

Awareness and Perception on Sexism amongst students in the University of Calabar: Counselling implications

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Abstract

This study which adopted a survey design was situated in the University of Calabar. It was aimed at establishing the level of awareness of the undergraduates on sexism and their perception of what constitutes sexism, amongst others. The population included 23,576 students in year I to IV in the 2017/18 academic session in the University of Calabar while a sample of 500 students were chosen through multi stage sampling technique. The instrument for data gathering was a questionnaire titled Sexism Awareness and Perception Questionnaire (SAPQ), whose reliability was established as 0.75, and was appropriately validated. The generated data was analysed using mean, standard deviation and t-test. The findings of the study indicated moderate level of awareness on sexism; and no significant difference on the level of awareness on sexism between the first year undergraduates and other years of study. The study also established making condescending remarks, or inferring that females are not suited for a particular thing, work or office; mistreating, slighting or ignoring someone as a result of one's gender; amongst others, as constituents of sexism. While the findings of the study indicated no significant difference, based on gender, on what constitute sexism; there however was significant difference on what constitute sexism between the first year undergraduates and other years of study. Recommendations were therefore made to the stakeholders with a view to reducing sexist practices in the university system.

Keywords: sexism, awareness, perception, sexist, counselling, universities

Introduction

There had been an increasing focus of academics on sexual harassment. This had been largely due to the awareness on this social problem and the established negative impacts it has on both the individual victims and the organizations where the victims and the perpetrators serve (Abe, 2012; Taiwo, Omole & Omole, 2014). There is however another very damaging social problem called sexism which does not seem to get the deserved attention. Though the women are generally acknowledged to be the target and victims of sexist treatment, Horowitz (1997) believes that the men also suffer from the practice of sexism. Going by the argument of Horowitz, sexism hurts everyone in the society either directly or remotely. This justifies the need for awareness to be created on this social ill with a view to reducing, if not completely eradicating, its presence. This serves as a justification for the present study.

According to the Britannica Encyclopedia, sexism is a prejudiced view that one sex is naturally superior or more valuable than the other sex. There is no denying the fact that a society where such belief holds sway is likely to witness a lot of instability. For instance, such view is capable of affecting the success of marital relationship if a baby born in such marital home is not the preferred sex. In a study on Male Preference and Marital Stability in Cross River State, South South Nigeria, Igbolo and Gyong (2014) reported that there was “strong preference for male children” mostly on the part of the female participants in the study. The reason for such strong preference was established to be the stability of their marriage. The female participants in the study are conscious of the fact that giving birth to male children will help to stabilize their marriage, while giving birth to female children may have negative implications for their marital homes. There is no gainsaying the fact that where the family is unstable, then the society would be affected. This makes it a necessity to tackle sexism in the society as it is capable of creating problems.

Awareness to a problem is usually a good starting point to remedying such problem. Therefore, for sexism as a social ill to be tackled, there must be reasonable awareness on its existence, meaning, nature, scope and undesirability. The present study sought to establish the level of awareness of the undergraduates to this concept. With respect to the nature and scope of the concept, the study also sought to establish the perception of the undergraduates on what constitutes sexism. This is because of the seeming absence of unanimously accepted specifications of what constitute sexism. An action that is considered as offensive and sexist by one person may be considered a joke and non-sexist by another person. Such confusion on what actually constitutes sexism may hinder enactment of policies on the menace, and may also hamper the victims of sexist treatment from reporting their experiences or seeking for redress.

Additionally, the categorization of sexism into benevolent and hostile does not help the situation of properly identifying what sexism really is. This categorization refers to the ambivalent nature of sexism which implies that some aspects of sexism are considered as good and tolerable while others are bad and unacceptable. Hostile sexism is the obvious sexist disposition which is a prejudice against a particular sex, usually the female sex. It usually aims at preserving male dominance by degrading the female sex (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Goh, Rad & Hall, 2016). Glick and Fiske (1996) define benevolent sexism as interrelated sexist attitudes toward women which view them stereotypically and in restricted roles but which have positive feeling towards them. Example of benevolent sexism is seeing a woman as a dependent to a man who is considered as the provider; or seeing women as charming but weak thus in need of not just men's admiration but also protection. Glick (2013) argues that the so-called benevolent sexism is harmful to the women in various ways including draining the personal ambitions of women and their resistance to inequality, justifying hostile sexism, amongst others. While Glick and Fiske (1996) were quick to point out that they "do not consider benevolent sexism a good thing," other researchers have also commented on the "Insidious Dangers of Benevolent Sexism" (Jost & Kay, 2005; Dardenne, Dumont & Bollier, 2007; Godsil, Tropp, Goff, Powell & MacFarlane, 2016). This has further strengthened the need to establish what is perceived as constituting sexism, which is the focus of the present study.

Just like in many other nations, sexism is an issue of concern in Nigeria. Ajayi (2007) opined that "sexism has become a major problematique in Nigerian politics" but was quick to add that sexism in Nigeria is not restricted to the political sphere alone. Mmadike (2014) averred that male domination over the female is sustained by sexist proverbs in Igbo, a major ethnic group in Nigeria. The author further added that the use of such proverbs contributes in no small measure to "shaping and sustaining the cultural biases of the male against the female in the Igbo patriarchal society." These are indications of the pervasiveness of sexism in Nigeria.

Researchers have conducted studies on sexism and related concepts. Eyo and Obot (2017) had investigated incidence of sexism amongst undergraduates in Nigerian Universities. The study indicated that the incidence of sexism in Nigerian universities is high. This reported high incidence seems a confirmation of a report by Osezua and Agbalajobi (2016) who conducted a Qualitative Study of Gender Issues Associated with Academic Mentoring in a Nigerian University and reported fear of stigmatization for having a male as an academic model, "unfriendly gender policies, and work environment that will not cater for women's needs (especially those in their reproductive age)" as some of the challenges faced by female academics. The findings of Eyo and Obot (2017) also established that the experiences of the students

on the incidence of sexism differ significantly based on gender, area of specialization and age. These established differences may have been caused by the lack of unanimity in what constitutes sexism. The study by Eyo and Obot (2017) also identified creating awareness on what constitutes sexism, amongst others, as a potent strategy for checkmating the incidence of sexism in universities. This serves as a further justification for the present study which sought to establish what constitute sexism as perceived by the undergraduates.

Ifegbesan (2010) investigated the gender-stereotyped beliefs and perception of secondary school teachers' in classroom practices. The findings of the study indicated that "majority of the teachers held gender-stereotypes and are guilty of gender-stereotypes practices in schools" and that teachers are unaware that they hold biased perceptions against the sexes. The author also reported findings of the study as indicating significant difference between gender stereotype belief, attitude and practices of the teachers based on sex, school location, school type, marital status of the teachers, educational qualification etc. In a study that sought, amongst other things, to establish the influence of independent variables like gender, ethnicity, religion, year of study etc on Students' Perception of Women from Developing Countries, Omisere (2015) reported that individual's perception of women is statistically different based on sex; and that year of study influence respondents' perception of women. These reviewed studies are pertinent to the present study which sought to establish the level of awareness and perception of undergraduates on what constitutes sexism, and the influence of some independent variables on the level of awareness and perception of sexism.

Research questions

1. What is the level of awareness of undergraduates on the concept of sexism?
2. How does the level of awareness of the first year undergraduates on the concept of sexism differ from the other years of study?
3. What is the perception of the undergraduates on what constitute sexism?
4. How does the perception of the undergraduates on what constitute sexism differ based on gender?
5. How does the perception of the first year undergraduates, on what constitute sexism, differ from the other years of study?

Research hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference in the mean scores of the level of awareness on the concept of sexism between the first year undergraduates and other years of study.
2. There is no significant difference, based on gender, on the mean scores of what constitute sexism.

3. There is no significant difference in the mean scores of what constitute sexism between the first year undergraduates and other years of study.

Research methodology

This study which adopted a survey design was situated in the University of Calabar. The population included 23,576 students in year I to IV in the 2017/18 academic session. 500 students were chosen as the sample of the study through multi stage sampling technique. The sample was purposefully selected from the Faculties of Arts, Education, Management Science, Social Sciences and Sciences, because these faculties ran a 4 year degree programmes. 25 students were then randomly selected from each year of study in each faculty. This implies a total of 100 students per faculty, thus 500 students from the five faculties.

A questionnaire titled Sexism Awareness and Perception Questionnaire (SAPQ) was developed by the researchers for data collection. The SAPQ had sections A and B. Demographic information about the respondents was gathered through Section A while section B was a 31 item section which elicited data used for answering the research questions. The section B was further divided into parts I and II. Part I had 13 items which sought to establish the level of awareness of the undergraduates on the concept of sexism. Part II had 18 items which aimed at identifying the perception of the undergraduates on what constitutes sexism. This instrument was validated by two counsellor educators and a Measurement and Evaluation expert, all from the University of Calabar. The reliability of the SAPQ was established by administering the instrument to 25 undergraduates from two other faculties which were not part of the faculties used for the study. Using Cronbach statistics, 0.75 was established as the reliability of the SAPQ. The instrument had a four point Likert-type response options. Part I had Highly Aware, Moderately Aware, Low Awareness and No Awareness as its options, with scoring 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively; while part II had Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree with scoring 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively.

The method of data collection was direct delivery/self administered technique, which involved the researchers administering the SAPQ directly on the respondents. The generated data was analysed using mean, standard deviation and t-test. Mean and standard deviation were utilized in answering the research questions while t-test was used in testing the three hypotheses. In deciding on the level of awareness, the mean score of each item and the cluster mean were compared with the real limit of numbers. If the mean scores fell between 0.50 and 1.49, it indicated no awareness, 1.50 – 2.49 implied low awareness, 2.50 – 3.49 meant moderate awareness while 3.50 – 4.49 indicated high awareness. In deciding on what constitutes sexism, the mean score was compared with a criterion value of 2.50; any score that was 2.50 and

below indicated rejection of such item as constituting sexism, while a mean score above the criterion value indicated acceptance.

Presentation and discussion of Results

Research questions 1: What is the level of awareness of undergraduates on the concept of sexism?

Table 1: The mean and standard deviation on the level of awareness of undergraduates on the concept of sexism

S/N	DESCRIPTION	N	\bar{X}	SD	DECISION
1	I have heard about sexism	459	3.32	0.79	Moderate
2	I know that sexism involves every discriminatory remarks, treatment or practice against the opposite sex	459	3.41	0.71	Moderate
3	I am aware that making comments like “that is how men are” or “she is only a woman” constitute sexist’s remarks	459	3.42	0.76	Moderate
4	I am aware that every form of sexual harassment constitutes sexism	459	2.87	1.08	Moderate
5	I am aware that any remarks or action that makes someone to feel ashamed, uncomfortable or humiliated because of the person’s gender amount to sexism	459	3.37	0.82	Moderate
6	I am aware that picking on someone, attempting to frustrate the person’s effort or to victimize the person because of one’s gender is an aspect of sexism	459	3.16	1.00	Moderate
7	I am aware that being unfair to someone because of one’s gender amount to sexism	459	3.38	0.91	Moderate
8	I am aware that whistling, laughing at or making derogatory remarks about someone because of one’s gender constitutes sexism	459	2.90	1.14	Moderate
9	I am aware that objectification of men/women (regarding men/women as sexual objects) is an aspect of sexism	459	2.91	1.12	Moderate
10	I am aware that seeing the kitchen as the women’s office is an aspect of sexism	459	2.98	1.12	Moderate
11	I know that treating someone “differently” because of one’s gender is an aspect of sexism	459	3.03	1.13	Moderate
12	I am aware that making condescending remarks, or inferring that someone is suited or not suited for a particular thing because of one’s gender is sexist remarks	459	3.25	0.93	Moderate
13	I am aware that interpreting someone’s behaviour on the basis of the person’s gender is an aspect of sexism	459	2.98	1.07	Moderate
Summary of results for the cluster		459	3.15	1.00	Moderate

The first research question was interested in establishing the level of awareness of the undergraduates to the concept of sexism. The summary of analysis presented on table 1 indicates that, on the overall, the undergraduates are moderately aware of the concept of sexism. The different items that sought to measure the level of awareness on each of the aspects of sexism also indicate moderate level of awareness. The moderate level of awareness indicates a 3 in a scale of one to four, thus not being poor. This result disagrees with the findings of Ifegbesan (2010) whose study indicated that teachers are unaware that they hold biased perceptions against the sexes, implying that teachers were not really aware about sexism.

Research questions 2: How does the level of awareness of the first year undergraduates on the concept of sexism differ from the other years of study?

Ho 1: There is no significant difference in the mean scores of the level of awareness on the concept of sexism between the first year undergraduates and other years of study

Table 2: t-test of significance of difference in the mean scores on the level of awareness on sexism between the first year undergraduates and other years of study

Groups	N	Mean	SD	df	t	t _{critical}	p	α	Decision	Inference
First year	121	3.19	0.98							
				457	1.61	1.96	0.11	.05	accept H ₀	Difference is not significant
Other years	338	3.14	1.01							

The research question two sought to establish the existence or otherwise of disparity in the awareness level of the undergraduates to the concept of sexism between the first year undergraduates and those in other levels of study. The analysis of the generated data indicates a disparity of 0.05 in the mean scores of awareness level between the two categories. This difference was therefore tested to establish its statistical significance or otherwise. This was achieved by testing hypothesis one whose result is as indicated in table 2. The result indicates that though there is a difference, it is statistically insignificant. This finding disagrees with the study by Omisere (2015) who reported that individual's perception of women is statistically different based on year of study of the respondents.

Research questions 3: What is the perception of the undergraduates on what constitute sexism?

Table 3: The mean and standard deviation on the perception of the undergraduates on what constitute sexism

S/N	DESCRIPTION	N	\bar{x}	SD	DECISION
1	Interacting or interpreting someone's behaviour on the basis of the person's gender	459	2.88	1.07	Accepted
2	Making condescending remarks, or inferring that females are not suited for a particular thing, work or office	459	3.31	0.78	Accepted
3	Treating someone, especially a woman "differently" because of her gender	459	3.04	0.96	Accepted
4	Mistreating, slighting or ignoring someone as a result of one's gender	459	3.15	0.95	Accepted
5	Whistling for someone, laughing at the person or making derogatory remarks about someone because of the person's sex	459	2.92	1.22	Accepted
6	Referring to the kitchen as a woman's office	459	2.91	1.14	Accepted
7	Being unfair to someone because of one's gender	459	3.00	1.12	Accepted
8	Being fair to someone because of one's gender	459	2.98	1.18	Accepted
9	Making any discriminatory remarks, treatment, practice against someone as a result of one's gender	459	2.83	1.11	Accepted
10	Every form of sexual harassment, including verbal, physical and psychological	459	3.08	0.96	Accepted
11	Any remarks or action that is taken as a result of the person's sex which makes the person to feel ashamed, uncomfortable or humiliated	459	3.00	1.11	Accepted
12	Making complimentary remarks which infer that someone is sexy or is a sexual object	459	2.61	1.10	Accepted
13	Using swear or obscene words when interacting with someone of opposite sex	459	2.59	0.92	Accepted
14	Believing that some household tasks like cooking, washing dishes etc are for a particular sex	459	2.45	1.16	Rejected
15	Believing that only one sex has the right to propose marriage to the other sex, and not vice versa	459	3.12	1.03	Accepted
16	Limiting the freedom of a certain sex in relation to that of the other sex	459	2.83	1.12	Accepted
17	Preferring to educate one gender and failing to educate the opposite sex	459	2.86	1.22	Accepted
18	Believing, acting or inferring that one sex is superior to the other	459	2.89	1.18	Accepted
Summary of results for the cluster		459	2.91	1.10	Accepted

The third research question sought to establish the perception of the undergraduates on what constitutes sexism. The summary of the analysis presented on table 3 indicates that the undergraduates accepted all but one of the eighteen items suggested as constituting sexism. The only item that has been rejected as constituting sexism is believing that some household tasks like cooking, washing dishes etc are for a particular sex; while items accepted as constituting sexism include making condescending remarks, or inferring that females are not suited for a particular thing, work or office; mistreating, slighting or ignoring someone as a result of one's gender; believing that only one sex has the right to propose marriage to the other sex, and not vice versa; amongst others.

Research questions 4: How does the perception of the undergraduates on what constitute sexism differ based on gender?

Ho 2: There is no significant difference, based on gender, on the mean scores of what constitute sexism.

Table 4: t-test of significance of difference, between male and female students, in the mean scores on the perception of what constitute sexism

Groups	N	Mean	SD	df	t	t _{critical}	p	α	Decision	Inference
male	199	2.90	1.03							
				457	0.69	1.96	0.49	.05	Accept H ₀	Difference is not significant
female	260	2.92	1.15							

The fourth research question sought to identify the difference, based on gender, on what the undergraduates perceive to constitute sexism. The result as indicated on table 4 indicates a mean difference of 0.02. Hypothesis two was however tested to establish the statistical significance of the established difference. The summary of the analysis on table 4 indicates that the established difference is not statistically significant. This finding contradicts the findings of Eyo and Obot (2017) who established that the experiences of the students on the incidence of sexism differ significantly based on gender. It also disagrees with Ifegbesan (2010) whose study indicated significant difference between gender stereotype belief, attitude and practices of the teachers based on sex.

Research questions 5: How does the perception of the first year undergraduates, on what constitute sexism, differ from the other years of study?

Ho 3: There is no significant difference in the mean scores of what constitute sexism between the first year undergraduates and other years of study

Table 5: t-test of significance of difference in the mean scores of what constitute sexism between the first year undergraduates and other years of study

Groups	N	Mean	SD	df	t	t _{critical}	p	α	Decision	Inference
First year	121	2.61	1.28	457	15.19	1.96	0.00	.05	reject H ₀	Difference is significant
Other years	338	3.02	1.00							

The fifth research question sought to establish how the perception of the first year undergraduates on what constitutes sexism differs from those in other years of study. The descriptive statistics in table 5 indicates a mean difference of 0.41. Hypothesis 3 was then tested to establish if the difference is statistically significant or due to chance. The analysis indicates that the difference is statistically significant. This finding agrees with Omisere (2015) who investigated and reported that individual’s perception of women is statistically different based on year of study of the respondents.

Summary of findings and implications to counselling

The summary of findings of the study includes:

1. The level of awareness of undergraduates on the concept of sexism is moderate.
2. There is no significant difference in the mean scores of the level of awareness on the concept of sexism between the first year undergraduates and other years of study.
3. The perception of the undergraduates on what constitutes sexism includes making condescending remarks, or inferring that females are not suited for a particular thing, work or office; mistreating, slighting or ignoring someone as a result of one’s gender; believing that only one sex has the right to propose marriage to the other sex, and not vice versa; amongst others.
4. There is no significant difference, based on gender, on the mean scores of what constitute sexism.
5. There is significant difference in the mean scores of what constitute sexism between the first year undergraduates and other years of study.

The findings of this study have implications for counselling. On the level of awareness of the undergraduates on the concept of sexism which has been established to be moderate, the implications for the Guidance Counsellor is that though this indicates a substantial level of awareness, work still needs to be done to raise the awareness. This is so because it is only such heightened awareness that can prompt every hand to be on deck towards eliminating sexist practices in tertiary

institutions in particular and the society in general. Another finding of the study has indicated no statistically significant difference on the level of awareness on the concept of sexism between the first year undergraduates and other years of study. While it indicates a good signal that the first year undergraduates, who are new to the university system, are also moderately aware of the concept of sexism, it also indicates that the Guidance Counsellor should adopt measures that would simultaneously address all the levels of university education in his attempt to fashion out programmes that can improve the level of awareness of this social malady.

Additionally, the findings of the study have established what constitutes sexism, and also the fact that there is no disagreement based on gender on what constitutes sexism. This finding has provided a veritable platform for counselling practitioners to create more awareness on this concept as there is a general understanding on practices that could be considered as sexist. However, an aspect of the findings of the study indicates a significant difference between the first year undergraduates and other years of study on what constitutes sexism. This is also important for counselling practice as practitioners would have to consider this disparity while developing programmes to checkmate the menace of sexism in the university system.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study was situated in the University of Calabar. It investigated Awareness and Perception on Sexism amongst students in the University of Calabar and also explored the Counselling implications. The findings of the study indicated that the level of awareness on sexism is moderate; and that there is no significant difference on the level of awareness on sexism between the first year undergraduates and other years of study. The study also established what the undergraduates perceived as components of sexism, and that there is no significant difference, based on gender, on what constitutes sexism. A finding of the study also indicated that there was significant difference on what is considered sexism between the first year undergraduates and other years of study. It can be concluded, based on the findings of the study, that undergraduates at different levels of study are aware of sexism, and that both the male and female undergraduates have no dichotomy on what they consider as sexism.

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that:

1. The guidance counsellors should organize enlightenment programmes to amplify the level of awareness and to raise the level of interest of university management and the university community on sexist practices.
2. Awareness campaigns on sexism should be targeted at both the first year undergraduates and other levels of study. This is essential as an aspect of the

findings of the study has indicated that the level of awareness of these two categories of students does not vary significantly.

3. The stakeholders in the university community, especially the university management should rely on these established components of sexism to draw up clear and detailed policy on sexist practices including stipulation of penalties and procedures for seeking redress.
4. Since the male and female students do not differ on what constitute sexism, the counsellor should rely on this unanimity and fashion out programmes targeted at both the male and female students collectively. This would save resources as compared to drawing programmes for these two categories of students differently.
5. The Guidance Counsellor should consider the level of study while enacting programmes that is concerned with constituents of sexism. This is premised on the significant difference between the first year undergraduates and other years of study on what constitute sexism.

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