

# **Female Executives' Self-Reported Experiences of Contra-Power Sexual Harassment from Male Subordinates in the Workplace**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines female executives' experiences of 'contra-power sexual harassment' (CPSH) – a situation in which the harasser possesses less formal power than the harassed – from male subordinates in the workplace. One hundred and fifteen (115) respondents, consisting of sixty-seven (67) female executives and forty-eight (48) male subordinates, were purposively selected. Two versions of a structured questionnaire in terms of the harassed and the harasser, containing eleven (11) sexual acts/behaviours were administered to the respondents. Additionally, two focused group discussions (FGDs), comprising between 6 and 10 participants, were conducted with female executives and male subordinates, respectively. Data collected from the FGDs were sorted, transcribed, and reported verbatim while data from the questionnaire were analyzed, using simple frequency percentage distributions. Female executives most perceived and experienced male subordinates grabbing their groins in front of female executives (P: 73.1%, E: 61.2%), male subordinates bragging about their sexual organs as hefty in the presence of female executives (P: 64.2%, E: 59.7%), and male subordinates bragging about their prowess in bed to the hearing of female executives (P: 61.2%, E: 58.2%) – as sexually harassing. 35% of the male respondents reported that they grabbed their groins in front of female executives, 60.4% bragged of the size of their sexual organs, and 52.1% bragged of their prowess in bed to the hearing of female executives. The FGDs revealed that CPSH may induce low job satisfaction, job commitment, and reduced productivity; increase feelings of loss of control over the body, destroy gender identity, and increase the tendency to quit the job. Female executives ignored the acts and maintained strict formal relationships with their male subordinates as ways of coping with the acts. Conclusively, as powerful as female executives are in position of authority, they are still powerless as regards CPHS.

**Keywords:** Contra-power Sexual Harassment, Job Satisfaction, Gender Identity.

## **Introduction**

Over the years, more men compared to women have often occupied executive positions in the workplace for reasons associated with gender perceptions situated in patriarchy – that conceives men to be superior to women. This gender perception confers certain privileges (e.g. access to education, employment, placement/promotion, etc.), on males over females in all spheres of life (Wilson and Thompson, 2001). Such privileges have strengthened gender differentiation in the workplace, with men empowered politically and economically over women.

Some studies (Akinbulumo, 2003; Jafe, Lemon, & Poisson, 2003; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998; Elles and Dekeseredy, 1996) argued that gender differentiation has accounted partly for the development and perpetration of sexual harassment (SH) in the workplace with men as the major perpetrators and women, the victims. Other studies (e.g., Fayankinnu, 2010; Wayne, 2000; etc) suggest that male executives' fear of challenges that may arise from women occupying executive positions increased the prevalent rate at which male executives sexually harass female subordinates as a means to sustain a male hegemony in the workplace and subject women under men's control (traditional SH).

Studies (such as Fayankinnu, 2010, 2004; Nnorom, 2004) have addressed traditional SH (where the harasser possesses higher organizational power than the harassed) and argued that, to reduce the incidence of such SH in the workplace women must improve their lot in areas that will render them relevant to attaining executive positions in the workplace.

In the last two decades, women have acquired higher educational qualifications, like their male counterparts, and have engaged in advocacy programmes against all forms of workplace discrimination. This has led to more women entering jobs traditionally preserved for males, e.g. executive positions in organizations (Akinnawo and Fayankinnu, 2010). In spite of attaining higher level and status, research indicate that female executives remain far outnumbered by male executives and also experience SH from higher status male executives and from lower status males (Ann, 2007; McKinney, 1990; Grauerholz, 1989). This paper delves into female executives' experiences of 'contra-power sexual harassment' (CPSH) from male subordinates in the workplace. Benson (1984) had defined CPSH as a situation in which the abuser possesses less formal power than the abused.

The justification for this study is hinged on the dearth of data on female executives' experiences of CPSH from male subordinates, particularly, in Nigeria. A plausible explanation

for this gap may be that men had traditionally outnumbered women in executive positions, consequent to “patriarchy”. High incidence of SH against female subordinates by male executives has aroused researchers’ interest towards traditional SH, with little or no attention to CPSH (Benson, 1984). Skewed studies of such are capable of underplay the incidence and number of female executives who may be experiencing CPSH in the workplace. Moreover, previous studies (Ann, 2007; DeSouza and Fansler, 2003; Yamada, 2000; Shaffer, Joplin, Bell, Lau, and Oguz, 2000; Smith, 2000; Claney, 1994; Sandroff, 1992; McKinney, 1992, 1990; Grauerholz, 1989; Benson, 1984) conducted on CPSH were in Western societies and do not reflect the exact situation in Africa, particularly Nigeria. Findings from this study may, therefore, compliment other scholars’ research interest in comparative studies relating to female executives’ experiences of CPSH.

In spite of their status, female executives experience CPSH (McKinney, 1992, 1990; Grauerholz, 1989; Benson, 1984), and it is prevalent (DeSouza and Fansler, 2003; Yamada, 2000). For example, in a study conducted among members of the National Association of Female Executives in the United Kingdom on their experiences of SH from male subordinates, Galen, Weber, and Cuneo (1991) reported that 53% of the respondents had once been sexually harassed by a male of lower status in the workplace. In another study, Sandroff (1992) reported that over 60% of executive women in a survey of *working women* have been sexually harassed by male subordinates at work. A similar study conducted on female family physicians in 1993 revealed that 77% of the female physicians had experienced at least one form of SH from patients (Phillips and Schneider, 1993). In her study of female attorneys, Claney (1994) found that 39% of female attorneys reported being sexually harassed by clients. In another study consisting of health care executives, Burda (1996) reported that 29% of women executives and 5% of men executives have been sexually harassed by men and women respectively of lower status, respectively. Finally, in his study of workplace aggression, Yamada (2000) found that 20% of the instigators of bullying are of lower institutional status than their targets. Despite the high incidence of CPSH, studies (Yamada, 2000; Newel, Rosenfeld, and Culbertson, 1995) continue to find low reporting rates for reasons associated with victims being scared of repercussions; embarrassed to report the incidence, feel shameful about what happened, or do not believe that what they experience qualifies for SH (Ann, 2007; Dey, Korn, and Sax, 1996).

Studies suggest that CPSH may have several consequences on the workplace and the individuals involved. For instance, CPSH may interrupt with female executives' careers (Ann, 2007), executive women may experience job dissatisfaction and reduced commitment (Fayankinnu, 2010; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003), decline in productivity (Akinawo and Fayankinnu, 2010), may lead to high feelings of loss of control over emotion and the body (Hardy, 2002), destroy gender identity (Fayankinnu, 2004; Van, 1993), and increase the tendency to quit the job (Djurkovic, McCormack & Casimir, 2004). This paper broadly examines female executives' experiences of CPSH from male subordinates, with specifics into female executives' perception of behaviour considered sexually harassing, experiences of sexually harassing behaviour from male subordinates, consequences of CPSH, and coping strategies employed.

### **Method**

The study population consisted of female executive's employee and male subordinates' employee, purposively selected from the Local Government Service. The purposive sampling technique was used for reason associated with fewer females in executive positions in Nigerian organizations. The social condition of the organization under which this study took place was one of speculation that female executives' sexuality and dignity was endangered in spite of the fact that the organization had a sexual harassment policy in place.

The FGD and the questionnaire schedule are the instruments utilized for collection of qualitative and quantitative data respectively. A total of four (4) FGDs, divided into two groups (2 FGDs for female executives and 2 FGDs for male subordinates), consisting of between 6 and 10 participants per FGD, were held. In all, there were eighteen (18) female executives and fifteen (15) male subordinates that participated in the FGD component of the study. The criteria for selecting the respondents for the FGDs were hinged on experience, job status, job tenure, and willingness to participate in the study.

The FGD-guide specifically sought to establish female executives' experiences of CPSH, implications for their social well-being, and the coping strategies employed. During the discussions, it was ensured that participants in each session were homogeneous in terms of their job status. This encouraged the participants to express themselves freely as well as it enabled this study to establish if there were differences in female executives' experiences of CPSH compared to sexually harassing acts perpetrated by male subordinates against female executives.

Participants' consent to have their voices recorded was sought and voluntarily given – which ensured the respondents' confidence that this study was purely for academic purpose. In addition to convincing the participants (through verbal discussions) that facilitators/interviewers were learning from them and not testing their knowledge, the participants were also encouraged to choose the setting for their discussions and to freely ask the facilitators pertinent questions. The group discussions were conducted in locations and spaces free of the watchful eyes of the male subordinates or supervisors. This was to avoid threat of sanctions, and the influence of non-participating on-lookers and gate-keepers. The FGDs lasted between 52 and 59 minutes, per session.

Two versions of a structured questionnaire (in terms of the harassed and the harasser) containing eleven (11) sexual acts/behaviours were administered to the respondents. The questionnaire for the harassed (female executives) was divided into three (3) sections and contained both open-ended and close-ended questions. The first section of the questionnaire assessed the demographic characteristics of the respondents, while the second and third sections measured female executives' perceptions of male subordinates' behaviour considered sexually harassing, and female executives' experiences of CPSH from male subordinates. The female executives were asked to indicate the acts/behaviour they perceived as sexually harassing from male subordinates as well as their experiences of CPSH from male subordinates on the following response format: Disagree (D) = 1, Not Sure (NS) = 2, and, Agree (A) = 3. Some of the acts/behaviours included in the questionnaire schedule are 'unwanted touch on the body', 'suggestive text messages from male subordinates, 'male subordinates grabbing their groins before female executives, etc.

On the other hand, the questionnaire for the harasser (male subordinates) contained two sections which assessed the demographic characteristics of the respondents and male subordinates' perpetration of SH against female executives. The questions were paraphrased to reflect male subordinates' posture as intending perpetrators of SH against female executives. Thus, the male subordinates were asked to indicate which of the acts/behaviour they have perpetrated against female executives with the intention to sexually harass them. These questions include 'male subordinates bragging about their sexual prowess in bed before female executives, 'male subordinates bragging about their sexual organs as hefty before female executives',

‘looking lustfully at female executives’, etc. The responses were coded as Disagree (D) = 1; Not Sure (NS) = 2; and, Agree (A) = 3.

The ethical and field protocols for this study were approved by the Research and Publications Committee of the Department of Sociology, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Nigeria.

### ***Analysis***

The data collected from FGDs were audio-taped, sorted, and later transcribed with the help of field assistants. Data were analyzed using manual content analysis – reporting verbatim the responses of participants where necessary. The questionnaire schedule was analyzed, using simple frequency percentage distributions. Cross tabulations between gender and other demographic characteristics of the respondents was used to provide explanation why female executives may experience CPSH.

## **Result**

### **Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

One hundred and fifteen (115) respondents, comprising of sixty-seven (67) female executives and forty-eight (48) male subordinates, participated in the study. Seven per cent of the entire respondents were aged between 25 and 29 years, 22.6% aged between 30 and 39 years, 55.7% were between 40 and 49, and 14.8% aged 50 and above. Comparatively, more male subordinates (60.4%) than the female executives are between 40 and 49 years, 12.5% and 16.4% male subordinates and female executives, respectively, are 50 years and above. More than seventy percent (71.3%) of the total respondents are married compared to 26.1% who are single; only 1(0.9%) is divorced, 1(0.9%) separated, and 1(0.9%) widowed, accordingly. When specifics were considered, 66.7% males and 74.6% females are married. Majority (92.2%) of the entire respondents are from the Yoruba ethnic group. This is expected given that the study is conducted in the south-western part of Nigeria, dominated by the Yoruba.

All the respondents are literate – 18.3% are holders of National Diploma Certificate (ND)/National Certificate of Education (NCE), 77.4% are degree holders while 2.6% and 1.7% hold higher degrees and professional certificate, respectively. When the respondents’ educational qualification is compared by gender, 66.7% males and 85.1% females are degree holders, 33.3% males compared to 7.5% females hold Ordinary Diploma/ National Certificate, while 4.5% and

3.0% females are PhD and professional certificates holders, respectively. Analysis concerning job tenure of respondents, showed that 10.4% of the total respondents had served between 1 and 5 years in service, 27% had spent between 6 and 11 years in service, 38.3% had put in between 12 and 16 years in service, while 24.3% are 17 years and above in service. Comparing job tenure for both genders, 94% female executives have spent 12 years and above compared to 18% male subordinates. On the other hand, 81% male subordinates have spent 1-11 years compared to 6% female executives (see Table I).

**Table I: Cross tabulation of socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents**

	AGE				Total
	25-29	30-39	40-49	50+	
<i>Gender:</i> Male, (% within gender)	8(16.7%)	5(10.4%)	29(60.4%)	6 (12.5%)	48(100%)
Female, (% within gender)	0(.0%)	21(31.3%)	35(52.2%)	11(16.4)	67(100%)
Total % for the entire respondents	8(7%)	26(22.6%)	64(55.7%)	17(14.8%)	115(100%)

	MARITAL STATUS					Total
	Single	Married	Divorced	Separated	Widowed	
<i>Gender:</i> Male, (% within gender)	15(31.3%)	32(66.7%)	1(2.1%)	0(.0%)	0(.0%)	48(100%)
Female, (% within gender)	15(22.4%)	50(76.4%)	0(.0%)	1(1.5%)	1(1.5%)	67(100%)
Total % for the entire respondents	30(26.1%)	82(71.3%)	1(.9%)	1(.9%)	1(.9%)	115(100)

	ETHNICITY			Total
	Yoruba	Igbo	Others	
<i>Gender:</i> Male, (% within gender)	46(95.8%)	1(2.1%)	1(2.1%)	48(100%)
Female, (% within gender)	60(89.6%)	7(10.4%)	0(.0%)	67(100)
Total % for the entire respondents	106(92.2%)	8(7.0%)	1(.9%)	115(100%)

	EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION				Total
	OND/NCE	HND/B.Sc.	PhD	PROFESSIONAL	
<i>Gender:</i> Male, (% within gender)	16(33.3%)	32(66.7%)	0(.0%)	0(.0%)	48(100%)
Female, (% within gender)	5(7.5%)	57(85.1%)	3(4.5%)	2(3.0%)	67(100%)
Total % for the entire respondents	21(18.3%)	89(77.4%)	3(2.6%)	2(1.7%)	115(100%)

	AVERAGE MONTHLY INCOME					Total
	<N40,000	N40,000- N49,000	N50,000- N59,000	N60,000- N69,000	N70,000 +	
<i>Gender:</i> Male, (% within gender)	35(72.9%)	13(27.1%)	0(.0%)	0(.0%)	0(.0%)	48(100)
Female, (% within gender)	0(.0%)	0(.0%)	26(38.8%)	38(56.7%)	3(4.5%)	67(100)
Total % for the entire respondents	35(30.4%)	13(11.3%)	26(22.6%)	38(33.0%)	3(2.6%)	115(100)

	JOB TENURE				Total
	1-5 years	6-11 years	2-16y1ears	17 years +	
<i>Gender:</i> Male, (% within gender)	12(25.0%)	27(56.3%)	9(18.8%)	0(.0%)	48(100%)
Female, (% within gender)	0(.0%)	4(6.0%)	35(52.2%)	28(41.8%)	67(100%)
Total % for the entire respondents	12(10.4%)	31(27.0%)	44(38.3%)	28(24.3%)	115(100%)

Source: Author's Survey.

### ***Female Executives' Perception of Male Subordinates' Behaviour Considered Sexually Harassing***

The respondents (female executives only) were served with a scaled list that contained eleven (11) acts/behaviour and were asked to indicate which of the acts they perceive as sexually harassing. Table 2 indicates that the respondents perceived all the eleven (11) acts as sexually harassing but reported three out of them as the most sexually harassing, namely: male subordinates grabbing their groins in front of female executives (73.1%), bragging about their sexual organs as hefty in the presence of female executives (64.2%), and bragging of their prowess in bed to the hearing of female executives (61.2%). With the exception of the act of suggestive text messages from male subordinates, which was perceived by 43.3% of the respondents as sexually harassing, the response rate for the remaining seven acts was below 30% for each (see Table 2). Nevertheless, more than one in five women considered each of the following as sexual harassment: prolonged handshake with junior male subordinates (28.4%), frontal hugging with suggestive meanings (23.9%), lustful look from male subordinates (23.9%), and unwanted touch by male subordinates (20.9%).



**Table 2: Percentage Distribution of Female Executives' Self-Reported Perception of Sexually Harassing Behaviour from Male Subordinates**

		Agree	Not Sure	Disagree
1	Male subordinates grabbing their groin in front of female executives	<b>49(73.1%)</b>	-	18(26.9%)
2	Male subordinates bragging about the size of their penal organ as hefty in the presence of female executives	<b>43(64.2%)</b>	-	24(35.8%)
3	Male subordinates bragging of their sexual prowess in bed to the hearing of female executives	<b>41(61.2%)</b>	-	26(38.8%)
4	Suggestive Text messages from male subordinates	29(43.3%)	-	38(56.7%)
5	Prolonged handshake with junior male subordinates	19(28.4%)	-	48(71.6%)
6	Frontal hugging with suggestive meanings	16(23.9%)	-	51(76.1)
7	Lustful look from male subordinates	16(23.9%)	-	51(76.1%)
8	Unwanted touch on the body from male subordinates	14(20.9%)	-	53(79.1%)
9	Verbal discussions with sexual undertones	7(10.4%)	-	60(89.6%)
10	Male subordinates presenting suggestive gifts to female executives.	7(10.4%)	-	6(89.6%)
11	When male subordinates pass pleasant comments often about female executives	6(9.0%)	-	61(91.0%)

Source: *Author's Survey.*

### ***Female Executives' Self-Reported Experiences of CPHS***

To investigate female executives' experiences of CPHS from male subordinates, the female respondents were served with a scaled list containing eleven sexual behaviours and asked to indicate the behaviour they had experienced from male subordinates in the workplace. Table 3 shows that a large proportion (61.2%) of the female executives reported that male subordinates grabbed their groins before them, 59.7% reported that male subordinates bragged about their sexual organs as hefty before them, and 58.2% female executives confirmed that male subordinates bragged about their sexual prowess in bed before them. These three acts/behaviours constitute the most sexually harassing behaviour experienced by the female executives. Additionally, 41.8% had received sexually patronizing comments from male subordinates, 37.4% have been given gifts with sexual undertones, 35.8% said that male subordinates had engaged them in verbal discussions that are sexually suggestive, 35.8% reported that male subordinates lustfully looked at them, 34.4% received prolonged handshakes with sexual undertones from male subordinates, 25.4% of the female executives reported that they experienced unwanted touch on their bodies from male subordinates, 16.4% said they were hugged frontally by male

subordinates, and another 16.4% received text-messages with sexual undertones from male subordinates, (see Table 3).

**Table 3:** Percentage Distribution Showing Female Executives’ Self-Reported Experiences of Sexual Harassment from Male Subordinates

		Agree	Not Sure	Disagree
1	Male subordinates grabbing their groins in the front of female executives	<b>41(61.2%)</b>	14(20.9%)	12(17.9%)
2	Male subordinates bragging about the size of their sexual organs as hefty in the presence female executives	<b>40(59.7%)</b>	13(19.4%)	14(20.9%)
3	Male subordinates bragging of their sexual prowess in bed to the hearing of female executives	<b>39(58.2%)</b>	11(16.4%)	17(25.4%)
4	When male subordinates make sexually patronizing comments often about female executives	28(41.8%)	10(14.9%)	29(43.3%)
5	Male subordinates presenting suggestive gifts to female executives.	25(37.4%)	6(9.0%)	36(53.6%)
6	Verbal discussions with sexual undertones	24(35.8%)	6(9.0%)	37(54.7%)
7	Lustful look from male subordinates	24(35.8%)	4(6.0%)	39(58.2%)
8	Prolonged handshakes from junior male subordinates	23(34.4%)	4(6.0%)	40(59.6%)
9	Unwanted touch on the body from male subordinates	17(25.4%)	5(7.5%)	45(67.1%)
10	Received suggestive text-messages from male subordinates	11(16.4%)	6(9.0%)	50(74.7%)
11	Frontal hugging with suggestive meanings	11(16.4%)	9(13.4%)	47(70.3%)

Source: Author’s Survey

### ***Male Subordinates’ Self-Reported Perpetration of CPSH against Female Executives***

In an attempt to avoid lop-sided results, the male subordinates were requested to indicate the sexual acts/behaviours they ever perpetrated against their female executives. Table 4 reveals that the prevalence which male subordinates harassed female executives was higher in four sexual acts/behaviours. According to the male respondents, 60.4% bragged about the size of their sexual organs as hefty in front of female executives, 58.4% sent suggestive messages to female executives, 54.2% agreed that they looked lustfully at female executives, while 52.1% said they bragged about their prowess in bed to the hearing of female executives. In addition, 37.5% had hugged female executives in a sexually harassing manner, 37.5% had engaged female executives in verbal discussions that are sexually suggestive, 37.5% had prolonged their handshakes with female executives, 35.4% grabbed their groins before female executives, 31.3% of the male respondents had touched female executives on their bodies without permission, 27% had made sexually patronizing pleasant comments about female executives, and 6.3% said that they presented sexually suggestive gifts to female executives (see Table 4).

**Table 4:** Percentage Distribution showing Male Subordinates' Self-Reported Perpetration of Sexually Harassing Behaviour against Female Executives

		Agree	Not sure	Disagree
1	Bragging about the size of your sexual organ as hefty in the presence of female executives	<b>29(60.4%)</b>	4(8.3%)	15(31.3%)
2	Sending suggestive text-messages to female executives	<b>28(58.4%)</b>	6(12.5%)	14(29.2%)
3	Bragging about your sexual prowess in bed to the hearing of female executives	<b>25(52.1%)</b>	7(14.4%)	16(33.4%)
4	Giving frontal hugging to female executives with suggestive meanings	18(37.5%)	13(27.1%)	17(35.4%)
5	Prolonged handshakes with female executives	18(37.5%)	13(29.1%)	17(35.4%)
6	Verbal discussions with female executives carrying sexual undertones	18(37.5%)	19(39.6%)	11(22.9%)
7	Grabbing your groin in the front of female executives	17(35.4%)	12(25.0%)	19(39.6%)
8	Unwanted touch on female executive body	15(31.3%)	13(27.1%)	20(41.7%)
9	Making sexually patronizing comments about female executives	13(27.1%)	9(18.8%)	26(47.9%)
10	Looking lustful at female executives	11(22.9%)	26(54.2%)	11(22.9%)
11	Presenting suggestive gifts to female executives.	3(6.3%)	15(31.3%)	30(62.5%)

Source: *Author's Survey*

### **Consequences of CPSH**

The FGD was utilized to ascertain what consequences CPSH have on the female executives. The choice to use the FGD is informed by the fact that CPSH is subjective in nature and requires a technique that can capture the subjective nature of the issue under study. Findings from a significant number of the participants in the FGDs point to the fact that CPSH induces low psychological health, which impact negatively on job satisfaction and job commitment, and reduces productivity. The bulk of the participants also reported that SH led to high feelings of loss of control over the body, destroys gender identity and induces the tendency to quit the job. The following are excerpts from the FGDs conducted with female executives:

It is very painful when you experience sexual harassment from a junior male officer. The experience is agonizing such that it makes you fall sick and lose interest in going to work.

Another female executive remarked that:

When male subordinates sexually harass their female executives consider it as a slight and disrespect on our bodies. In other words, the male subordinates are suggesting that we don't own control over our bodies – we consider this attitude violent and dehumanizing.

Another female executive reported thus:

Being sexually harassed by male subordinates is an indication that the workplace is unsafe for female executives. In short, every female executive lives in fear of the unexpected – being raped or sexually molested by male subordinates. Thus, the satisfaction we ought to derive from our work declines, commitment reduces, and productivity drops.

Yet, another female executive expressed her experiences thus:

The presence of SH in any organization is capable of making people to quit their jobs. For example, there was a time when a female executive had to quit her job for reasons related to being sexually harassed by a male subordinate; and, the failure of the sexual harassment panel to punish the male subordinate. Such a woman saw her identity destroyed, the essence of her existence stolen away, losing control over her body, and alienated from her workplace and the society. On the other hand, the male subordinate raises his shoulders high in the workplace.

Majority of the participants aligned with the views expressed in these excerpts.

When the respondents were asked how they coped with CPSH from male subordinates, they reported that they simply ignored acts with sexual undertones by male subordinates towards them, and maintained strict formal relationships with their male subordinates. An excerpt from one of the FGDs reads thus:

I ignored sexually harassing acts perpetrated by male subordinates and ensure that my relationship with the male subordinate is strictly on official basis.

## **Discussion**

This study examined female executives' perception and experiences of CPSH from male subordinates in the workplace. The findings confirmed that female executives perceived and believed they experienced three major sexually harassing behaviours – 'male subordinates grabbing their groins before female executives', 'male subordinates bragging about their sexual organs as hefty before female executives', and 'male subordinates bragging about their sexual

prohess in bed before female executives'. In other words, female executives experienced more symbolic SH (e.g., male subordinates grabbing their groins before female executives) and verbal SH (e.g., male subordinates bragging about their sexual organs as hefty before female executives, and male subordinates bragging about their sexual prowess in bed before female executives) compared to physical SH. This is similar to the findings of Matchen and DeSouza (2000), and McKinney (1990), who found that faculty female professors, experienced more body language of sexual nature each month from male students.

That female executives experienced higher incidence of symbolic SH and verbal SH from male subordinates may be explained within the purview of the power relations that exists between female executives as leaders, on the one hand, and male subordinates as followers, on the other. Such power relation empowers female executives as supervisors over male subordinates, and requires that the latter comply with directives from the former, or be sanctioned for insubordination. Aware of the differences in possession of organizational power, and the fear of being punished if caught in the act of harassing female executives, male subordinates appear to resort to the use of subtle patterns of SH, such as symbolic behaviour and verbal behaviour, to sexually harass female executives fairly indirectly – patterns that protect male subordinates from easily being detected as perpetrators of SH against female executives. Additionally, female executives' low report of SH occasioned by fear of stigmatization, difficulty in providing evidence against suspects of symbolic SH and verbal SH, and the absence of a functional Sexual Harassment Panel (SHP), may have increased the incidence at which female executives experience SH from male subordinates in the workplace (Fayankinnu, 2010; Ann, 2007; Benson, 1984).

Comparing male subordinates' responses to the three sexual acts/behaviour reported by the female executives as most sexually harassing, 35.4% of the male subordinates reported that they grabbed their groin before female executives (symbolic SH), more than 50% male subordinates said they bragged about their sexual prowess on bed before female executives (verbal SH), and 60.4% bragged about the size of their penal organ as hefty before female executives (verbal SH), and 58.4% said they forwarded sexually suggestive text messages to female executives (electronic SH). An inference from this finding is that male subordinates perpetrated less symbolic SH (35.4%) against their female superiors compared with female executives' report of high experiences of symbolic SH (61.2%). DeSouza and Fansler (2003)

earlier observed a similar variation in respondents' response rate. They observed a similar rate of female faculty reporting sexual harassment, but found a lower level of SH admitted by students. As regard this study, there is the need to take caution in interpreting this dichotomy of responses from both the female executives and male subordinates, particularly as it relates to the cultural context of the environment in which the study was conducted.

The variation in response rates as observed above may be explained in two ways. First, studies show that females differ from males in their perception of acts/behaviour that constitute SH. Therefore, female executives may misinterpret when male subordinates grab their groins before them as harassment when, in actual fact, male subordinates may grab their groins unconsciously or habitually without the intention of harassing female executives. Commenting on this in one of the FGDs, a male subordinate stated:

I am a very hairy person and I often have little itching in between my legs. If I grab my groin before a female executive, it is only to scratch and nothing more. I am also aware of many males who hold their groins as a matter of habit, imbibed and internalized from rap musicians. Unfortunately, female executives are quick to conclude that we are sexually harassing them when we do this.

Second, male subordinate's low response rate to the perpetration of symbolic SH against female executives may have been informed by both societal and organizational cultures inherent in the workplace. For instance, the Yoruba culture perceives the grabbing of one's groin intermittently as indecent. Similarly, workplace ethics frowns at males grabbing their groins – thus, male subordinates may shy away from responding affirmatively that they grabbed their groins before female executives to harass them for fear of being stigmatized as indecent persons.

On the other hand, male subordinates' responses in affirmation that they perpetrated more verbal SH against female executives may be associated with the fact that the Yoruba culture approves such sexual behaviour, particularly in relation to sexual acts/behaviours reported by the respondents (e.g., male subordinates bragging about their prowess in bed before female executives and male subordinates bragging about the size of their sexual organs as hefty before female executives). In the Yoruba language of South-western Nigeria, farm (oko) is where most men work and, indeed own. Among the Yoruba, the persons (males) who possess the penis (oko) own the farms (oko), who also own the hoes (oko) and are the husbands (oko). Thus, as the hoe

(oko) constitutes the tool used to till the farm (oko), the penis (oko) is the tool, the plough, or the ‘thing’ with which men work upon women as husbands to affirm their authority in the home. Any dysfunction of the penis (oko) incapacitates the man from being a ‘good’ husband (oko), and denies him applause from his wife. Hence, it becomes a pride for men to boast of their sexual prowess and for women to ‘deny’ their sexuality.

In the context of the foregoing, culture seems to have played a vital role in transmitting this cultural belief through (the Yoruba) language from one generation to another within the family and into the workplace. Thus, in a sense, it appears culture has institutionalized verbal SH in the workplace such that when male subordinates brag about their sexual prowess in bed or brag about the size of their sexual organs as hefty before female executives, they may be hiding under culture to affirm their masculinity and, at same time, harassing female executives, though indirectly.

Several factors seem to explain the SH of female executives by male subordinates in the workplace. Data from the cross tabulation revealed that respondents’ age, educational attainment, average income, and job tenure may account for the harassment of the female executives by male subordinates. For instance, the age distribution of the respondents revealed that 31.3% of the female executives and 10.4% of the male subordinates are between the age of 30 and 39 years, 52.2% female executives and 60.4% male subordinates are between 40 and 49 years, while 16.4% female executives and 12.5% male subordinates are 50 years and above. Such age distribution may propel male subordinates to harass female executives given the culture of patriarchy that conceives men as superior to women, and the African perception in relation to age. Narrating her experience of SH from a male subordinate, a female executive recounted as follows:

A male subordinate once admired me and told me that I am beautiful and young as his wife. He was very polite in his utterance, but was driving at a point – to remind me that I am young as his wife and perhaps behave as his wife does to him, submissive. This is a clever way through which male subordinates make unwanted sexual advances towards female executives.

The foregoing suggests that the male subordinate in question is likely to be older than the female executive. For example, the Yoruba culture accords significance to age, emphasizing that the younger ones should respect their elders. Given such cultural belief, particularly in African societies, male subordinates who are older or within the same age bracket with their female

executives may take advantage of the privilege the culture offers to sexually harass female executives, indirectly. Female executives' resistance against SH perpetrated by male subordinates is often misconstrued as being disrespectful to elderly men. In a sense, the culture that canvasses respect for the elderly renders female executives vulnerable to SH from male subordinates given the lack of understanding that rational issues should be treated differently from culture. At this juncture, the question that emerges is: what happens if female executives are older than their male subordinates? The answer to this question is better given, presumably, from further research.

The cross tabulation also showed little variation in the respondents' educational qualifications by gender. This suggests that both female executives and male subordinates hold almost the same educational qualifications. In the light of this assertion, other factors than educational qualifications appear to have accounted for women attainment of executive positions. For example, female executives may have over the years developed their careers on the job through in-service training, to attain executive positions through promotion. In this wise, job-tenure may account for the positions attained by a sizeable proportion of the female executives. When male subordinates possess the same certificates/qualifications with female executives, there is the likelihood to want to prove that they (male subordinates) are not inferior to female executives, by ostensibly sexually harassing female executives in the workplace as a 'defence' against the reality that a female is their superior officer. The FGD reveals that large proportions of the male subordinates were employed with Diploma certificates and have only improved their lots by acquiring additional academic qualifications from part-time programmes. The situation in which male subordinates possess the same educational qualifications as female executives may explain, in part, why female executives experience SH from male subordinates.

The cross tabulation also suggest a marked difference in the respondents average monthly income by gender, with the female executives earned higher than their male subordinates. This is expected given the difference in statuses and positions occupied by both gendered employees. How this disparity in income aids the SH of female executives by male subordinates may be traced to previous studies conducted on traditional SH – where the harasser possesses more organizational power than the harassed (Fayankinnu, 2010, 2004; Nnorom, 2004). These studies focused on males as the perpetrators of SH owing to increased number of men in leadership positions, resulting from males' acquisition of higher educational qualifications, compared to the



females. This empowers men with organizational and economic power (income) to harass women. In contrast, the male subordinates lack such organizational and economic power to compete with their female executives. Thus, male subordinates resort to harassing female executives using their 'agbara inu' – literally defined as an informal power of self-consciousness characterized by subtleness, yet potent as a way of coping with inferiority complex (Fayankinnu, 2004, 2007). Generally, the position of this paper is that the reasons identified do not justify the SH of female executives by male subordinates; rather, it is an attempt by male subordinates to further institutionalize male hegemony in the workplace.

Female executives who have been sexually harassed are prone to low health status. The FGDs revealed that female executives suffered some ailments after an experience of SH from a male subordinate. An excerpt goes thus:-

The day a male subordinate sexually harassed me, I could not sleep for nights. I had blurred vision, serious headache, and was restless for several days.

Another excerpt reads:-

Some female executives who are my colleagues told me that after their experiences of SH from their male subordinates, they felt like something moving in their bodies, experienced depression and anxiety, had internal heat, felt sudden fear, had pains on their chest, lost appetite, sulked, felt dizzy, had stomach-ache, and changes in their menstrual cycles. In my case, I was shocked to my marrow, sweated profusely and became uncomfortable.

The foregoing suggests that female executives' health status is often at risk when sexually harassed. But, a pertinent question to ask is that could the experiences of SH from male subordinates account for the health challenges reported by the female executives, particularly when other work stressors (e.g., longer working hours, poor work environment, exposure to work hazards, etc.) could lead to similar manifestations. A plausible explanation is perhaps, female executives experiences of SH from male subordinates triggered the symptoms they reported as health challenging. Such experiences, in turn, tend to induce job dissatisfaction and reduce work commitment, expressed in the forms of absenteeism, sabotage, labour turnover, boycott, etc. These unfriendly work manifestations impede productivity and hamper the growth of the organization. At the personal level, female executives experience alienation – being estranged to

oneself, and loss of gender identity. Such experiences breed the feeling of not being in the workplace and, subsequently, reduce the sense of belongingness while encouraging the 'withdrawal syndrome' – withdrawing to oneself such that it impacts on the identity of the individual, work activity, and the organization.

All the female executives in this study reported that they coped with SH from male subordinates by ignoring acts/behaviours perpetrated by male subordinates and maintaining strict formal relationships with their male subordinates. Two inferences can be drawn: - first, it may imply that female executives consider themselves capable of handling the situation on their own; and, second, it indicates that female executives seldom report cases of SH against them for reasons associated with the absence of any sexual harassment policy or, where there is a policy, inadequate implementation of the policy and the fear of being stigmatized by others.

## **Conclusion**

The author acknowledges the limitation inherent in this study particularly as it relates to the sample size. The study recognizes that the sample size used in this study may not be adequate for global generalization and that with a larger sample; some variations in findings may be obtained. However, the study serves to complement other researchers that may be interested in studying issues on CPSH in Nigerian organizations. Other researchers may take advantage of the limitation in this study and examine larger samples, employ bivariate statistical tools, such as correlation and regression, to test for relationships between variables identified.

The paper concludes that female executives constitute victims of symbolic and verbal SH in the hands of male subordinates. These forms of SH render it difficult to provide conclusive evidence against male subordinates as culprits, thereby letting them off the hook. Thus, as powerful as female executives are in their formal positions of authority, they are still powerless. Hence, to protect female executives from further victimization from male subordinates, it is suggested that efforts be geared towards instituting a definitive advocacy programme that emphasizes and encourages female executives to report cases of SH to the appropriate quarters. The rationale behind this is that if male subordinates know that female executives are most likely to report cases of SH, they are likely to be discouraged from harassing female executives for fear of being sanctioned. Reported cases of SH can only be meaningful when a functional SHP is in place. In this regard, Management in organizations should ensure that they are gender sensitive when constituting SHPs. Furthermore, work handbook containing regulations relating to SH be

issued to all employees; and, male subordinates found guilty of SH against female executives be swiftly sanctioned.

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