



LOW AWARENESS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE REPORTING CHANNELS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN NORTHEAST NIGERIA: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY OF FEDERAL UNIVERSITY GASHUA



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Abstract

Sexual violence remains a persistent challenge in higher education globally, with serious psychological, academic, and social consequences. In Nigeria, many incidents go unreported due to stigma, fear of retaliation, and limited awareness of reporting mechanisms. This study examined awareness of sexual violence reporting mechanisms among students of the Federal University Gashua, Northeast Nigeria. The study is grounded in Routine Activity Theory, which conceptualizes student awareness as a form of capable guardianship, and Institutional Theory, which examines the decoupling of formal university policies from actual student experiences. A mixed-method design was employed, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative responses collected electronically using KoboCollect. Undergraduate students were selected through voluntary sampling. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were used for data analysis. Findings indicate extremely low awareness of reporting mechanisms. Less than 1% of respondents reported knowledge of any hotline or formal reporting channel, while 99.2% were unaware. Respondents who indicated awareness could not provide specific details. This suggests significant institutional communication gaps and limited access to support systems. Strengthening awareness and accessibility of reporting mechanisms is critical. Universities should integrate digital reporting platforms and confidential hotlines with sustained sensitization strategies to improve reporting, institutional response, and student safety.

Keywords: sexual violence, reporting mechanisms, university students, digital reporting, campus safety

Introduction

Sexual violence has increasingly been recognized as a major social and public health concern within institutions of higher learning across the world. Universities are expected to provide safe environments that foster learning, intellectual growth, and personal development. However, evidence from many countries indicates that sexual harassment, assault, and other forms of gender-based violence remain prevalent on university campuses. Students, particularly young women, are frequently vulnerable to unwanted sexual advances, coercion, and abuse perpetrated by peers, acquaintances, or individuals in positions of authority (BMC

Public Health, 2024). Victims often experience psychological, academic, and social consequences, including trauma, withdrawal from academic activities, and reduced trust in institutional support systems.

In Nigeria, sexual violence in tertiary institutions has gained increasing public attention. Media reports, civil society advocacy, and empirical studies have highlighted the persistence of sexual harassment and assault within universities and other higher education institutions (Etta, Agbor, & Ekpo, 2024). Although some universities have introduced policies on sexual harassment and gender-based violence, challenges remain in ensuring that these policies translate into accessible and effective reporting and response systems for students. Cultural norms, fear of stigma, victim-blaming attitudes, and concerns about retaliation often discourage victims from reporting incidents of sexual assault.

Effective reporting mechanisms are therefore essential components of institutional responses to sexual violence. Reporting channels such as confidential hotlines, counseling services, complaint units, and digital platforms provide victims with opportunities to seek help, report incidents, and access support services (Ogunfowokan et al., 2023). Universities and development organizations have increasingly explored technology-based solutions, including mobile applications and online reporting platforms, to facilitate confidential and accessible reporting. Such mechanisms are designed to encourage reporting and strengthen institutional capacity to respond promptly and appropriately to cases of sexual violence.

Despite these mechanisms, limited awareness among students often remains a critical barrier. Many victims of sexual violence do not report incidents because they are unaware of where or how to seek help (Akiyode-Afolabi et al., 2022). Lack of knowledge about hotlines, reporting offices, or digital platforms can silence victims and allow perpetrators to remain unaccountable. Consequently, even when reporting systems exist, their impact may be minimal if students are unaware or do not trust them.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to provide empirical data that can guide institutional reforms, policy implementation, and student advocacy within higher education institutions, particularly in Northeast Nigeria. By uncovering the specific communication gaps and barriers to reporting at the Federal University Gashua, this research offers university management a concrete blueprint for redesigning accessible, confidential, and culturally sensitive reporting pathways. Furthermore, these findings provide policy makers and gender-equity advocates with critical insights to mandate standardized digital reporting platforms and student sensitization frameworks across regional tertiary institutions. Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader academic literature on campus safety in Sub-Saharan Africa by highlighting how institutional theories and routine activities manifest in conflict-affected or culturally conservative regions, thereby offering a foundation for future comparative research.

This study examines the level of awareness of sexual assault reporting mechanisms among students of the Federal University Gashua, located in Yobe State, Northeast Nigeria. Specifically, the study investigates students' knowledge of available hotlines and formal channels for reporting sexual violence and explores the implications of awareness gaps for preventing and addressing sexual violence within university environments.

Literature Review

Sexual Violence in Higher Education

Sexual violence in universities is a global problem that affects students' safety, mental health, and academic performance. Sexual violence includes harassment, coercion, unwanted sexual

advances, attempted rape, and rape, occurring in classrooms, hostels, social gatherings, and online spaces. Globally, universities are environments where young adults may be vulnerable due to new independence and complex social dynamics (BMC Public Health, 2024). Survivors often experience anxiety, depression, academic disruption, and social withdrawal, highlighting the public health and social significance of campus sexual violence (Etta *et al.*, 2024).

In Nigeria, research indicates high prevalence rates of harassment and sexual assault in tertiary institutions, especially affecting female students due to unequal power dynamics and patriarchal norms (Ayeobasan, 2025). Case studies suggest that sexual harassment is systemic, often enabled by weak enforcement of policies and cultural barriers that discourage reporting (Etta *et al.*, 2024).

Barriers to Reporting Sexual Assault

Reporting rates remain low due to fear of stigma, shame, victim-blaming, and retaliation (Link & Springer, 2026). Students may also fear that reporting could negatively affect academic progress or social relationships (Akiyode-Afolabi *et al.*, 2022). Cultural norms surrounding sexuality in Nigeria further discourage open discussion, contributing to underreporting (Uhumwangho *et al.*, 2024).

Institutional barriers also limit reporting. Complex, poorly communicated procedures, lack of trust in university authorities, and perceived bias toward perpetrators reduce students' willingness to report incidents (Ogunfowokan *et al.*, 2023). These factors demonstrate how structural, cultural, and organizational influences combine to limit reporting of sexual violence.

Awareness of Institutional Support Systems

Awareness of support systems is a key determinant of reporting behavior. Universities often provide counseling centers, gender desks, complaint committees, and hotlines, but their effectiveness depends on students knowing about them (Akiyode-Afolabi *et al.*, 2022). Studies in Nigerian universities show that many students are unaware of these structures or perceive them as inaccessible, undermining institutional efforts to support victims (Vanguard, 2022).

Effective communication through orientation programs, awareness campaigns, digital platforms, and student handbooks is essential to bridge the gap between institutional policies and student knowledge. Without awareness, reporting mechanisms cannot function effectively.

Reporting Innovations: Hotlines and Digital Platforms

To improve reporting, universities are increasingly adopting technology-based mechanisms. Confidential hotlines provide immediate, anonymous access to guidance, counseling, and legal support (Ogunfowokan *et al.*, 2023). Mobile applications and online reporting platforms allow discreet reporting and secure data collection, improving monitoring and institutional response (Uhumwangho *et al.*, 2024).

Technology-based systems are particularly effective in environments where students may fear stigma or retaliation. However, their effectiveness depends on awareness, trust in the institution, and proper implementation, highlighting the importance of integrating digital innovations with sustained communication strategies.

Theoretical Perspectives

The structural and behavioral dynamics surrounding sexual violence and the systemic failure to report incidents within higher education institutions can be comprehensively understood through two complementary frameworks: Routine Activity Theory and Institutional Theory. Together, these paradigms address both the situational opportunities that allow sexual violence to persist on a university campus and the structural, organizational failures that keep vital reporting mechanisms hidden from the student population. By synthesizing a macro-level environmental crime theory with an organizational sociology framework, this study evaluates campus safety not merely as a matter of individual behavior, but as a product of environmental vulnerability and institutional management.

Routine Activity Theory (RAT)

Originally formulated by Lawrence E. Cohen and Marcus Felson (1979), Routine Activity Theory (RAT) is a macro-level criminological framework positing that predatory crime occurs when a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian converge in time and space. Rather than focusing on offender psychology, RAT assumes criminal opportunity is deeply embedded in the structure and vulnerabilities of daily routines. Applied to the Federal University Gashua, undergraduate students (particularly females) represent suitable targets due to daily campus routines, while motivated offenders leverage academic or administrative power imbalances. A distinct strength of RAT in this study is its situational focus, allowing researchers to move past unalterable criminal motives to identify actionable, environmental interventions.

Crucially, this study positions student awareness of reporting channels as a fundamental component of cognitive, administrative guardianship. When 99.2% of the student population is unaware of formal hotlines or reporting units, the institution's protective guardianship effectively drops to zero, signaling absolute impunity to motivated offenders. Widespread awareness, conversely, acts as an active, invisible guardian that alters the risk-benefit calculation for potential perpetrators, disrupting the spatial-temporal convergence required for abuse to occur. RAT thus provides university management with a tangible framework to design preventative measures, transforming passive, hidden policies into active, visible, and capable mechanisms of environmental protection.

Institutional Theory

Pioneered by organizational sociologists John W. Meyer, Brian Rowan (1977), Paul J. DiMaggio, and Walter W. Powell (1983), Institutional Theory assumes that organizations are heavily shaped by external cultural symbols, regulatory frameworks, and social expectations. It posits that institutions often adopt formal policies and structures not for operational efficiency, but to gain social legitimacy and conform to compliance myths. This often results in "decoupling," a structural phenomenon where an organization maintains a polished, compliant framework on paper that is entirely disconnected from its actual, day-to-day internal practices. The core strength of this theory lies in its capacity to look beneath superficial organizational compliance, preventing a naive assumption that policies on paper automatically equate to safety on campus.

This framework is exceptionally well-suited to explain the systemic gap between anti-sexual violence policies and actual student awareness at the Federal University Gashua. To maintain administrative legitimacy before stakeholders and regulatory bodies, the university formally ratifies gender policies, yet empirical findings reveal a severe state of decoupling: less than 1% of students know any formal reporting channel exists. Furthermore, Institutional Theory explains how deeply entrenched cultural norms in Northeast Nigeria, such as stigma, and

institutional self-preservation, create cognitive scripts that suppress open communication. This analysis highlights the urgent need for universities to bridge the gap between structural legitimacy and authentic, communicative policy implementation.

Methodology

The study was conducted at the Federal University Gashua, located in Gashua, Yobe State. Established in 2013, the university draws students from across the northeastern region. A mixed-method research design was adopted, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative open-ended questions. The survey assessed knowledge of reporting channels, while qualitative responses provided insights into students' perceptions of institutional support. Safety walk was also conducted across the university campus to identify and document areas that are considered unsafe to students, especially the female students. Team members include the research team, representative of the security unit of the Federal University, Gashua, representative of the health facility in charge, student union government, some faculty staff, male and female students.

Sampling and Respondents

Undergraduate students across faculties and levels were selected through a non-probability sampling approach. Participation was voluntary, with ethical considerations including anonymity and confidentiality emphasized. Respondents for the KII were purposively selected from faculty members, student union officials, health facility staff, selected students (male and female) and the security unit.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected using KoboCollect, enabling real-time electronic capture. Closed-ended questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while open-ended responses underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to awareness, barriers, and perceptions of institutional support systems. Qualitative data was content analyzed in line with the themes and sub themes of the study and triangulated with the quantitative data.

Results

Awareness of Sexual Violence Reporting Hotlines

Students were asked whether they knew of any hotline for reporting sexual violence. Less than 1% indicated awareness, while 99.2% were unaware. Even respondents who claimed awareness could not provide specific hotline numbers or details.

This near-total lack of awareness suggests either limited attention to campus security issues or inadequate institutional sensitization. The findings highlight a significant gap in knowledge regarding reporting mechanisms, potentially hindering access to support and limiting institutional capacity to respond effectively.

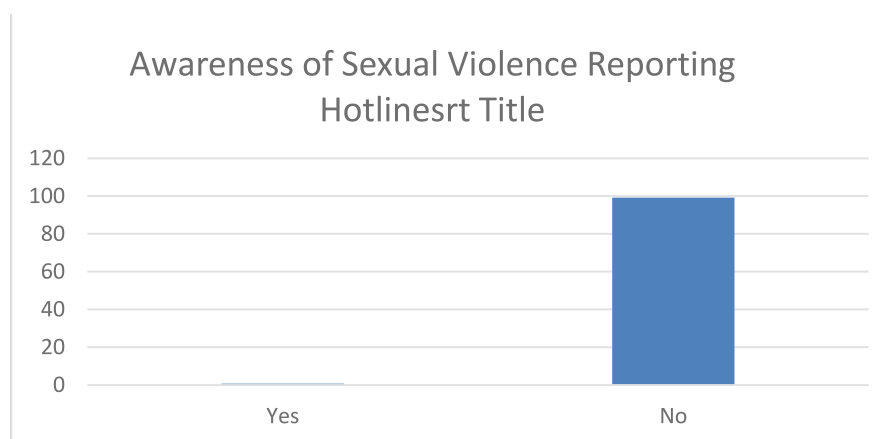


Figure 1: Awareness of Sexual Violence Reporting Hotlines
Source: Field Survey, 2023

Discussion

Implications of Low Awareness

The findings of this study reveal an extremely low level of awareness of sexual violence reporting hotlines among students of the Federal University Gashua. This situation has serious implications for the reporting and management of sexual violence within university environments. When students are unaware of available reporting mechanisms, survivors of sexual violence may feel isolated and powerless, lacking the information necessary to seek help or pursue justice. As a result, incidents of sexual harassment and assault may remain unreported, thereby perpetuating a culture of silence and impunity. Underreporting not only protects perpetrators from accountability but also limits the institution's ability to understand the true scope of the problem and design appropriate preventive interventions.

Furthermore, the lack of awareness undermines efforts aimed at providing timely support to victims. Reporting channels such as hotlines and digital platforms are typically designed to facilitate rapid access to counseling, medical assistance, and legal support. When students do not know about these services, victims may experience prolonged psychological distress, academic disruption, and social withdrawal without receiving the assistance they need. In such contexts, the protective function of institutional support systems becomes ineffective because they are essentially invisible to the intended beneficiaries.

From a theoretical standpoint, Routine Activity Theory provides useful insight into the implications of this finding. According to this perspective, crime occurs when three conditions converge: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardianship. In university settings, accessible reporting mechanisms and responsive institutional structures can serve as forms of capable guardianship by deterring offenders and enabling victims to report incidents. However, when students are unaware of these mechanisms, the protective guardianship function of the institution is weakened. In effect, the absence of awareness reduces the perceived risk for potential offenders while simultaneously limiting victims' opportunities to seek redress. Consequently, improving awareness of reporting mechanisms is not only a matter of communication but also a crucial component of campus safety and crime prevention strategies.

Institutional Communication Gaps

Another key issue highlighted by the findings is the existence of institutional communication gaps regarding sexual violence reporting mechanisms. Although many universities have formal policies addressing sexual harassment and gender-based violence, the effectiveness of such policies largely depends on how well they are communicated to students. The results suggest that existing information about reporting hotlines or support services at Federal University Gashua may not be reaching the student population effectively. This could be due to several factors, including inadequate orientation programs, limited awareness campaigns, or insufficient use of digital communication platforms commonly accessed by students.

Universities typically communicate institutional policies through official documents, student handbooks, or administrative notices. However, these traditional communication channels may not be sufficient in reaching the entire student population, particularly in contexts where students rely more heavily on digital media and peer networks for information. If reporting mechanisms are not prominently displayed on campus, discussed during orientation programs, or regularly promoted through student-centered communication channels, many students may remain unaware of their existence.

This situation can be better understood through the lens of Institutional Theory, which emphasizes the role of organizational structures, norms, and implementation processes in shaping institutional effectiveness. According to this perspective, the mere existence of policies or institutional frameworks does not automatically translate into effective outcomes. Instead, institutions must actively operationalize these policies through consistent communication, training, and awareness initiatives. In the context of sexual violence prevention and response, universities must ensure that students are not only aware of reporting channels but also trust that these systems are accessible, confidential, and responsive. Without such practical implementation measures, institutional policies risk remaining symbolic rather than functional.

Comparison with other Studies

The findings of this study are consistent with a growing body of research on sexual violence reporting in higher education institutions both within Nigeria and internationally. Several studies have documented low levels of awareness of formal reporting mechanisms among university students, which contributes significantly to the underreporting of sexual harassment and assault. For instance, research conducted in Nigerian tertiary institutions indicates that many students lack adequate knowledge of institutional procedures for reporting sexual misconduct, despite the presence of formal policies (Ayeobasan, 2025). Similarly, Ogunfowokan et al. (2023) found that although reporting systems may exist within universities, students often have limited awareness of these systems and may lack confidence in their effectiveness.

Comparable patterns have also been observed in other educational contexts. Studies examining campus sexual violence globally have highlighted that awareness of reporting mechanisms is frequently limited, particularly where universities have not implemented sustained sensitization programs. Etta et al. (2024), for example, observed that weak institutional communication and cultural barriers often discourage victims from utilizing formal reporting channels. These findings reinforce the argument that policy development alone is insufficient; active engagement with students is necessary to ensure that reporting systems are visible, accessible, and trusted.

In response to these challenges, many universities are increasingly adopting technology-based solutions to improve reporting and response mechanisms. Digital reporting systems, mobile applications, and confidential hotlines have been introduced in several institutions as innovative tools to facilitate discreet and accessible reporting. Such systems can provide students with alternative channels to report incidents without fear of stigma or retaliation. However, the effectiveness of these technological innovations depends largely on their visibility and credibility within the university community. When students are unaware of these tools or doubt their confidentiality, the potential benefits of technology-driven reporting systems may not be realized.

The present study therefore reinforces the importance of integrating digital reporting innovations with sustained awareness campaigns. Universities must ensure that students are consistently informed about available reporting channels through orientation programs, campus sensitization activities, and digital communication platforms. Only by combining technological solutions with proactive communication strategies can institutions effectively address the persistent challenge of underreporting sexual violence in higher education environments.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study reveal a strikingly low level of awareness of sexual violence reporting hotlines among students of the Federal University Gashua, Yobe State, Northeast Nigeria. The overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they were unaware of any hotline or formal channel through which incidents of sexual violence or abuse could be reported. Even among the very small proportion of respondents who claimed awareness, none could provide specific hotline numbers or identify a concrete institutional reporting platform. This suggests that awareness of reporting mechanisms within the university community is extremely limited.

The implications of this situation are significant. When students are unaware of available reporting channels, victims of sexual violence may be unable or unwilling to seek assistance, report incidents, or access institutional support services. This lack of awareness contributes to the persistent problem of underreporting, which in turn obscures the true magnitude of sexual violence on university campuses. Without reliable reporting, institutions may underestimate the prevalence of such incidents and consequently fail to develop adequate prevention and response strategies. In addition, the absence of accessible and well-publicized reporting mechanisms may inadvertently create an environment in which perpetrators perceive a low risk of accountability.

The findings also highlight the gap that often exists between institutional policies and practical implementation. Many universities have developed policies or guidelines addressing sexual harassment and gender-based violence, yet these frameworks may have limited impact if students are not adequately informed about how to access reporting channels or support services. Effective institutional response to sexual violence requires not only the establishment of reporting systems but also sustained efforts to ensure that these systems are visible, trusted, and accessible to the student population.

Furthermore, the results of this study reinforce the broader need for universities to adopt proactive strategies for addressing sexual violence on campus. Awareness of reporting mechanisms is a critical component of campus safety and student protection. Without adequate information about available support structures, students may rely on informal networks or choose silence rather than pursue formal reporting channels. This not only limits

access to justice for victims but also weakens institutional capacity to respond to and prevent sexual violence.

In light of these findings, improving awareness and accessibility of reporting mechanisms should be considered a priority for university administrations and higher education regulators. Institutions must strengthen communication strategies, integrate technology-based reporting tools, and ensure that students are consistently informed about available resources. By addressing the awareness gap identified in this study, universities can create safer learning environments, encourage reporting of sexual violence, and enhance institutional accountability in responding to cases of abuse.

1. Strengthening Awareness Campaigns – Integrate information about reporting mechanisms into orientation programs, campaigns, student handbooks, and social media platforms.
2. Integration of Digital Reporting Systems – Implement mobile applications and secure online platforms to complement traditional channels, ensuring confidentiality and accessibility.
3. Policy Implications for Nigerian Universities – Develop survivor-centered policies requiring establishment, communication, and monitoring of reporting mechanisms. National regulatory bodies should standardize reporting protocols and awareness programs across universities.

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