

Uninformed but Unprotected: Resilience as a Survival Strategy for Female Police Officers Sexual-Induced Harassment and Psychological Distress

Gabriel C. Kanu¹, Chisom V. Ezeh¹, Ikechukwu V. N. Ujoatuonu^{1*}, ¹Lawrence O. Amazue, and Paul I. Obodo²

¹*Department of Psychology, Faculty of the Social Sciences, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria*

²*Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT) Enugu, Nigeria*

³*Department of Psychology, Peace Land University, Enugu*

***Correspondence: Ikechukwu V. N. Ujoatuonu**

Ethics Statement

Before sharing any photos or data that could identify individuals in this article, we obtained informed written consent from the employee(s) and legal guardian/next of kin of any minors involved. All study participants provided informed consent. Additionally, we received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN/EC/008-SC/2009-AP.05).

Data Availability Statement

Upon request, the authors have agreed to provide the raw data supporting their findings.

Author Contributions

Each author has made a significant and valuable contribution to this manuscript.

Competing interests: We hereby state that we do not have any competing interests.

Abstract

The study investigated the relationship between resilience, sexual harassment, and psychological distress among 504 female police officers in Nigeria. The participants, aged between 24 and 53 with an average age of 35.09, were selected from different police formations and divisions. The study used three measures to collect data: the Sexual Harassment Inventory (SHI), the Connor-Davidson Brief Resilience Scale, and the Psychological Distress Scale. It employed a cross-sectional design, and the data was analyzed using the Hayes Process Macro. The study found a positive relationship between sexual harassment and psychological distress. Although no direct link was found between resilience and psychological distress, the study discovered that resilience moderated the relationship between sexual harassment and psychological distress in female police officers. The study implies that resilience is a vital resource that enables sexually harassed female officers to cope with psychological distress. Female police officers need education on developing resilience to manage work-related stress effectively.

Key words: Sexual Harassment, Psychological Distress, Resilience, Female, Police Officers

Introduction

Stress is a growing concern in the workplace, with police officers being one of the top three occupations affected. Police officers face high stress levels due to the growing threat of violence, high public demand, and the emphasis on efficiency and integrity (Adebusuyi, 2023; Centre for Occupational & Environmental Health, 2000; Yesufu et al., 2020;). The mental and physical health of police officers is a significant concern, leading to early retirement, increased sick leave, and decreased productivity. In 1997, 26% of medical retirements were due to psychological illnesses, according to a report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC). Psychological distress can be caused by acute stress, which is a natural part of police work and can affect the general public, organizations, and individuals (Adebayo et al., 2008; Adom et al., 2021; John-Akinola et al., 2020). Operational stress arises from the nature of police work, such as the use of firearms and exposure to traumatic situations (Centre for Occupational & Environmental Health, 2000; Chitra & Karunanidhi, 2021). Psychological distress indicates compromised mental well-being and can manifest as symptoms of prevalent mental conditions like depression and anxiety. It can present itself as feelings of sadness, anxiety, difficulty focusing, and symptoms of mental illness (Sheard et al., 2019). Wolff et al. (2017) and Gale et al. (2019) have found that psychological problems and mental issues, such as sleep disorders, nightmares, anxiety, and eating disorders, can be indicators of sexual harassment.

Sexual Harassment and Psychological Distress

Sexual harassment is offensive and inappropriate behavior in the workplace that threatens an individual's physical and emotional well-being, as well as their job satisfaction. This can result in symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, disengagement from work, and physical and mental health issues (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). Nevertheless, the correlation between sexual harassment and psychological distress among employees is not well-documented, and additional research is required to elucidate this relationship (Burn et al., 2019; Willness et al., 2007). Workplace harassment is common among women, leading to limited work freedom, emotional turmoil, and long-term psychological distress (Rathore et al., 2019). Nigerian female workers have experienced sexual harassment, including advances, enticement, and intimidation. Women work in various professions, including law enforcement, but fear of harassment in male-dominated fields can hinder their entry (Noah, 2008). Male officers and administrators have been hesitant and critical of integrating female officers into the police department from the start due to their perceived vulnerability, which increases their susceptibility to

harassment or assault (Bernat & Zupan, 1989; Oliphant & Allen-Vercoe, 2019). Harassment can take various forms, including inappropriate comments, ostracizing behaviours, and physical harm.

Workplace sexual harassment can lead to stress, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder for individuals of any gender, race, education level, or history of torture (Ansoleaga et al., 2019; Attell et al., 2017; Berry et al., 2016; Yesufu and colleagues 2020). High levels of workplace violence can cause increased psychological distress among employees. Incidents of sexual harassment at work can be a reliable indicator of psychological health issues such as distress (Koval, 2014; Mushtaq et al., 2015; Verkuil et al., 2015). Female police officers experience more psychological distress due to gender-based stereotyping and harassment, as they are often targets of harassment and face hostile work environments (Gross et al., 1994; Lambert et al., 2012; Lovrich & Stohr, 1993). Noah (2008) reported that a significant number of female workers in Nigeria encountered instances of sexual harassment in their place of employment. These encompass various forms of sexual solicitation, such as making sexual advances, enticing with sex, intimidating for sexual favours, and engaging in sexually suggestive gestures (John-Akinola et al., 2020; Adebusuyi, 2023; Yesufu et al., 2020). Work demands, excessive work hours, task completions and overburdening are among the factors that contribute to psychological distress (Martin & Jurik, 2006). Police officers are susceptible to mental health complications as a consequence of their exposure to hazardous circumstances (Bell & Eski, 2016). However, coping mechanisms can become ingrained in their personalities, making them more resilient to stress. Professional police standards prioritize fitness for duty, and women officers work alongside opposite-sex colleagues in various settings (Gaines & Kappeler, 2014; Rollinson, 2005). Station House Officers (SHO) have administrative responsibilities, requiring undivided attention, which can pose a risk of psychological distress (Viertiö et al., 2021; Major et al., 2002; Garbarino et al., 2013).

Resilience and Psychological Distress

Female police officers face a variety of challenges, including harassment, bias, discrimination, and a hostile work environment (John-Akinola et al., 2020; Liberman et al., 2002). These stressors, along with responsibilities like child care and household management, make them more susceptible to negative impacts of stress (Walker et al., 2017). Studying resilience in law enforcement can improve understanding of this group and offer insights into potential interventions (Chaiyavej & Morash, 2008; Morash et al., 2006; Sheehan & Van Hasselt, 2003; Thompson & Cox, 2020). Resilience is closely linked to the ability to cope with persistent fear and uncertainty, adapt psychologically and physiologically when faced with challenges. It is positively

associated with individuals' self-perception of good physical health and the absence of physical symptoms (Elizabeth, 2020; Child et al., 2014; Meichenbaum 2017). Resilience, as demonstrated by Regehr et al. (2021), shows a negative correlation with depression, anxiety, and psychological distress. The availability of resources plays a crucial role in dealing with environmental stress, determining whether individuals can effectively engage in necessary regulatory behaviours to manage psychological distress (Connor & Zhang, 2006). Resilience, an essential element of the COR theory, has substantial moderating impacts within the framework of the strength model (Wassermann et al., 2019; Ryu et al., 2019). The COR theory highlights the significance of actively allocating resources to mitigate stress and promote resilience (Hobfoll, 2011; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001). The study suggests that resilience, as a personal attribute, can have a positive influence on how female police officers perceive and evaluate stressful situations. This is possible because researchers view it as a function or behavioural outcome that can assist individuals in overcoming and rebounding from adversity in a result-oriented way (Chitra & Karunanidhi, 2021; Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004; Masten, 2001).

The Present Study

Police officers often experience high levels of mental health disorders such as stress, fatigue, and anxiety due to the demanding nature of their occupation (Adebusuyi, 2023; Shahid & Farooq, 2020). They are frequently found to have lower levels of psychological well-being compared to the general population. In the United Kingdom, a staggering 91% of police personnel have reported experiencing stress, low mood, or insufficient mental well-being during their time in service. Studies in various regions of Africa have highlighted the psychological difficulties faced by police officers. For instance, a study in South Africa found that around 28.1% of female police officers exhibited signs of post-traumatic stress disorder and psychological distress (Adebusuyi, 2020; Steyn, 2013). The Nigerian Police Force has expressed concern about the increasing incidence of suicide among its officers (San Francisco, 2017). Yesufu et al. (2020) found that 34% of police officers in Nigeria experienced psychological distress. Police officers in Nigeria encounter psychologically challenging work and workplace hazards that have adverse effects on their psychosocial well-being, mental health, and job performance (Adebusuyi, 2023; Yesufu et al., 2020; Sheard et al., 2019; Martin & Jurik, 2006). Adegoke (2014) conducted a study in Ibadan, Nigeria, which demonstrated the significant impact of work-related stress and frustration on the psychological well-being of police officers. In Nigeria, a separate study showed that female police officers and junior police officers experienced significantly higher levels of job-related stress than their male counterparts

and senior officers, respectively (Omolayo, 2012). Female officers face a greater probability of experiencing psychological distress, both while on duty and in the workplace. Additionally, the work environment could be more supportive when reporting these incidents. Sexual harassment has become a global crisis, posing a threat to women's rights and safety. Individuals who have experienced sexual harassment are also more prone to displaying indications of psychological distress, engaging in behaviors that pose risks to their health, and demonstrating below-average performance in the workplace. Sexual harassment has wide-ranging ramifications, encompassing not only detrimental effects on women's physical and mental well-being, but also their professional advancement and educational pursuits. While the impacts of health, work, and education are easily noticeable in the public domain, sexual harassment may be too personal and delicate to be thoroughly examined. Even less is known about sexual harassment faced by female officers in Nigeria because many choose to remain silent to protect their careers. The presence of mental health issues in high-stress police occupations results in substantial costs for both the individual and the organization (Chitra & Karunanidhi, 2021). However, it remains elusive what these victims should do mentally to challenge and contain the trauma resulting from the distress. To fill this gap, it is essential to help them deal with the trauma resulting from the distress, specific techniques are essential (John-Akinola et al., 2020).

The aim of the study is to examine the impact of resilience on the experiences of female police officers who have been sexually assaulted. The research will investigate to what extent resilience can affect the link between psychological distress and sexual harassment. Past research has indicated a significant negative correlation between sexual harassment and female resilience (Thambo et al., 2019; Williams, 2007). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that resilience training could be an effective form of cognitive behaviour therapy to alleviate the impact of challenging life circumstances. The study's objectives are based on a thorough review of existing literature and aim to investigate the following research hypotheses:

- H1:** Sexual harassment has a positive significant relationship with psychological distress among female police officers.
- H2:** Resilience has a negative significant relationship with psychological distress among female police officers.
- H3:** Resilience positively moderates the relationship between sexual harassment and psychological distress among female police officers in Nigeria such that resilient officers will adapt to the distress triggered by sexual harassment.

Method

Participants and procedures

The study involved 504 female police officers in Nigeria. The researcher selected 25 police formations, 18 State Criminal Investigation Department, 21 Area Command and 28 police divisions located in seven states namely: Lagos, Enugu, Rivers, Anambra, Benue, Kogi and Abia State. The study focused exclusively on female participants and used a multistage and purposive sampling technique to select consenting police officers from various states, divisions, and formations. Among these, 75.4% were married, 24.6% were single, 75.4% were Christians, and 24.6% were of interfaith. In terms of educational qualifications, 2.4% had a Doctor of Philosophy, 4.8% had a Master's Degree, 23.8% had a Bachelor's Degree, 18.3% had a Higher National Diploma, 16.7% had an Ordinary National Diploma, 7.9% had a National Certificate Examination, and 26.2% had a Senior Secondary Certificate Examination. The tenure of these female police officers ranged from 1 to 33 years, and their ages ranged from 24 to 53 years ($M=35.09$, $SD=2.29$). The researchers visited the State Police Command and various police formations and divisions across the sampled states to introduce and familiarize themselves with the study. Authorization to conduct the study among police officers was also requested and received from the State Police Command of the respective states used in Nigeria. The Administrative Officer instructed the heads of the command's formations and divisions to administer copies of the questionnaire to female officers using the roster. The study excluded female officers who were physically ill, pregnant, or on extended leave. Out of 530 questionnaires distributed, 515 were completed and returned, with 97.86% properly filled. The study used the 504 returned and properly filled questionnaires for analysis.

Measures

Sexual Harassment Inventory (SHI)

The Sexual Harassment Inventory (SHI), a 21-item questionnaire developed by Murdoch & McGovern in 1998, was used to evaluate sexual harassment. The SHI assesses three categories of sexual harassment: (1) a hostile work environment with sexual undertones, (2) requests for sexual favors in exchange for preferential treatment (quid pro quo), and (3) instances of criminal sexual misconduct, such as indecent exposure or rape. The inventory evaluates harassment between colleagues and between supervisors and their subordinates. The SHI has strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's α values ranging from 0.92 to 0.95. Additionally, studies by Murdoch et al. (2003) and Murdoch & McGovern (1998) have shown its factorial validity. The SHI has two

response options which are Yes (1) and No (0). Obtained scores range from 0 – 21. A higher score means high sexual harassment; lower score means low sexual harassment, while zero score indicates no harassment. The scale was tested in the police population and showed good internal consistency, with α values ranging from 0.65 to 0.71 in this study.

Connor–Davidson Brief Resilience Scale

The researchers used a 10-item scale to measure the resilience of female police officers. This scale used a 5-point Likert-type system, with response options from 0 (never) to 4 (almost always). The scale showed a consistent structure and participants indicated how relevant each item was to them in the past month. The total score, calculated by adding the responses, ranged from 0 to 40, representing the highest resilience level. The scale showed good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.81, indicating that the consistency remained even after removing any item from the scale. Some sample items included "I possess the ability to handle any challenges that arise" and "The experience of managing stress can enhance my resilience." Further analysis using principal component analysis showed a two-factor model. Factor 1 had 6 items, explaining 38.94% of the variance, while Factor 2 had 4 items, explaining 10.35% of the variance. The model's goodness of fit was confirmed by various indices: $\chi^2 = 87.5$; CMIN/df = 2.74; CFI = .95; GFI = .96; SRMR = .046; RMSEA = .062. The scale was also tested in the police population and showed good internal consistency, with α values ranging from 0.72 to 0.83 in this study.

Psychological Distress Scale

The evaluation of psychological distress was carried out using the K10 scale. The K10 scale, developed by Kessler et al. in 2003, is a commonly used assessment tool designed to differentiate between individuals with severe mental illness and those without any mental illness. Responses were assessed using a five-point Likert scale, which measures the degree to which respondents have experienced 10 symptoms, such as unexplained fatigue and feelings of sadness or depression, over the past month. The scale utilizes a 5-point response format ranging from 5 (indicating all of the time) to 1 (indicating none of the time). The individual items were combined to calculate a total score ranging from 10 to 50. A higher score on this scale indicates a higher level of psychological distress. The K10 scale, developed by Kessler et al. (2003), showed high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.93. The scale was also tested in the police population and demonstrated strong internal consistency, with alpha values ranging from 0.67 to 0.84 in this study.

Data Analysis

Pearson's correlation was used to examine the relationships among the study variables, as shown in Table 1 (Hayes & Preacher, 2014). The data was thoroughly analyzed using the Hayes (2013) Regression-based Macro PROCESS for SPSS version 23. The findings in Tables 2 and Figure 1 unmistakably demonstrate the direct and moderating impacts of the study variables. The PROCESS macro is specifically designed for assessing the effects of mediation and moderation in research ((Podsakoff et al. 2003; Salam et al., 2017).

Results

Table 1: Mean, Standard deviation, and Correlations among the study variables

	Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Age	35.09	2.29	-							
2	Marital St.	1.84	.61	.36**	-						
3	Edu. Quali.	4.71	1.73	-.12	-.23**	-					
4	Religion	1.03	.25	.08	.03	-.05	-				
5	Job Dur.	15.32	6.98	.45**	.15	-.31**	.09	-			
6	SEXHAS	9.34	3.57	-.01	.08	.04	.06	.02	-		
7	RES	20.67	8.07	.01	.10	-.18*	-.01	-.07	-.38*	-	
8	PSYDES	27.27	11.66	-.02	-.11	.10	.01	.04	.55**	-.32*	-

Note: N=504 **p< .01, * p< .05 (2-tailed). Marital St. = Marital Status, Edu. Quali. = Educational Qualification, Job Dur. = Job Duration, SEXHAS. = Sexual Harassment, RES. = Resilience, PSYDES= Psychological Distress

The data presented in Table 1 indicated that there were no significant relationships between age, marital status, educational qualification, religion, and job duration and psychological distress among female police officers. As a result, these variables were not included in the overall analysis. However, a strong positive correlation ($r=.55$, $p<.01$) was found between sexual harassment and psychological distress. Additionally, there was a significant negative correlation ($r= -.38$, $p<.01$) between resilience and psychological distress. Age and marital status have a negative correlation ($r=-.36$, $p<.01$), as does age and job duration ($r=.45$, $p<.01$). Marital status also has a negative correlation with educational qualification ($r = -.23$, $p <.01$). Additionally, there is a negative correlation between educational qualification and job duration ($r= -.31$, $p<.01$), as well as between educational qualification and resilience ($r= -.18$, $p<.05$). There is a noteworthy inverse correlation between sexual harassment and resilience, with a correlation coefficient of $-.38$ and a significance level of $p<.01$.

Table 2: Hayes Process Moderating Effect of Resilience in the relationship between Sexual Harassment and Psychological Distress.

Variable	B	SE	t	P	95%CI	R ²	F
Sexual Harassment	3.30	.70	4.66	.00	[1.90, 4.70]	.35	90.63
Resilience	.53	.31	1.72	.08	[-.07,1.14]		
SEXHAS X RES	-.09	.03	-2.5	.01	[-.12, -.05]		

SEXHAS= Sexual Harassment, RES= Resilience, CI= Confidence Interval

The result of the analysis indicates that sexual harassment was positively related to psychological distress ($\beta = 3.30$, 95% CI [1.90, 4.70], $P < .001$). It also shows that resilience did not relate with psychological distress ($\beta = .53$, 95% CI [-.07, 1.14], $P > .05$). The interaction effect of sexual harassment and resilience on the psychological distress of female police officers was significant ($\beta = -.09$, 95% CI [-.12, -.05], $P < .01$).

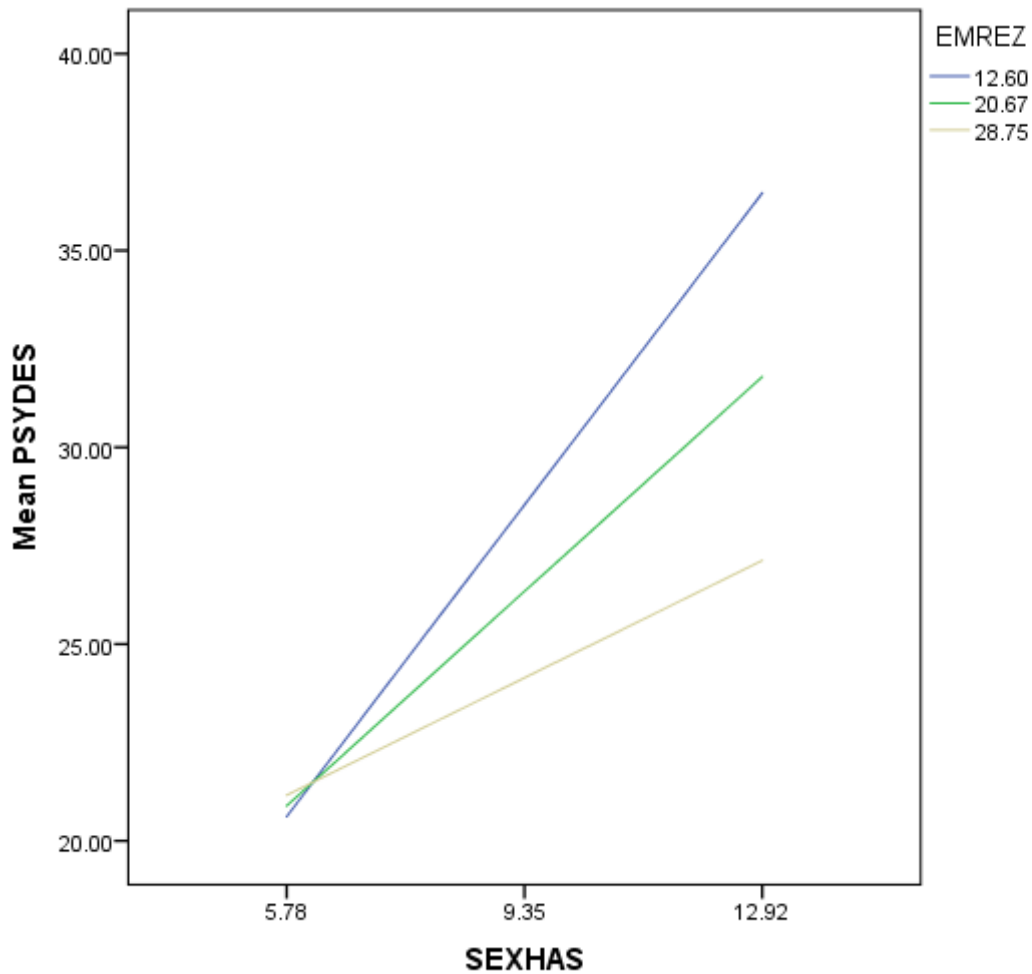


Figure 1: The moderating effect of resilience in the relationship between sexual harassment and psychological distress among female police officers. SEXHAS. = Sexual Harassment, EMRES. = Resilience, PSYDES= Psychological Distress

Discussion

The aim of the study was to examine the role of resilience on the relationship between sexual harassment and psychological distress among female police officers in Nigeria. The aim of this study was to investigate the impact of resilience on the relationship between sexual harassment and psychological distress among female police officers in Nigeria. The study findings support the proposed model: Hypothesis 1 posits a notable correlation between sexual harassment and psychological distress among female police officers in Nigeria. A high proportion of them report mental health difficulties and believe that their work negatively impacts their mental well-being. This finding aligns with previous research that highlights sexual harassment as a significant social stressor with substantial negative effects on women (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Yesufu et al., 2020;

Ansoleaga et al., 2019; Attell et al., 2017; Glomb et al., 1999; Munson et al., 2000). Previous research also suggests that workplace harassment and bullying contribute to increased psychological distress among female police officers, resulting in mental anguish, physical illness, and damage to professional reputation (Chitra & Karunanidhi, 2021; Munson et al., 2000; Yesufu et al., 2020; Ansoleaga et al., 2019).

Regarding H2, the study found that resilience does not significantly relate to psychological distress among female police officers in Nigeria, contradicting previous studies that suggest resilience can reduce psychological distress (Regehr et al., 2021; Elizabeth, 2020; Child et al., 2014). Resilience is a skill required to cope with negative emotions caused by workplace sexual harassment, not a natural trait. Female officers do not demonstrate resilience when there is no stress to act upon, but when their mental health is threatened by sexual harassment, resilience is necessary. The study in Hypothesis 3 found that resilience moderated the relationship between sexual harassment and psychological distress among female police officers in Nigeria. Resilience alleviates distress caused by sexual harassment, such as sadness, fear, depression, anxiety, or isolation. It acts as an adaptive temperature, mitigating the harmful effects of the initial stress. Resilience, toughness, and psychological capital are crucial abilities for police personnel to adapt to traumatic situations.

Implications for Research and Practices

This study will add to the existing body of work examining the impact of sexual harassment and psychological distress on women in law enforcement. For example, female police officers may benefit from an awareness campaign as it might/can help them understand and deal with sexual harassment in the workplace. This may be accomplished, for example, through assertiveness training. In addition, this study will help police authorities develop effective strategies to reduce the adverse effects of harassment on female police officers, allowing them to do their jobs more effectively and safely.

The study highlights the negative impact of psychological distress on female officers' mental health, suggesting that police forces should address these issues and support those in high-risk roles. Identifying tasks that may lead to sexual harassment and psychological distress can help control mental health issues. The College of Policing (2018) emphasizes the importance of focusing on strengths to build resilience and reduce personal and organizational hazards. Regular psychological evaluations can help identify and intervene in mental health issues caused by harassment (Chitra & Karunanidhi, 2021; Yetunde et al., 2020). Resilience is crucial in preventing psychological distress among female police officers in Nigeria. It involves overcoming workplace

behaviours and adversity, which can negatively impact performance and mental health. Cultivating resilience is essential for female officers to combat sexual harassment and maintain their mental health, thereby fostering a more resilient personality trait.

Recent studies have explored mental toughness as a resource for coping with stress in police officers. Training in sports and education can develop mental toughness (Ward et al., 2018). Research has also explored strategies for boosting stress resistance, such as relaxation and imagery training, which can improve resilience and sustain mental well-being (Arnetz et al., 2009). These strategies are particularly beneficial for officers in vulnerable groups like 24/7 officers and shift workers.

Limitations and Future Research

Given the reliance on self-reported measurements, the potential for recall bias, and the presence of unobserved confounding factors, such as socioeconomic status and organizational climate, it is important to interpret the findings of this study with caution. Relying on individuals' self-perceptions can result in either overestimation or underestimation of results. Moreover, only Police units and departments in seven Nigerian States were included in the sample; data from other states and cities' police departments in Nigeria would be more representative. Using a larger sample size is advisable in order to enhance the statistical power of the study. Future research should include a comprehensive interview to explore factors such as socioeconomic status, age, and ethnic identities. This will help understand the correlation between harassment and resilience among female police officers.

Conclusion

Sexual harassment is a significant issue in police departments, causing emotional harm, reduced morale, and potentially compromising public trust. A strong anti-harassment policy is necessary to protect all female employees who are at risk. Bystanders may also be negatively affected by such incidents. The police should take a consultative approach to developing action plans and support mechanisms for victims. Reporting sexual harassment cases is often ineffective; creating multiple channels, improving training for informal resolution, and using a neutral third party can increase trust. Training can provide emotional and physical resilience for female police officers, preventing psychological distress and mental health issues. Interventions with senior staff can enhance role-playing and create incentives for effective action. Sexual harassment can be a precursor to sexual violence, and understanding its causes and effects is crucial for providing practical help. The study recommends implementing training programs for enhancing resilience skills and regular stress

management for female police officers. It is essential to also effectively incorporate special interest organizations such as the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), National Council for Women Societies (NCWS), and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) into positive strategies aimed at reducing sexual harassment.

Data availability: The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available and will be provided by the corresponding author if required.

Conflicts of interest: The authors disclosed no conflicts of interest

Ethical Approval: All research methods involving human participants align with the institutional research committee's ethical standards and the 1964 Helsinki Statement and its subsequent revisions or similar ethical standards

Informed Consent: All individual participants in the research provided informed permission.

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ORCID iD

Gabriel C. Kanu – <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8176-1167>

Ikechukwu V.N. Ujoatuonu – <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8336-9716>

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