associated with stronger student protection systems and greater confidence in institutional responses.

Hypothesis Four

H₀₄: There is no significant relationship between institutional accountability strategies and student protection in universities.

Table no 13. Test of Relationship Between Accountability Strategies and Student Protection.

Test Statistic	Value
Chi-Square (χ^2)	47.931
Degrees of Freedom (df)	4
Probability (p-value)	0.000

Decision: Since the p-value (0.000) is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected.

The Chi-Square test revealed a statistically significant relationship between institutional accountability strategies and student protection ($\chi^2 = 47.931$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$). Since the p-value (0.000) is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that institutional accountability strategies are significantly associated with student protection in universities. The finding suggests that strengthening accountability measures, including effective reporting systems, enforcement mechanisms, and institutional oversight, is likely to enhance the protection of students from sexual harassment.

Overall, the Chi-Square results demonstrate that institutional policies, reporting mechanisms, duty of care, and accountability strategies are all significantly associated with student protection and universities' responses to sexual harassment. These findings provide empirical support for the existence of an institutional accountability gap and underscore the need for stronger governance, policy implementation, and accountability mechanisms to enhance student safety.

IV. Discussion Of Findings

The study examined the accountability gap in universities' responses to sexual harassment, focusing on institutional policies, reporting mechanisms, enforcement procedures, and student protection systems. The findings reveal substantial weaknesses in universities' capacity to translate policy commitments into effective institutional action. Across the first three research questions, respondents expressed dissatisfaction with policy implementation, institutional responsiveness, reporting systems, and accountability mechanisms. The relatively low grand mean scores recorded for institutional policies and responses (WMS = 2.42), reporting and enforcement mechanisms (WMS = 2.34), and duty of care and accountability obligations (WMS = 2.34) indicate that students

generally perceive universities as falling short of their responsibilities in addressing sexual harassment. These findings suggest that the challenge confronting universities extends beyond the existence of sexual harassment to the effectiveness of institutional responses and accountability structures.

The findings relating to institutional policies and responses indicate that although anti-sexual harassment policies exist in some institutions, their implementation remains inconsistent and largely ineffective. While respondents moderately agreed that universities possess documented anti-sexual harassment policies (WMS = 2.78), they expressed dissatisfaction with management commitment to addressing sexual harassment (WMS = 2.43), prompt institutional response to complaints (WMS = 2.34), and the consistent implementation of policies (WMS = 2.24). The overall grand mean of 2.42 therefore suggests that policy frameworks have not translated into effective institutional action. These findings are consistent with previous research which states that anti-sexual harassment policies in Nigerian universities often exist without adequate implementation mechanisms⁸. Similarly, others observed that weak enforcement structures and limited institutional commitment undermine the effectiveness of existing legal and policy frameworks⁹. The findings further support a similar work on systematic review, which concluded that many higher education institutions have formal policies but face significant challenges in implementation and enforcement¹⁰. The implication is that policy adoption alone is insufficient unless accompanied by strong monitoring, institutional commitment, and accountability systems.

The findings further reveal weaknesses in reporting mechanisms and enforcement procedures. Although respondents demonstrated some awareness of reporting channels (WMS = 2.70) and accessibility of reporting mechanisms (WMS = 2.52), they expressed low confidence in the fairness of complaint investigations (WMS = 2.27), the appropriateness of sanctions imposed on perpetrators (WMS = 2.15), and overall trust in reporting systems (WMS = 2.08). The grand mean of 2.34 indicates that existing reporting and enforcement structures are generally perceived as ineffective and in a previous paper, it was reported that many students in Nigerian higher institutions avoid reporting incidents because of fears of retaliation, confidentiality breaches, and institutional inaction. Similar findings were reported by the Higher Education Authority which found that students often hesitate to report sexual misconduct due to limited confidence in institutional procedures and concerns regarding the outcomes of investigations. The present findings also align with another work whose review identified weak reporting systems and inadequate institutional responses as major contributors to underreporting¹¹. The consistently low WMS values recorded in this study suggest that students are unlikely to engage with reporting systems that they perceive as ineffective, unfair, or incapable of delivering justice.

The study further found that universities are perceived as falling short of their duty of care obligations. Respondents expressed concerns regarding protection from retaliation following complaints (WMS = 2.19), confidentiality during investigations (WMS = 2.30), availability of support services for survivors (WMS = 2.37), and institutional accountability (WMS = 2.27). Although respondents moderately agreed that universities prioritize student safety and well-being (WMS = 2.55), the overall grand mean of 2.34 indicates widespread dissatisfaction with institutional protection mechanisms. These findings provide empirical support for Institutional Betrayal Theory which argues that institutions can exacerbate the harm experienced by victims when they fail to provide adequate support and protection¹². It was also revealed in a study that students who perceived weak institutional support were less likely to report incidents and more likely to experience adverse psychological outcomes¹³. Likewise, another study reported that perceptions of institutional indifference significantly weakened trust in university authorities and reduced confidence in formal complaint procedures¹⁴. The findings of the present study therefore suggest that accountability failures may have implications not only for complaint resolution but also for institutional trust, student well-being, and perceptions of campus safety.

The regression analysis provides further evidence regarding the importance of institutional accountability in protecting students. The results showed that institutional accountability emerged as the strongest predictor of student protection ($\beta = 0.391$, $p < 0.001$), followed by enforcement procedures ($\beta = 0.332$, $p < 0.001$), policy implementation ($\beta = 0.284$, $p = 0.001$), and reporting mechanisms ($\beta = 0.219$, $p = 0.003$). The model explained approximately 73.6% of the variation in student protection ($R^2 = 0.736$), indicating strong explanatory power. These findings suggest that improvements in accountability structures, enforcement systems, and policy implementation were likely to result in significant improvements in student protection outcomes. Similarly, it was identified in another study that institutional climate, administrative responsiveness, and reporting structures were critical determinants of campus safety¹⁵. The findings therefore reinforce the argument that student protection is fundamentally dependent on institutional governance and accountability mechanisms.

The Chi-Square results further reinforce the study's findings by demonstrating statistically significant relationships between the key institutional variables and student protection outcomes. Specifically, institutional policies were found to be significantly associated with the prevalence of sexual harassment ($\chi^2 = 32.417$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that universities with stronger and better-implemented anti-sexual harassment policies are more likely to reduce the occurrence of sexual harassment and improve institutional responses. This finding supports the argument that the mere existence of policies is insufficient unless they are effectively implemented and monitored. The study established a significant relationship between reporting mechanisms and students'

willingness to report incidents of sexual harassment ($\chi^2 = 41.286, p < 0.001$). The result indicates that students are more likely to report harassment where reporting channels are accessible, confidential, and trusted.

Finally, respondents expressed overwhelming support for reforms designed to strengthen accountability and student protection. The highest ratings were recorded for the establishment of confidential reporting systems (WMS = 4.19), stronger anti-retaliation protections (WMS = 4.17), regular training programmes (WMS = 4.11), independent monitoring mechanisms (WMS = 4.07), and institutional accountability reporting (WMS = 3.97). The overall grand mean of 4.10 reflects strong consensus among respondents regarding the reforms required to improve institutional responses. These findings are consistent with recommendations advanced by UNESCO¹⁶ and the World Health Organization, both of which emphasize survivor-centred reporting systems, institutional transparency, and preventive education as critical components of effective responses to gender-based violence¹⁷. Another study corroborated and demonstrated that sustained institutional interventions and training programmes can improve reporting confidence, awareness, and organizational responsiveness¹⁸.

Overall, the findings reveal a significant accountability gap within universities' responses to sexual harassment. Although institutions may possess formal policies and reporting structures, weaknesses in implementation, enforcement, transparency, and student protection continue to undermine their effectiveness. The study therefore supports growing calls within the literature for universities to move beyond symbolic compliance and adopt robust accountability frameworks capable of protecting students, strengthening institutional trust, and fostering safer learning environments.

V. Conclusion

This study examined the accountability gap in universities' responses to sexual harassment, focusing on institutional policies, reporting mechanisms, enforcement procedures, and student protection systems. The findings revealed that although anti-sexual harassment policies exist in many universities, their implementation remains weak and inconsistent. Respondents expressed limited confidence in institutional responses, complaint-handling processes, enforcement mechanisms, and survivor protection measures. The study further found that universities are perceived as falling short of their duty of care obligations, particularly in relation to confidentiality, protection from retaliation, and support for complainants.

The regression results revealed that institutional accountability, policy implementation, reporting mechanisms, and enforcement procedures significantly influenced student protection, with institutional accountability emerging as the strongest predictor. These findings suggest that effective student protection depends not only on the existence of policies but also on the capacity of institutions to implement, enforce, and monitor them effectively. The study therefore concludes that sexual harassment in universities should be understood not only as an issue of individual misconduct but also as a challenge of institutional governance and accountability.

To address these challenges, universities should strengthen the implementation and monitoring of anti-sexual harassment policies, establish confidential and survivor-centred reporting systems, and ensure timely and impartial investigation of complaints. Institutions should also provide adequate support services for survivors, strengthen anti-retaliation protections, and implement regular training programmes for staff and students. Furthermore, independent oversight mechanisms and periodic accountability reporting should be introduced to enhance transparency and institutional responsibility. Regulatory agencies should incorporate student protection and accountability indicators into university quality assurance and accreditation frameworks.

The findings should be interpreted considering certain limitations- That the study relied on self-reported perceptions from students in selected universities and may not fully represent all higher education institutions. Future research may expand the scope of inquiry by incorporating additional institutions and the perspectives of university administrators, policymakers, and other stakeholders involved in sexual harassment prevention and response.

Acknowledgements:

1. This research was supported by Africa-UniNet, through funding from the Austrian Federal Ministry of Women, Science and Research (BMFWF) and implemented by OeAD. We are grateful for the support.
2. The authors also thank Prof. Lawrence Ezemonye, Prof. Evelyn Umemezia, Prof. Theresa Claes, Dr. Esther Amoako, Dr. Olusoji Popoola and Dr. Kiapene Zidiegaha for their contributions to the fieldwork and stakeholders' engagement.

AI Use Declaration: ChatGPT was used solely to improve the grammar and readability of this manuscript. All content was reviewed, verified, and approved by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final version.

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