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Sexual Harassment and Academic Engagement of Female Students in Higher Education Institutions in Nigeria

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Abstract

Sexual harassment in higher education has become an increasingly global concern with significant implications for students' well-being and academic success. This study explored the impact of sexual harassment (SH) on the academic engagement of female students in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Nigeria. Specifically, the study examined (1) the forms and contexts of SH experienced by female students and (2) analysed how these experiences influence their academic engagement across the cognitive, affective, and behavioural domains. The normalisation of gender-based violence (GBV), toxic academic masculinity, a culture of silence, and a lack of active leadership were identified as key features that enable SH in HEIs and contribute to academic disengagement among female students. A qualitative phenomenological case study design using in-depth interviews was employed for data collection, and students' narratives were thematically analysed. The findings revealed that SH significantly undermines students' academic engagement across all domains. Participants reported reduced emotional connection to learning (affective), withdrawal from academic activities (behavioural), and difficulties with concentration, comprehension, and task completion (cognitive). These challenges manifested as reluctance to participate in class discussions, difficulty completing assignments and

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presentations, fear, loss of motivation, and negative perceptions of the academic environment, including relationships with lecturers and peers. The study further shows that institutional factors such as weak reporting mechanisms, fear of stigmatisation, and prolonged complaint procedures function as structural barriers that discourage reporting and reinforce silence. Consequently, legal action against perpetrators was rarely pursued. Generally, the study indicates that sexual harassment operates not only as an experience but also as a structural constraint on students' ability to engage meaningfully with their education. It shows the need for institutional reforms that promote safe learning environments, strengthen reporting systems, and support affected students' academic recovery.

Keywords: Sexual Harassment, Academic Engagement, Gender-based violence, Higher Education, Nigeria

Introduction

Sexual harassment (SH) is a prevalent problem in universities, particularly in Nigeria, with female students being most vulnerable. SH is unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, verbal or physical behaviour, or gestures of a sexual nature that cause offence or humiliation, leading to an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment (UN Women, 2013; Harassment Policy, 2016). It is a harmful intrusion into the educational sphere that goes beyond academic discourse. It appears as unwelcome, objectionable, and often threatening behaviour that undermines students' well-being (Burn, 2019). In Nigeria, there are SH laws (though not implemented) in different states, in addition to the Constitution, which recognises these rights as sacred and requires all persons to respect them. In most cases of SH, victims' fundamental human rights (the right to dignity of the human person (Section 34) and the right to freedom from discrimination (Section 42) are threatened and violated (Action for Justice, Nigeria 2024). SH is viewed as a pervasive problem in educational settings that can negatively affect students' learning.

Globally, 27% of partnered women of reproductive age (15-49 years old) are estimated to have experienced sexual intimate partner violence at least once in their lifetime. The global prevalence rate of SH among female university students is 37% (Smith & Sinclair, 2002). Research has confirmed high rates of SH in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and research organisations, characterised by precarious working conditions and hierarchical relations between employees and students, as well as a culture that normalises GBV and silences the phenomenon (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020).

In developing countries, the prevalence of GBV appears to be higher than in developed countries. For instance, in Sub-Saharan Africa, the

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prevalence is high, exceeding 50% in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa (Workye, Mekonnen, Wedaje & Sitot, 2023). One in three students in HEIs (30.6%) have experienced sexual assault at least once in their lifetime (Blaker, 2022).

For SH on campus, universities are expected to ensure a just and timely response and to take action to prevent these harms. Many of the instances of SH and sexual assault that impacted people most, as reported in the 2021 survey, happened in settings such as lectures and classes, libraries, clubs, events, and student accommodation (Blaker, 2022).

While SH is high in Africa compared with developed countries, it seems to be higher in Nigeria, most likely due to a harsh economic situation and poor leadership, which adversely affect lecturers and leave the majority of the youth, comprising 60% of the population, unemployed and depressed. A recent study on SH among students in HEIs in Ogun State, Nigeria, revealed that SH was the most frequently reported form of GBV among students (Ojeniyi & Moronkola, 2023). In Nigeria, SH is a major problem for many students. A 2018 World Bank survey reported that 70% of female graduates from Nigerian tertiary institutions had been sexually harassed in school by fellow students and lecturers. In addition, a study found that women are more at risk of sexual violence and harassment than men. Furthermore, any form of GBV is systematically associated with feeling less safe, feeling unwell, and lower work productivity or study performance, especially for women and non-binary people (Humbert et al., 2022). A survey found that 34.2% of 160 Nigerian students reported SH as the most prevalent form of GBV (Ugah, 2023). The impact of SH on students' learning experience is substantial. Studies show that university students who have experienced SH report serious impacts on their well-being and are vulnerable to psychological distress, substance abuse, depression, anger, low life satisfaction, and physical illnesses (Rospenda et al., 2000; Buchanan et al., 2009; Jirek & Saunders, 2018). Another study found that SH can create a hostile learning environment, making it difficult for students to feel safe and comfortable engaging in class discussions and other school activities (Fitzgerald, Gelfand & Drasgow, 1995; Berdahl & Moore, 2007). This can lead to decreased participation and engagement in class, as well as lower grades and academic achievement (Fitzgerald et al., 1995). Students' poor academic achievement could be attributed to many factors, especially an unconducive learning environment, such as that caused by SH. It was stated that sexually abused students report limited academic engagement, low academic achievement, as well as a generalised sense of insecurity in the school environment (Athanasiades, Stamovlasis, Touloupis, & Charalambous, 2023).

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Concepts

Students' academic engagement (SAE) is an important construct that helps explain students' behaviour in the teaching-learning process. SAE can be seen as the glue that holds together all aspects of student learning and growth, making teaching more fun, engaging, and rewarding, and having a critical impact on students. When students are in a safe, violence-free environment, have a good relationship with their lecturers and classmates, and feel a sense of belonging to their school (emotional engagement), they may be more likely to participate in class discussions and activities (behavioural engagement), which might lead to a stronger commitment and investment in their learning (cognitive engagement) (Sutton, 2021).

Academic engagement is "the quality and quantity of students' participation or connection with the educational endeavour and hence with activities, values, individuals, aims, and place that comprise it" (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009, p. 495). It is the degree to which students are 'connected' to their academic activities and to what is going on in their classes (Adimora, Ngwoke, Oyeoku & Onwuka, 2016). SAE is multidimensional, encompassing behavioural, emotional, and cognitive types. Behavioural engagement is students' involvement in academic and extracurricular activities, including effort, persistence, attention, asking questions, participation, following rules, and the absence of disruptive behaviours. Affective/emotional engagement is students' attitudes towards their school, classroom, classmates, and teachers, such as boredom, happiness, sadness, anxiety, a sense of belonging, and liking or disliking school. Cognitive engagement involves participation in academic and extracurricular activities, thoughtfulness and a willingness to master difficult skills such as self-regulation, a preference for challenge and hard work, going beyond requirements, efforts to master new knowledge and skills, and the use of learning strategies (Sutton, 2021). It is imperative to understand that students' academic engagement significantly affects their academic achievement, and that high academic engagement can lead to high self-esteem, likely because students' belief in themselves leads them to think that their activities could lead to better academic achievement (Ayenew et al., 2014).

SH, an unpleasant behaviour, is responsible for many negative consequences for the victim's social, psychological, physical, and academic aspects. Studies have emphasised the adverse effects of SH on students' academic engagement. For instance, in schools, men devalue women by drawing attention to their sexuality, which eventually erodes their self-esteem. Research has shown that females who have been sexually harassed reported experiencing embarrassment, feeling self-conscious, and feeling less sure or less confident in themselves (Ayenew & Gebremeskal, 2014).

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The phenomenon causes victims' irritation, frustration, anxiety, stress, and trauma. The negative academic consequences include students avoiding school, experiencing low academic performance, losing interest in education or extracurricular activities, and showing insufficient dedication to academic life. Regrettably, SH policies in Nigerian HEIs are neither comprehensive nor implemented (Konlan & Dangah, 2023). These findings indicate the negative consequences of SH on learning activities, and the study has specifically examined the impact across three distinct domains. The findings of this study and previous related studies provide clarity on the negative consequences of SH for victims.

Research Method

The study utilised a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of female students who were victims of sexual harassment (SH) within Nigerian higher education institutions (HEIs) and their coping mechanisms. The goal was to understand the emotional, behavioural, and cognitive impact of SH on academic engagement and well-being. Semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs) were employed because they were deemed beneficial for capturing respondents' perspectives and maintaining the research focus (Morris, 2021). This approach gave the researchers the opportunity to engage closely with the research participants. Experienced and well-trained research assistants assisted with data collection. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with direct experience of SH in academic settings. They received three days of data collection training, which covered confidentiality and privacy, interview and focus group techniques, and opportunities for the team to rehearse administering interviews, focus groups, and other study procedures. Using purposive sampling, 32 participants (14 undergraduate and 18 postgraduate students) who voluntarily gave their consent participated in the study. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 45 years. Fourteen female students from various Nigerian universities who had personally experienced SH shared their lived experiences. Snowball sampling was also used to identify additional participants through referrals. There were currently enrolled undergraduates and postgraduate students willing to speak about their experiences with SH. An in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interview guide that allowed participants to freely narrate their experiences was used. Informed consent, confidentiality, and emotional support provisions were ensured. Pseudonyms or participant numbers (e.g., Participant 5) were used to anonymise data.

Open-ended guidelines were used during the IDIs. The participants were made aware of the discussion theme and arranged in groups in a private setting to ensure their safety and freedom to share their views on sensitive topics. The questions that guided the study included i) What are the female

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students' experiences of SH? (ii) What is the impact of SH on female students' academic engagement? The moderator guided the discussion and encouraged each participant to contribute, ensuring a respectful interaction. Each group shared non-confidential experiences during the interview session and was given the opportunity to write down any confidential experiences of sexual harassment they might like to share.

During data collection, interviewers received regular feedback from senior research assistants on their facilitation techniques and the use of the exercises. We also held a review meeting midway through data collection to reflect on our findings and experiences and to adjust data collection as needed.

Participants who consented to an interview also participated in a session to share their experiences. The interview session and the paper-based responses from those who opted for anonymity were recorded. The project coordinator oversaw and verified the completeness and accuracy of the data. The research assistants regularly reviewed progress and communicated any problems during data collection. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the interviewers in English within a week of data collection. Transcripts were read and re-read to gain an in-depth understanding of the content. Meaningful units of text were highlighted and assigned descriptive codes.

Codes included fear of failure, coerced consent, isolation, loss of concentration, academic withdrawal, emotional trauma, reporting barriers, etc. Codes were grouped into broader themes, such as: Abuse of power and authority; Emotional and cognitive trauma; Disruption of academic engagement; Fear, silence, and stigma; Institutional failure and distrust.

Themes were refined by comparing them with the raw data to ensure they reflected participants' lived experiences. Overlapping or ambiguous themes were merged or split as appropriate. The final themes were clearly defined and supported by participant quotes. Each theme captured aspects of students' affective, behavioural, and cognitive academic engagement. The themes were woven into a coherent narrative, supported by rich, illustrative quotations from participants.

Results

Forms and Contexts of Sexual Harassment in HEIs

The findings indicate that sexual harassment (SH) is pervasive within higher education institutions (HEIs) in Nigeria and disproportionately affects female students. Participants reported a wide spectrum of experiences, including unwanted touching, verbal harassment, coercion, sexual assault, and rape. These incidents frequently occurred in both public (e.g., lecture halls) and private (e.g., offices, secluded campus locations) spaces, reflecting the normalisation of harassment across institutional contexts.

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Unwanted physical contact and public harassment were particularly prevalent in crowded settings. One participant described repeated experiences of invasive touching and persistent staring in lecture rooms, which created anxiety and a persistent sense of insecurity (Participant 1). Such accounts illustrate how everyday academic environments can become sites of vulnerability.

Abuse of Power and Coercion

A dominant theme across the data is the abuse of institutional power, particularly by lecturers who leveraged their authority to demand sexual or financial compliance. These interactions were often framed as conditions for academic success, including passing courses or receiving supervision.

For example, one participant reported being coerced into paying money under threat of failure after resisting a lecturer's advances (Participant 2). Another described repeated course failure following refusal of sexual demands, resulting in prolonged academic delay (Participant 3). These cases demonstrate how power asymmetries within HEIs enable exploitation and constrain students' ability to resist or report abuse.

In some instances, harassment extended into manipulative and exploitative relationships. One participant recounted being deceived into a relationship under false promises of marriage, which resulted in pregnancy, withdrawal from university, and long-term disruption to her educational and life trajectory (Participant 6).

Fear, Silence, and Institutional Constraints

Fear of retaliation, stigma, and institutional inaction emerged as key factors sustaining underreporting. Participants frequently described remaining silent due to threats to their academic progress, disbelief from family or authorities, or fear of social consequences.

One participant explained how threats of admission withdrawal and lack of familial support forced her into prolonged silence and exploitation (Participant 9). Similarly, another participant's attempt to report harassment resulted in a delayed institutional response, leading to the loss of an academic year (Participant 7). These experiences indicate systemic barriers to reporting and reinforce cultures of silence within HEIs.

Long-Term Psychological Trauma and Academic Disengagement

Beyond immediate experiences, SH had enduring psychological and academic consequences. Participants reported long-term psychological consequences, including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and persistent trauma, often extending beyond graduation.

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For instance, one participant described long-term psychological distress and reduced academic performance following repeated harassment and academic failure (Participant 8). Another noted that traumatic experiences continued to affect emotional stability, interpersonal relationships, and concentration years later (Participant 10).

Disruption of Academic Engagement

The findings further show that SH significantly undermines students' academic engagement across affective, behavioural, and cognitive domains, often in interconnected ways.

- *Affective engagement* was compromised by fear, anxiety, and emotional detachment, reducing students' sense of safety and belonging.
- *Behavioural engagement* was disrupted through avoidance of classes, withdrawal from group activities, and delayed or discontinued studies. For example, one participant described avoiding academic interactions and experiencing declining performance due to trauma (Participant 12).
- *Cognitive engagement* was impaired by intrusive memories and emotional distress, which affected concentration, comprehension, and academic performance. One participant explicitly linked depressive symptoms to disrupted learning and memory (Participant 13). These interconnected effects indicate that SH not only affects immediate experiences but also undermines long-term academic development and achievement. In more severe cases, trauma led to social withdrawal and isolation, further limiting opportunities for collaborative learning and intellectual development (Participant 14).

Fear, Silence, and Underreporting

A cross-cutting theme is the culture of silence surrounding sexual harassment, driven by fear of retaliation, stigma, and institutional inaction. Participants expressed reluctance to report incidents due to threats of academic failure, disbelief from authority figures, or potential social consequences. This silence not only perpetuates abuse but also exacerbates its long-term psychological and academic effects.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that sexual harassment in Nigerian HEIs operates as both an interpersonal violation and a structural issue embedded within institutional power relations. By integrating participants' lived experiences with existing literature, the study shows how SH

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systematically undermines academic engagement and long-term educational outcomes.

First, the prevalence of coercion and abuse of authority reinforces existing evidence that power asymmetries within academic systems facilitate exploitation (Adetunji, 2020; Ajuwon et al., 2011). Unlike incidental harassment, the cases reported in this study reveal deliberate strategies by lecturers to condition academic success on compliance. This shifts SH from individual misconduct to a mechanism of control in which students' educational trajectories are directly manipulated.

Second, the findings extend prior research by demonstrating the long-term and cumulative nature of psychological harm. Consistent with Kamal and Tariq (2020), participants reported anxiety, depression, and emotional detachment. However, this study further shows that such effects are not confined to the period of victimisation but persist over time, influencing post-graduation well-being, interpersonal relationships, and self-concept. This suggests the need to conceptualise SH as a chronic developmental disruption, rather than a discrete event.

Third, the disruption of behavioural engagement aligns with previous studies linking SH to withdrawal from academic participation (Fawole et al., 2002; Mamaru et al., 2015). However, the present findings add nuance by illustrating how disengagement is often strategic rather than passive. Students actively avoid spaces, individuals, or activities perceived as unsafe. This indicates that disengagement can function as a protective mechanism, albeit one that compromises academic progress.

Cognitively, the findings support existing literature on trauma and learning (Campbell et al., 2009; Sarpong & Osei-Tutu, 2014), showing that intrusive memories and emotional distress impair concentration, comprehension, and memory. Importantly, this study shows that these cognitive disruptions accumulate over time, contributing to long-term academic underperformance and diminished intellectual confidence.

The study also provides critical insight into the role of institutional failure. Consistent with Bennet (2009) and Nwaduru (2020), participants described delayed responses, lack of confidentiality, and fear of retaliation. These institutional gaps not only discourage reporting but also legitimise abusive practices by signalling a lack of accountability. Thus, SH persists not only because of individual perpetrators but also because of systemic inaction and weak governance structures.

Finally, the coping strategies identified, such as avoidance, silence, and emotional suppression, reflect Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) coping framework, which distinguished two basic coping categories, the problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, as responses aimed at "managing or altering the problem causing the distress" and "regulating emotional responses

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to the problem," respectively (Lazarus & Folkman, p. 150). However, while these strategies may offer short-term psychological relief, they often exacerbate long-term academic and emotional outcomes. This tension shows the need for institutional interventions that move beyond individual coping to structural support systems.

Implications for Institutional Response

The findings suggest the urgent need for coordinated institutional interventions that address both prevention and support. SH not only creates hostile learning environments but also functions as a structural barrier to academic engagement, undermining equity and inclusivity within HEIs. Weak reporting systems, delayed responses, and lack of accountability erode trust and discourage disclosure, reinforcing cycles of silence and victimisation (Konlan & Dangah, 2023). To address these challenges, institutions must implement confidential, non-retaliatory reporting mechanisms and ensure timely, transparent responses to complaints. Accessible psychological support services are essential to address trauma, while targeted academic accommodations such as flexible deadlines, mentoring, and learning support can help affected students re-engage academically.

Importantly, SH disrupts academic engagement across affective, behavioural, and cognitive domains. Emotional distress reduces students' sense of belonging (affective), avoidance behaviours limit participation (behavioural), and trauma-related cognitive impairments hinder concentration and learning (cognitive). Without institutional intervention, these interconnected effects can lead to prolonged academic disruption, including poor performance and extended study duration.

Addressing SH, therefore, requires systemic reform, including the enforcement of comprehensive policies, staff training, and accountability structures. Such measures are critical not only for student protection but also for restoring the conditions necessary for meaningful academic engagement and success.

Major Findings and Thematic Structure

Theme	Subthemes	Participants
Abuse of Power and Coercion	Threats to academic success, forced relationships, and manipulation.	Participant 5 accepted a relationship under duress to avoid project failure
Emotional and Cognitive Trauma	Depression, anxiety, memory loss, and academic detachment.	Participant 13 reported depressive symptoms affecting cognition and academic output
Fear, Silence, and Stigma	Non-disclosure, fear of retaliation, internalised blame	

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		Participant 9 remained silent due to disbelief from family and fear of losing admission
Disruption of Academic Engagement	Affective, behavioural, and cognitive disengagement.	Participant 11 could not focus on studying due to recurring trauma memories
Isolation and Withdrawal	Avoidance of peers, poor participation, and loss of confidence.	Participant 12 avoided group work and had declining academic performance
Institutional Neglect	Delayed justice, lack of support structures, and policy gaps.	Participant 7 lost a year waiting for the university to assign a new supervisor.

Analytical Framework

Academic Engagement (Interpretation of findings through the lens of the three academic engagement domains)

Engagement	Definition	Effect of SH
Affective Engagement	Emotional investment in learning (motivation, sense of belonging).	Anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, fear, and spiritual disconnection.
Behavioral Engagement	Participation in academic tasks, group work, and class attendance.	Class avoidance, reduced group participation, and withdrawal from studies.
Cognitive Engagement	Attention, effort in learning, and critical thinking.	Memory disruption, inability to concentrate, reduced comprehension.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that SH in Nigerian HEIs has pervasive and detrimental effects on students' academic engagement across the affective, behavioural, and cognitive domains.

Abuse of power and faculty coercion were recurring themes. Lecturers used their authority to pressure students into sexual relationships, often linking compliance to academic progression. This aligns with earlier research highlighting how power asymmetries in academic settings enable sexual exploitation (Adetunji, 2020; Ajuwon et al., 2011). Such coercion fostered fear and strategic silence, as students prioritised safety and academic survival over confrontation.

SH negatively affected affective engagement, with students reporting anxiety, depression, anger, and emotional detachment from academic life. These emotional consequences align with findings from Kamal & Tariq (2020), who noted that victims of SH in academic contexts often experience

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long-term psychological distress that undermines their academic motivation and sense of belonging.

Thirdly, behavioural disengagement was common. Many students avoided classes, skipped lectures, and disengaged from group activities, consistent with previous studies showing a correlation between SH and withdrawal from academic participation (Fawole et al., 2002; Mamaru et al., 2015). Some students even dropped out or extended their studies due to repeated victimisation or to avoid harassers.

Cognitively, victims experienced difficulty concentrating, poor academic performance, and reduced cognitive functioning, consistent with the literature on trauma's effects on learning (Campbell et al., 2009; Sarpong & Osei-Tutu, 2014). Intrusive memories and emotional exhaustion impaired students' ability to engage meaningfully with academic tasks.

Moreover, institutional responses were described as inadequate and unsupportive. Many students avoided reporting due to fear of retaliation, disbelief, or procedural delays. This aligns with previous critiques of institutional cultures that prioritise reputation over survivor protection (Bennet, 2009; Nwaduru, 2020). The absence of clear, confidential, and responsive grievance systems further exacerbated victims' sense of vulnerability.

Lastly, students used various coping strategies, including emotional suppression, seeking social support, prayer, and denial. These strategies align with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Theory of coping, which holds that individuals manage stress through both emotion-focused and avoidance strategies.

Recommendation

- Implementation of trauma-informed counselling services.
- Establishment of anonymous, safe reporting mechanisms.
- Reform of sexual harassment policies and the enforcement of accountability.
- Provision of academic accommodations for sexual harassment survivors.

Conclusion

SH in Nigerian HEIs is not only an individual experience but a structural phenomenon that undermines academic engagement across affective, behavioural, and cognitive domains. At the affective level, SH erodes students' sense of safety and belonging, replacing it with fear, anxiety, and mistrust. Behaviourally, students adopt survival strategies, including avoidance, withdrawal, or coerced compliance, which, while protective in the short term, ultimately reinforce disengagement from academic life.

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Crucially, the findings show that cognitive engagement is not only impaired by trauma but constrained by institutional failure. Weak reporting systems, fear of retaliation, and delayed responses create conditions that limit students' ability to concentrate, learn, and perform academically. In this sense, institutional inaction operates as a systemic barrier that paralyses learning processes, rather than merely a contextual factor.

By linking lived experiences to the academic engagement framework, this study demonstrates how power relations and institutional structures shape educational outcomes. Addressing SH, therefore, requires not only supporting affected students but also implementing structural reforms that restore safe conditions for meaningful academic engagement and long-term success.

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Conflict of Interest: The authors have no conflict of interest to report.

Data Availability: The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author, due to privacy and ethical restrictions. The data are not publicly accessible because they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants. Our policy is to share data on request.

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