

Beyond the Gates: Young Male Student Leaders' Perceptions of Sexual Harassment and Campus Safety Mechanisms in Metro Manila

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Abstract: This study explores how young male student leaders in Metro Manila conceptualize campus safety, sexual harassment, and institutional reporting mechanisms to inform gender-based violence prevention strategies. Utilizing a qualitative exploratory design, data was collected through semi-structured focus group discussions with 12 male student leaders representing six higher education institutions. Findings indicate that while participants equate safety with physical security, they identified specific "geographies of fear" both within and outside campus premises. Participants recognized men—particularly authority figures and service workers—as the primary perpetrators, attributing this to toxic masculinity and societal normalization; however, the students' views still revealed internalized victim-blaming and misunderstandings of consent. Furthermore, the study identified severe institutional barriers to seeking redress, including a pervasive victim-blaming culture, re-traumatizing confrontation requirements, and restrictive grievance windows. Ultimately, the research concludes that creating truly safe educational environments requires transcending mere reactive security measures. To achieve this, universities must implement survivor-centric policies, mandate gender-transformative education to actively dismantle toxic masculinity, and forge coordinated safety coalitions with local government units to bridge critical jurisdictional gaps.



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1 Introduction

Sexual harassment encompasses a spectrum of unwanted behaviors ranging from verbal comments and suggestive gestures to physical contact and coercion [1]. Research demonstrates significant gender differences in how sexual harassment is perceived and defined. A meta-analytic review examining gender differences in sexual harassment perception found that women consistently rated behavior as more harassing than men, with these patterns remaining stable over the past two decades despite increased social awareness [2]. Young women perceive both verbal and non-verbal forms of sexual harassment as significantly more

serious compared to young men [1], and they demonstrate greater sensitivity in identifying sexually harassing behaviors in familiar contexts where men tend to trivialize or normalize such conduct [3].

Understanding young men's perceptions of sexual harassment and campus safety transcends mere academic inquiry; it is a critical prerequisite for effective prevention. While discourse on campus safety rightfully centers on the empowerment and experiences of female victims, a fundamental gap persists. Because men are disproportionately identified as perpetrators of public space harassment, examining how they conceptualize safety, boundaries, and sexual violence is essential for designing interventions that tangibly reduce harm. Research demonstrates that men who hold gender-equitable attitudes exhibit a significantly lower risk of perpetrating gender-based violence and a greater willingness to engage in preventative, anti-violence actions [4]. Conversely, adherence to problematic, patriarchal attitudes directly hinders bystander intervention. Empirical studies highlight pronounced gender disparities in this area, showing that women are substantially more inclined than men to actively intervene in situations involving sexual harassment [5]. Furthermore, men consistently endorse rape myths at higher rates and perceive hostile behaviors as less harassing than their female peers do [6, 7].

In the densely populated urban centers of Metro Manila—specifically Quezon City and the City of Manila—university campuses do not exist in a vacuum. They are deeply embedded within bustling communities. Against the backdrop of the Safe Cities Metro Manila Programme [8], exploring how young male students navigate and interpret this urban educational setting provides vital insights. Based on the review of the literature and localized data, a significant gap exists between the formulation of anti-harassment policies and actions. To support the UN Women Safe Cities project of The Forum, entitled SAFE Campus or “Student Action for Eliminating Violence and Harassment in Campus Campaign”, this study is aimed at exploring how young male college students define safety and conceptualize sexual harassment within and around their campuses. Furthermore, it seeks to identify: who these students perceive as the primary perpetrators and understand the socio-cultural factors they attribute to these behaviors; the structural and institutional barriers that hinder the reporting of abuse, ultimately aiming to compile actionable policy interventions proposed by male student leaders to cultivate a violence-free educational environment.

2 Methods

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design to capture the nuanced perspectives and attitudes of young male leaders regarding sexual harassment. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. The participants were 12 male student leaders (aged 18-21) representing a mix of state-owned and private higher education institutions in Metro Manila. Participants were students from the Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Maynila (PLM), Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP), Philippine Normal University (PNU), University of Sto. Tomas (UST), Adamson University (AdU), and De La Salle - College of St. Benilde (CSB). All participants held leadership positions in student councils or student organizations across various academic disciplines.

Data was collected using semi-structured Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) designed to elicit open-ended responses on personal definitions of safety, perceptions of sexual harassment, awareness of institutional mechanisms, and recommendations for policy improvement. The FGD guide was structured around research questions while allowing emergent themes to surface. Collected qualitative data underwent Thematic Analysis, following established procedures for identifying, coding, and organizing patterns within the data. Prior to data

collection, informed consent was secured from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 Defining Safety and Conceptualizing Sexual Harassment

Perceptions of Campus Safety: For the male respondents, "safety" was explicitly synonymous with physical security—freedom from danger and fear within and outside campus premises. Respondents from Adamson University emphasized that safety also encompasses mutual respect regardless of gender and the freedom to express oneself without fear of retribution. While students perceived their campuses as relatively safe due to entry/exit controls, security checks, and surveillance cameras, they noted these measures were often time-limited and geographically constrained. This finding aligns with broader research on bystander intervention and institutional responses to violence, which emphasizes that reactive security measures alone are insufficient for creating truly safe environments [9, 10].

Spatial vulnerability emerged as a critical theme: Respondents identified specific "geographies of fear" within and outside campuses. Within campuses are—staircases where male students engaged in predatory behavior, poorly-lit areas rarely patrolled by guards, and botanical gardens frequented by street dwellers. Off-campus vulnerabilities proved even more pronounced, with students highlighting dangerous streets, areas with recorded violence, and transport corridors as high-risk zones.

Conceptualizing Harassment and Victim-Blaming: While all respondents acknowledged that sexual harassment violates individual rights and occurs within and outside schools, their conceptualizations revealed internalized victim-blaming narratives. Some respondents problematically categorized harassment into "voluntary" (consensual physical affection) and "involuntary" (unwanted advances), conflating consent issues with consensual behavior. This misconceptualization reflects broader patterns observed in college populations, where misunderstandings of sexual consent remain widespread even among perpetrators. Several students argued that individuals must foresee harassment risks and establish boundaries, suggesting that victims bore responsibility for their own victimization—a perspective directly contradicted by evidence-based research on violence prevention. A study on intimate partner violence argued that victim-blaming is influenced by cultural stigma, internalized stigma, and anticipated stigma [11].

3.2 Identifying Perpetrators and Socio-Cultural Root Causes

Perpetrator Profiles and Power Dynamics: The male student-participants' identified men as the primary perpetrators of sexual harassment, though they rarely viewed peer students as active harassers. Instead, perpetrators were largely identified within two groups: authority figures (professors, teachers, security guards) who abused institutional power, and service workers (drivers, construction workers) operating outside formal institutions. This observation reflects research on power dynamics in sexual violence, demonstrating that abuse frequently occurs within hierarchical relationships where perpetrators exploit positional authority [12]. Critically, respondents noted that transgender individuals and LGBTQ+ community members faced targeted harassment, highlighting intersectional vulnerabilities within campus spaces, and is consistent with studies among LGBTQ+ students in school settings [13, 14].

Socio-Cultural Root Causes: Respondents demonstrated emerging awareness of systemic issues underlying harassment. They attributed male perpetration to the need to exercise authority and prove masculinity, recognizing toxic masculinity and regressive cultural norms as drivers of violence. Media representations depicting women as weak or sexualized

were cited as contributing factors. Some respondents attributed harassment to poor upbringing or lack of discipline, suggesting individual deficiency rather than systemic culture. A UST respondent offered a profound insight: harassment persists because society normalizes it as common experience, which inherently encourages perpetrators to continue. This observation aligns with literature on social norms theory, which demonstrates that when harmful behaviors are perceived as normative or common, intervention becomes less likely [11].

3.3 Structural and Institutional Barriers to Redress

Victim-Blaming Culture and Fear of Stigma: Respondents recognized the severe psychological impact of harassment on victims—including heightened stress, diminished self-esteem, and paralyzing fear. However, the primary barrier to reporting is the pervasive culture of victim-blaming, wherein victims are accused of "inventing stories" or being blamed for circumstances beyond their control. Because victims fear becoming subjects of campus gossip and social ostracism, many refuse to file complaints. This finding reflects extensive research documenting how victim-blaming and fear of social consequences deter reporting, even when formal institutional mechanisms exist [11, 15].

Institutional Failures and Re-traumatization: When students attempted to report incidents, institutional mechanisms proved deeply flawed. Procedures requiring face-to-face confrontation between victim and perpetrator caused severe psychological distress and effectively re-traumatized survivors. Punishments were perceived as disproportionately light (e.g., parental contact or community service). Grievance mechanisms imposed restrictive technicalities, including strict five-day filing windows that effectively barred many victims from seeking redress. When harassment occurred outside campus boundaries, university administrations frequently refused to intervene, leaving students without institutional support or recourse through legal channels.

3.4 Proposed Interventions for Violence-Free Campuses

Based on their analyses and identified gaps, male student leaders proposed a multi-tiered intervention approach grounded in evidence-based practices from bystander intervention research.

Infrastructure and Environmental Design: Increase CCTV installation and improve street lighting in secluded campus areas and surrounding communities, reducing spatial vulnerabilities that enable harassment. This aligns with development sector's recommendations [16].

Campus-Community Coordination: Establish coordinated safety policies between educational institutions and local government units (barangays), explicitly including schools in comprehensive anti-harassment mechanisms rather than maintaining jurisdictional silos. Consistent with development organizations' recommendations to improve community participation in ending gender-based violence [16].

Curriculum and Skill-Building: Integrate gender sensitivity across academic curricula and mandate continuous training for student councils and organizational leaders. Research demonstrates that coach-delivered and peer-led prevention programs targeting male youth significantly increase positive bystander behaviors and reduce abuse perpetration. One study likewise suggests that awareness-raising seminars should address parenting, personal safety, and comprehensive sexuality education [17].

Institutional Policy Reform: Implement survivor-centered policies eliminating restrictive technicalities, mandatory confrontation requirements, and jurisdictional limitations.

Establish dedicated safe spaces for complaint filing and support. Evidence from bystander intervention trials demonstrates that programs combining skill-building, knowledge development, and attitude change significantly reduce sexual violence perpetration when implementation is rigorous [10, 17].

Creative and Community-Based Campaigns: Utilize digital art, social media, and creative forums to encourage students to stand against abuse. Evidence supports social marketing approaches combined with social norms interventions to increase bystander willingness to intervene [18]. Campaigns on workplaces using punitive messaging directed at male harassers were praised as effective models worthy of institutionalization [19].

Student Leadership Empowerment: Clearly define student council roles in disciplinary processes, granting them authority to recommend immediate supportive measures for survivors. Research on gender-transformative programs emphasizes that male youth engagement—when structured to challenge harmful norms rather than shame perpetrators—can produce sustained behavior change [20].

3.5 Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings reveal that young male leaders in Metro Manila possess developing awareness of sexual harassment's systemic nature and recognize the psychological toll on survivors. However, their perspectives remain colored by internalized victim-blaming and misunderstandings of consent—limitations that underscore the need for evidence-based gender-transformative education. Research on male adolescents demonstrates that equitable gender attitudes operate as powerful protective factors, reducing violence perpetration across multiple contexts. Gender-transformative approaches that engage young men in critical reflection on masculinity while building bystander skills show particular promise.

The structural failures identified—restrictive reporting windows, re-traumatizing confrontation requirements, and jurisdictional gaps—represent systematic barriers that effectively silence survivors and enable perpetrators. These barriers persist despite written policies, indicating a profound gap between policy formulation and implementation. Bystander intervention research consistently demonstrates that institutional will, clear policies, and consistent enforcement are essential for sustained violence reduction.

4. Conclusion

Cultivating truly safe campuses requires transcending reactive security measures. Institutions must proactively dismantle the cultural norms and institutional structures that perpetuate sexual violence through comprehensive, evidence-based approaches. The student leaders' recommendations—emphasizing gender transformation, survivor-centered policies, community coordination, and male peer engagement—align with emerging best practices in sexual violence prevention. Implementation of these recommendations, grounded in the voices of young male leaders themselves, offers a pathway toward educational environments where safety, dignity, and respectful relationships become institutional norms rather than aspirational ideals.

Limitations and Future Directions – this study centered exclusively on male leaders' perspectives, potentially missing nuances in how female and non-binary students experience institutional responses. Future research should incorporate survivors' voices and examine how institutional practices either facilitate or obstruct help-seeking. Additionally, the study's focus on institutional actors may underestimate informal community resources and peer support networks that operate outside formal systems.

To cultivate truly safe educational environments, institutions must move beyond reactive security measures. Universities must proactively dismantle toxic masculinity through continuous, mandatory gender-sensitivity education designed to foster equitable attitudes and bystander intervention. Furthermore, institutions must reform their grievance structures to be strictly survivor-centric. Finally, because the "geography of fear" frequently lies just "beyond the gates" or outside campus walls, university administrators must bridge the jurisdictional divide by forging robust, coordinated safety coalitions with surrounding Local Government Units (LGUs) to ensure holistic protection for students.

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