

# Non-Contact Sexual Violence Among Senior Public High School Students In Southwest Nigeria

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## Citation

J Awoleke, B Olofinbiyi. *Non-Contact Sexual Violence Among Senior Public High School Students In Southwest Nigeria*. The Internet Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics. 2020 Volume 24 Number 1.

DOI: [10.5580/IJGO.54594](https://doi.org/10.5580/IJGO.54594)

## Abstract

**Objective:** Youth may suffer diverse forms of sexual violence, including non-contact unwanted sexual encounters, either at school or in the community, with negative psycho-social and academic outcomes. However, data from southwest Nigeria are sparse.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional cohort study of public high school youths was undertaken to address the need. Using a semi-structured questionnaire, data obtained was coded into SPSS version 20. Pearson's Chi-square test and logistic regression analysis were used for inferential statistics.

**Results:** Every respondent had experienced one form of sexual harassment or another; more females suffered verbal sexual harassment and were seductively gazed upon, but more males were threatened to have sex, coerced into touching the sex organs of the harassers, and forced to look at the exposed sex organs of their victimizers. However, more females have been exposed to two or more types of non-contact sexual violence.

**Conclusion:** There is need for strategic scaling up of healthy sexuality instructions that will challenge the poisonous nature of our sex-obsessed environment. Proper guidelines for identifying, investigating, and reporting non-contact sexual violations, and sanctioning perpetrators are urgently needed. Provision of psychological support for both victims and harassers is recommended.

## INTRODUCTION

In our sex-charged world, one of the alarming outcomes is the problem of sexual violence. The media is replete with movies showing individuals having casual sex with multiple consorts 'to get to know each other better,' musicals with sexually-explicit imagery, and moment-by-moment coverage of drug-induced sexual violence. Unfortunately, adults (parents, educators, policy makers) fail to realize the impact of these phenomena on adolescents. Sexual violence refers to sexual act that is forced, coerced, or manipulated because consent is not freely given or obtained [1]. It could involve physical contact such as occurs in rape, sexual assault, child sexual abuse, or incest, or non-contact violence such as voyeurism, sexting, verbal sexual harassment, or exposure of the assailant's sex organs [2]. Such violation is meant to control or dominate the victim, and it breeds humiliation of the victim, insecurity, breach of trust, and offends sexual integrity within peer relationships. Various forms of non-

contact unwanted sexual encounters are perpetrated by fellow adolescents (when it can be regarded as a type of bullying [1]) or adults, and can happen within and outside of dating relationships. Young people have been sexually harassed at school, in the community (for example, on the internet), in college, and in the workplace [3 – 5]. Both sexes could be harassed [6]; boys in high school were more likely to be exposed to sexually-explicit content without their consent and be labelled homosexuals, while girls reportedly heard more jokes and comments about sexual obscenities [7]. This can occur on a single occasion, or repeatedly, each episode becoming more invasive/diverse over time [8].

However, when in-school adolescents experience non-contact unwanted sexual harassment, they tend to respond by giving undue sexual attention to others. Four out of ten young victims of sexual violence responded by absenting themselves from school or skipping classes [1]. Such teenagers are also at higher risk of suicidal attempts,

substance abuse, risky sexual behaviours, sexually-transmissible infections, unwanted pregnancies, depression, poor weight control, and dating violence victimization [9]. Worse still, some of the victims become perpetrators of sexual violence too [7].

In spite of the fact that, compared with those who do not, young people who experience sexual violence are at a higher risk of negatively-impacting psycho-social and physical responses, there are no data from Ekiti State documenting the non-contact sexual experiences of high school students. This study is designed to set the pace in the provision of data for the identification of prevalent patterns of sexual violence and gender stereotypes, and guide policy development regarding prevention of adolescent sexual violence and promotion of gender respect and equality in our environment.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This is a cross-sectional cohort survey of senior students in public high schools in Ekiti State, undertaken during a Youth Camp meeting designed by Eyelua Leadership and Gender Development Initiative, in collaboration with the Ministries of Education and Youth & Development during the summer vacation of August, 2019. In order to achieve universal participation in this first-of-its-kind workshop, one male and one female student from each public high school in all the sixteen (16) Local Government Areas in the State were invited. Honourable Commissioners of the Ministries of Education and Youth & Development, and representatives of non-governmental organizations, facilitated and also served as resource persons during the three-day camp.

Ekiti State, in southwest Nigeria, has a population of 2,384,212, with 100 public high schools in sixteen local government areas, spread almost uniformly across the three senatorial districts [10]. The indigenous population are largely Christians of Yoruba extraction. There are also indigenous Muslims, and many ethnic minorities, including Igbo, Hausa, Ibira, and Edo. The schools are co-ordinated by the Ekiti State Ministry of Education, with staff support from the Teaching Service Commission of Ekiti State. Although disciplinary sanctions are meted out to students and staff who violate sexual decorum, there are no clear-cut guidelines and protocols for identifying, reporting, investigating, punishing and preventing sexual harassment in the institutions.

After briefly explaining the purpose of the study during one of the sessions on sexual and reproductive health education,

a structured questionnaire was handed out to each participant. Although their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses were assured, the students were encouraged to opt out of the survey whenever they chose to, or to leave unanswered any questions they were uncomfortable with. The investigators accepted the completion of the questionnaire as consent to participate in the study.

The survey instrument enquired about the demographic details of the respondents, including their age, sex, class, religious inclination, and ethnic tribe. The knowledge of the students about various reproductive health issues, such as menstrual cycle and menstruation, unsafe abortion, cervical cancer, sexual assault and rape was tested. Self-rating of their reproductive health knowledge was done using a five-point Likert scale, Very good, Good, Average, Poor, and Very Poor. Very good and Good rating were regarded as Adequate knowledge, Average rating as Fair, while those with Poor and Very Poor assessment were regarded as Poor knowledge. Specific enquiries into their experience of non-contact sexual violence were made. Sexting was not explored in this study because high school students in Ekiti State were prohibited from using personal phones, and only a few had laptops and other devices with limited or no internet access. The study was approved by the Ekiti State Ministry of Education.

The retrieved data were coded into, and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. Results were presented as percentages. Univariate association between the demographic variables and non-contact sexual violence was tested using the Pearson's Chi-square test, while logistic regression model was employed to identify the independent predictors of non-contact sexual violence in the study population. Level of significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ .

### **RESULTS**

All the 192 participants at the workshop adequately filled and returned the questionnaires to the research team. Thirteen (6.8%) of the respondents were less than 15 years old, while most of them, 175 (91.1%), were between 15 and 19 years. Two (1%) of the participants did not claim any religious inclination; 104 (54.2%) were females, 189 (98.4%) were 12th graders, while 19 (9.9%) were non-Yoruba. Ninety percent of the students rated their knowledge of reproductive health matters as at least, fair (Table 1).

The distribution of various forms of non-contact sexual

violence against the sex of the respondents is displayed in Table 2. Among those who reported being looked at lustfully, 67 (64.4%) were females, while 33 (37.5%) were males; more males were victims of unapproved exposure of the victimizers' sex organs (25%), harassers threatening to have sex with the victims (22.7%), coercion to touch the victimizers' sex organs (21.6%), and were encouraged to have unwanted sexual experiences (2.3%). Verbal sexual harassment occurred more with the females (64.4%). More females (97.1%) have experienced at least two different types of non-contact sexual violence.

Those who declared a religious inclination (99.4% versus 90.9%,  $p = 0.007$ ) and were of indigenous Yoruba extraction (91.7% versus 63.6%,  $p = 0.002$ ) were significantly more likely to have experienced two or more types of non-contact sexual harassment (Table 3). The independent predictor of multiple non-contact sexual violence, from Table 4, was being of Yoruba ethnicity (Adjusted Odds Ratio: 5.08; 95% confidence interval: 1.20 – 21.85,  $p = 0.029$ ).

**Table 1**

Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Characteristics of the respondents	Frequency (%)
<b>Age (years)</b>	
Less than 15	13 (6.8)
15 – 19	175 (91.1)
Above 19	4 (2.1)
<b>Religious inclination</b>	
Religious	190 (99)
Not religious	2 (1)
<b>Sex</b>	
Male	88 (45.8)
Female	104 (54.2)
<b>Grade in High School</b>	
Less than 12 <sup>th</sup> grade	3 (1.6)
12 <sup>th</sup> grade	189 (98.4)
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
Yoruba	173 (90.1)
Non-Yoruba	19 (9.9)
<b>Knowledge of sexuality and sex education</b>	
Adequate	98 (51)
Fair	75 (39.1)
Poor	19 (9.9)

**Table 2**

Distribution of non-contact sexual violence against sex of the respondents

Variants of non-contact sexual violence	Frequency (%)	Male, n (%)	Female, n (%)
<b>Lustfully looked at?</b>			
Yes	100 (52.1)	33 (37.5)	67 (64.4)
No	92 (47.9)		
<b>Unapproved exposure of victimizers' sex organs</b>			
Yes	35 (18.2)	22 (25)	13 (12.5)
No	157 (81.8)		
<b>Threat to have sex with the victim</b>			
Yes	42 (21.9)	20 (22.7)	22 (21.2)
No	150 (78.1)		
<b>Coercion to touch victimizers' sex organs</b>			
Yes	25 (13)	19 (21.6)	6 (5.8)
No	167 (87)		
<b>Verbal sexual harassment</b>			
Yes	100 (52.1)	33 (37.5)	67 (64.4)
No	92 (47.9)		
<b>Unwanted sexual experience e.g. masturbation</b>			
Yes	3 (1.6)	2 (2.3)	1 (1)
No	189 (98.4)		
<b>Overall incidence of non-contact sexual violence</b>			
1 variant of sexual harassment	11 (5.7)	8 (9.1)	3 (2.9)
2 or more variants of harassment	181 (94.3)	80 (90.9)	101 (97.1)

**Table 3**

Relationship between respondents' demographic variables and non-contact sexual violence

Variables	Categories	Non-contact sexual violence		$\chi^2$	p-value
		1 variant	≥ 2 variants		
		n (%)	n (%)		
Age (years)	< 15	0 (0)	13 (7.2)	3.541	0.170
	15 – 19	10 (90.9)	165 (91.2)		
	> 19	1 (9.1)	3 (1.7)		
Religion	Religious	10 (90.9)	180 (99.4)	7.334	0.007*
	Not religious	1 (9.1)	1 (0.6)		
Sex	Male	8 (72.7)	80 (44.2)	3.399	0.065
	Female	3 (27.3)	101 (55.8)		
School grade	< 12 <sup>th</sup> grade	0 (0)	3 (1.7)	0.185	0.667
	12 <sup>th</sup> grade	11 (100)	178 (98.3)		
Ethnicity	Yoruba	7 (63.6)	166 (91.7)	9.168	0.002*
	Non-Yoruba	4 (36.4)	15 (8.3)		
Knowledge	Adequate	6 (54.5)	92 (50.8)	1.305	0.521
	Fair	5 (45.5)	70 (38.7)		
	Poor	0 (0)	19 (10.5)		
*significant at p < 0.05					

**Table 4**

Logistic regression model

Variables	Adjusted odds Ratio	95% Confidence interval	p-value	Reference
Religious	4.67	0.22 - 97.50	0.321	Not religious
Yoruba	5.08	1.20 - 21.85	0.029*	Non-Yoruba
*significant at $p < 0.05$				

## **COMMENTS**

All the 192 respondents in this survey have suffered one form of non-contact sexual violence or the other, and most of them have experienced more than one variant. This finding is extremely worrisome in view of the possible negative impact on these students, and considering the fact that these young people were senior students with most of them self-reporting good knowledge of reproductive health matters. The finding among more vulnerable younger adolescents would be better imagined! Studies from other nations have equally reported high figures, although less than 100% seen in this survey [3, 6, 7]. The difference may be due to the fact that those countries have local and national guidelines for identifying, reporting, and penalizing sexual violence among their adolescents and adults.

The dressing and behaviour of teens are modified by today's sex-obsessed culture. Compared with their male counterparts, female adolescents are more likely to put on tight, curve-revealing clothes, use heavy make-up, and clothes that expose more delicate parts of their bodies. Undoubtedly, as shown in this survey, these will expose them to seductive gaze and verbal sexual harassment from their peers and adults.

More male respondents were victims of indecent exposure of genitalia. This could be via mooning (sexually-motivated display of the bare buttocks), exposure of the phallus or female breasts and pubic area. Going forward, almost four males for every female teen have been coerced to touch the sexual organs of their assailants. They could be grabbed or brushed up against in a sexual manner. Threats to have sex were commoner among the male respondents, as well as unwanted sexual encounters like being encouraged to masturbate or kiss the harasser. These findings tally with those from a longitudinal study of reported in-school sexual violence by 242 adolescents after the fifth, seventh and ninth grades [6]. They found that the more pubertally-advanced the males were, the more at risk of sexual harassment they became.

Our survey found that those who were indigenous Yoruba were five times more likely to have experienced two or more forms of non-contact sexual violence than the non-indigenes. This may be related to the familiarity between the assailant and the victim, or the perceived power differences between the indigenes and non-indigenes [6, 8].

This study is an attempt at appropriately documenting the existence and prevalence of non-contact sexual violence

among students in our State's high schools. Subsequent action should include longitudinal studies that will explore its consequences, conducting workshops to raise awareness levels among young people, their caregivers, and their educators, and designing public health interventions to stem its tide.

In conclusion, non-contact sexual violence affects young people of both sexes, and cuts across age groups, religious inclination, level of reproductive health knowledge, and grade in school. There is need for strategic scaling up of healthy sexuality instructions that will challenge the poisonous nature of our sex-obsessed environment. Proper guidelines for identifying, investigating, and reporting non-contact sexual violations, and sanctioning perpetrators are urgently needed. Provision of psychological support for both victims and harassers is recommended.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The authors wish to acknowledge the contributions of the Honourable Commissioners of the Ministries of Education and Youth & Development, the entire administrative and research teams of Adolescent Friendly Research Initiative and Care (ADOLFRIC), and Eyelua Leadership and Gender Development Initiative during the Youth Camp and data collection.

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