
Law, Gender, and Higher Education in Madagascar: Confronting Sexual Harassment on Campus

Razafitahindraza Erica Feyzine Sulla^{1*}, Rakotoniriana Noelisoa Jean Michel², Razafiharimbola Larissa¹, Shahabuddin Esmati³

¹Université de Toliara, Madagascar

²Université de l'Itasy Soavinandriana, Madagascar

³Universitas Hasanuddin, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: razafsulla@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the intersection of law, gender, and higher education by analyzing sexual harassment in public universities in Madagascar, with a particular focus on the University of Toliara. The study is motivated not only by the practical need to strengthen institutional responses to sexual harassment but also by the limited empirical and theoretical scholarship on this issue within the Malagasy higher education context. Guided by Feminist Legal Theory, Foucault's Theory of Power Relations, and Legal Effectiveness Theory, the research adopts a qualitative socio-legal approach involving 50 key informants, comprising 40 students, 5 lecturers, 3 administrative staff members, and 2 lawyers selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that sexual harassment is primarily manifested through abuse of academic authority, verbal and unwanted sexual advances, and quid pro quo practices linked to academic evaluation, with female students disproportionately affected due to unequal gender and institutional power relations. The study further identifies substantial gaps between existing legal frameworks and their institutional implementation, compounded by fear of retaliation, social stigma, and ineffective reporting mechanisms. Theoretically, the study contributes to the literature by integrating legal and gender perspectives to explain how institutional power, legal effectiveness, and gender inequality interact to sustain sexual harassment within higher education. Practically, the findings provide evidence to support the development of stronger legal enforcement, transparent institutional reporting systems, and gender-responsive university policies aimed at creating safer and more equitable learning environments in Madagascar and comparable higher education settings.

Keywords: Higher Education, Law, Harassment, Madagascar.

Article history

Received: 24-4-2026

Revised: 12-6-2026

Accepted: 27-7-2026

Published: 1-8-2026

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment in higher education has emerged as a major global concern that threatens students' safety, gender equality, and the quality of academic environments. Across universities worldwide, evidence indicates that sexual harassment remains widespread despite increasing legal protections and institutional policies. A systematic review by Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020) found that the prevalence of sexual harassment in higher education ranges from approximately 20% to more than 60%, depending on the institutional context and measurement approach. Similarly, Fedina et al. (2016) reported that nearly one in five female university students experiences sexual violence during her academic career. These findings demonstrate that sexual harassment is not an isolated occurrence but a persistent structural problem affecting educational access, academic achievement, and students' psychological well-being. Consequently, universities are increasingly expected to establish safe learning environments that uphold human rights, gender equality, and institutional accountability.

Sexual harassment within universities extends beyond individual misconduct because it is deeply embedded in organizational structures and unequal power relationships. Academic institutions, although designed to promote knowledge and social development, frequently reproduce broader societal inequalities through hierarchical relationships between lecturers, students, supervisors, and administrative authorities (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). These unequal relationships create opportunities for abuses of authority, including verbal harassment, unwanted sexual attention, coercion, quid pro quo practices, and sexual assault. Fitzgerald et al. (1997) argue that organizational power structures play a central role in enabling such misconduct, while Cortina et al. (2013) demonstrate that modern forms of gender discrimination often occur through subtle hostility and selective incivility that are more difficult to identify and challenge. Understanding sexual harassment therefore requires attention not only to individual behavior but also to the institutional systems that permit such behavior to continue.

Gender inequality remains one of the principal factors explaining the persistence of sexual harassment in higher education. Sexual harassment frequently functions as a mechanism for maintaining unequal gender relations by discouraging women from fully participating in academic life and by reinforcing existing power hierarchies (Berdahl, 2007). As Malatjie and Mbajiorgu (2024) argue, sexual harassment constitutes both gender discrimination and a violation of equal educational opportunities. Beyond gender, however, vulnerability to harassment is also shaped by broader social dimensions, including age, academic status, economic dependence, institutional hierarchy, and prevailing cultural norms regarding authority and silence. These intersecting social factors influence students' willingness to report harassment and their ability to obtain institutional protection, demonstrating that sexual harassment is a multidimensional social and legal problem rather than solely an issue of interpersonal misconduct.

The consequences of sexual harassment extend far beyond the immediate experiences of victims. Research consistently demonstrates that victims experience psychological distress, reduced academic engagement, lower educational performance, and diminished career opportunities (McDonald, 2012; McLaughlin et al., 2017). Fear of retaliation, social stigma, and distrust of institutional reporting mechanisms further discourage victims from reporting incidents, allowing perpetrators to continue abusive practices with limited accountability (Ssali et al., 2021). Although many universities have adopted policies intended to prevent sexual harassment, the effectiveness of these measures often remains limited because institutional implementation is inconsistent and enforcement mechanisms are weak (Ali, 2026). Consequently, the existence of legal regulations alone does not necessarily guarantee meaningful protection for students.

Within African higher education, sexual harassment is shaped by complex interactions among institutional governance, cultural norms, and unequal power relations. Previous studies have documented widespread harassment in universities across the continent, where authority figures sometimes exploit academic dependency for personal benefit (Dranzoa, 2018; Mawere & Seroto, 2022). Cultural expectations, fear of reputational damage, and inadequate complaint mechanisms frequently discourage victims from reporting abuses, contributing to substantial underreporting. These findings indicate that effective interventions must extend beyond legal sanctions to include institutional reforms, transparent reporting systems, and broader cultural transformation.

Madagascar represents an especially important context for examining sexual harassment in higher education. The country's universities continue to face significant challenges related to limited institutional resources, governance constraints, unequal educational opportunities, and administrative capacity

(Emynorane et al., 2025). These conditions may intensify power imbalances between lecturers and students while simultaneously weakening institutional responses to sexual harassment. Despite increasing international attention to gender-based violence in educational institutions, empirical research examining sexual harassment within Malagasy universities remains extremely limited. Furthermore, the absence of comprehensive national data and the likelihood of substantial underreporting make it difficult to understand the magnitude of the problem or evaluate the effectiveness of existing legal and institutional responses. This lack of empirical evidence represents an important gap in the literature that requires systematic investigation.

The present study is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives. First, Feminist Legal Theory (MacKinnon, 1989) provides the primary conceptual framework by explaining how legal and institutional structures may reproduce gender inequalities that disadvantage women and other vulnerable groups. Second, Foucault's Theory of Power Relations (Foucault, 1977) explains how institutional authority operates through hierarchical relationships that may facilitate coercion, dependency, and abuse within educational settings. Third, the study adopts Legal Effectiveness Theory (Hart, 2012), which argues that the existence of legislation alone is insufficient unless laws are effectively implemented, enforced, and supported by accountable institutions. Together, these theoretical perspectives enable a comprehensive socio-legal analysis of how gender inequality, institutional power, and legal implementation interact in shaping sexual harassment within higher education. Methodologically, the study adopts a socio-legal qualitative approach that combines multiple stakeholder perspectives to generate a comprehensive understanding of institutional responses to sexual harassment. By integrating these empirical, theoretical, and methodological dimensions, the study advances scholarly understanding of gender justice, legal protection, and institutional accountability within higher education in Madagascar.

This study examines the intersection of law, gender, and higher education by investigating sexual harassment in public universities in Madagascar, with particular emphasis on the University of Toliara. Specifically, the study analyzes how legal frameworks, institutional policies, gender relations, and socio-cultural dynamics shape the occurrence of sexual harassment and influence institutional responses. Through this analysis, the study seeks to contribute to the development of more effective legal protections, gender-sensitive university policies, and safer learning environments while enriching broader discussions on educational governance, human rights, and gender equality in higher education.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative research approach to explore sexual harassment within higher education in Madagascar, focusing on the University of Toliara. The study specifically examined non-physical and institution-related forms of sexual harassment, including verbal sexual harassment, unwanted sexual comments or advances, sexually suggestive communication, quid pro quo (conditional sexual harassment involving academic benefits or grades), abuse of academic authority for sexual purposes, and behaviors that created a hostile or intimidating educational environment. Although participants were free to disclose any experiences, the study did not specifically investigate cases of physical sexual assault or rape, as these require different legal, ethical, and forensic research procedures.

The participants consisted of 40 students ranging from first-year undergraduate to doctoral level, five lecturers, three university administrative staff members, and two lawyers, all of whom served as key informants. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants based on their relevance to

the research objectives and their ability to provide diverse perspectives on campus experiences, institutional practices, and legal frameworks. Students were selected across different academic levels to capture variations in experiences and vulnerability, while lecturers and administrative staff were included to examine institutional responses and existing reporting mechanisms. The inclusion of lawyers provided legal perspectives regarding the adequacy, interpretation, and implementation of laws addressing sexual harassment in higher education.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions concerning participants' experiences or observations of verbal harassment, unwanted sexual advances, abuse of authority, conditional or quid pro quo sexual harassment, reporting practices, institutional responses, and perceptions of legal protection. This interview approach allowed participants to provide detailed narratives while ensuring consistency across the principal themes investigated. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve data familiarization before being systematically coded. Similar codes were grouped into broader categories, from which key themes were identified, interpreted, and refined to explain patterns relating to sexual harassment, gender inequality, institutional practices, and legal implementation within the university context.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed data triangulation by comparing perspectives across students, lecturers, administrative staff, and legal practitioners. Member checking was conducted by returning interview summaries to selected participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations. Furthermore, methodological transparency, careful documentation of the research process, and consistent application of coding procedures were maintained to strengthen the dependability and rigor of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that sexual harassment is a significant concern within the University of Toliara, particularly in relation to power imbalances between lecturers and students. Many participants described situations in which authority figures were perceived to misuse their positions, creating environments where students felt vulnerable and unable to refuse inappropriate advances. Several student informants emphasized that such behaviors were not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern of concern within the university context. These accounts highlight how hierarchical relationships in higher education can facilitate different forms of sexual harassment, especially where accountability mechanisms are weak or unclear.

A recurring theme in the data is the gendered nature of sexual harassment, with female students reporting higher exposure to inappropriate behavior compared to their male counterparts. Many female participants described feeling particularly vulnerable in interactions with lecturers, especially in situations involving academic evaluation or supervision. One student explained, *"As a woman, you feel like you are always being watched differently. Some lecturers don't treat you the same as male students."* Another participant stated, *"It is mostly girls who face these situations. Boys don't experience it in the same way."* These testimonies suggest that sexual harassment in the university is closely linked to broader gender inequalities and social norms.

The study also identifies the presence of what participants described as "conditional" or "exchange-based" harassment, often associated with academic performance. Several students reported that some forms of harassment involved implicit or explicit expectations of "favor" in return for academic advantages, such as passing exams or receiving higher grades. One participant noted, *"Sometimes the message is not direct, but you understand that if you don't accept, you may fail."* Another student shared, *"There are cases where students are told they can pass if they agree to certain things, especially during exams."* These accounts

point to the existence of quid pro quo dynamics, where academic authority is used as leverage in inappropriate and coercive ways.

In addition to direct experiences, many students highlighted a climate of silence and fear surrounding the issue of sexual harassment. Participants reported that victims are often reluctant to report incidents due to fear of retaliation, academic consequences, or social stigma. One student explained, *“Even if something happens, you cannot easily report it because you are afraid of what will happen next.”* Another added, *“People prefer to stay quiet because they think nothing will change.”* This culture of silence contributes to the persistence of harassment by limiting institutional awareness and response.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that institutional mechanisms for addressing sexual harassment are perceived as insufficient or ineffective by many participants. Both students and staff pointed to a lack of clear reporting procedures and limited trust in existing systems. This lack of confidence further discourages victims from seeking support or justice. Overall, the results suggest that sexual harassment at the University of Toliara is shaped by power imbalances, gender inequality, and institutional gaps, creating conditions that allow such behaviors to persist.

Abuse of Academic Authority and Conditional Sexual Harassment

The findings demonstrate that abuse of academic authority constitutes one of the primary mechanisms through which sexual harassment occurs at the University of Toliara. Participants described situations in which lecturers allegedly used their institutional authority during examinations, supervision, and academic evaluation to make unwanted sexual advances or implicitly link academic success to compliance with inappropriate requests. These accounts indicate that sexual harassment is not merely an individual behavioral problem but is closely associated with unequal institutional power relationships.

This finding is consistent with Foucault's Theory of Power Relations (Foucault, 1977), which explains that power operates through institutional structures that shape individuals' behaviour rather than solely through direct coercion. Within universities, lecturers possess legitimate authority over students' grades, supervision, and academic progression, creating unequal relationships that may be exploited for personal benefit. The participants' experiences suggest that this institutional authority enables conditional or quid pro quo sexual harassment, where students perceive that refusing inappropriate advances may negatively affect their academic outcomes. In this context, power functions as a mechanism of control that limits students' freedom to reject inappropriate behaviour.

The findings also support Feminist Legal Theory (MacKinnon, 1989), which argues that sexual harassment reflects structural gender inequality rather than isolated misconduct. Most reported victims in this study were female students, indicating that unequal gender relations continue to shape interactions between lecturers and students. Sexual harassment therefore serves to reinforce existing gender hierarchies by placing women in more vulnerable positions within academic institutions. This interpretation extends beyond individual misconduct by demonstrating how institutional authority and gender inequality interact to sustain discriminatory practices in higher education.

From a legal perspective, the findings further illustrate the relevance of Legal Effectiveness Theory (Hart, 2012). Although legal provisions and university regulations addressing sexual harassment formally exist, participants reported that fear of retaliation, limited institutional accountability, and ineffective complaint mechanisms reduced their practical effectiveness. This demonstrates that legal protection depends not only on the existence of regulations but also on their consistent implementation and enforcement. Without credible institutional mechanisms, students may perceive compliance as safer than reporting abusive behaviour, thereby perpetuating the cycle of harassment.

These findings are consistent with previous research showing that hierarchical authority increases the risk of sexual harassment within universities (Emynorane et al., 2024; Pina et al., 2009; Mawere & Seroto, 2022). However, the present study extends this literature by demonstrating that, within the Malagasy higher education context, abuse of academic authority is reinforced simultaneously by institutional

hierarchy, gender inequality, and ineffective legal implementation. Rather than operating independently, these structural factors interact to create an environment in which conditional sexual harassment can persist with limited accountability.

The findings suggest that reducing abuse of academic authority requires reforms that address both institutional governance and legal enforcement. Universities should establish transparent grading systems, strengthen independent reporting mechanisms, ensure consistent disciplinary procedures, and provide regular training on gender equality and professional ethics. Such measures would reduce opportunities for coercion while promoting accountability and safer learning environments for all students.

Hierarchical Power and Sexual Exploitation in Universities

Hierarchical structures within universities play a significant role in shaping relationships between students, lecturers, and administrative authorities, often creating conditions that enable sexual exploitation. In higher education, authority is not only academic but also institutional, giving lecturers substantial control over students' academic progress and professional futures. Such imbalances increase the likelihood of exploitative behaviors, particularly when institutional oversight is weak or ineffective (Dranzoa, 2018). The unequal distribution of power makes it difficult for students to challenge inappropriate conduct, especially when their academic success depends on those in authority. Consequently, hierarchical power becomes a central factor in understanding sexual exploitation in university settings.

Sexual exploitation in universities is often embedded within these hierarchical relationships, where authority figures may take advantage of their positions to exert control over students. This dynamic is closely linked to broader patterns of gender-based violence, where power and inequality intersect to produce exploitative outcomes. Research shows that individuals in subordinate roles are more vulnerable to coercion, particularly in environments where accountability mechanisms are limited (Fnais et al., 2014). In academic contexts, this vulnerability is intensified by the dependency of students on lecturers for evaluation, supervision, and mentorship. As a result, exploitation can occur in both direct and indirect forms, often hidden within routine academic interactions.

The gendered nature of hierarchical power further exacerbates the risk of sexual exploitation in universities. Female students are disproportionately affected due to existing gender inequalities and social norms that reinforce male dominance in positions of authority. Studies indicate that harassment often targets women who navigate or challenge male-dominated academic environments, reinforcing existing hierarchies (Berdahl, 2007; Emynorane et al., 2026). This dynamic not only limits women's participation in higher education but also undermines their sense of safety and belonging within academic spaces. Sexual exploitation, therefore, operates not only as an abuse of power but also as a mechanism for maintaining gender inequality.

In many cases, sexual exploitation is sustained by institutional cultures that tolerate or fail to adequately address such behaviors. Universities may lack clear reporting systems, or existing mechanisms may be perceived as ineffective or biased, discouraging victims from coming forward. Research highlights that institutional responses to sexual harassment are often insufficient, with policies that fail to translate into meaningful action (Ali, 2026). Additionally, fear of retaliation, stigma, and reputational concerns further contribute to underreporting, allowing exploitation to persist. This reflects a broader gap between formal regulations and actual institutional practices in higher education.

Addressing hierarchical power and sexual exploitation in universities requires a multidimensional approach that goes beyond legal frameworks. Strengthening institutional accountability, ensuring transparency in academic processes, and establishing independent reporting mechanisms are critical steps in reducing opportunities for abuse. At the same time, cultural change within universities is essential to challenge norms that enable exploitation and silence victims. International perspectives emphasize the importance of integrating legal, institutional, and educational strategies to effectively combat gender-based

violence in academic settings (Damous and Guillopé, 2021). Such efforts are necessary to transform universities into safe and equitable environments where power is exercised responsibly.

Between Law and Practice: Gaps in Institutional Response

The existence of legal frameworks addressing sexual harassment in higher education does not necessarily guarantee effective protection for students, as significant gaps often persist between formal regulations and institutional practice. In many university contexts, policies are established to demonstrate compliance with national or international standards, yet their practical implementation remains limited or inconsistent. This disconnect reflects broader challenges in translating legal norms into enforceable institutional actions, particularly in environments with limited resources or weak governance structures (Ali, 2026). As a result, students may be formally protected under the law but remain vulnerable in everyday academic settings. Understanding this gap is essential for assessing the real effectiveness of legal protections against sexual harassment.

Institutional responses to sexual harassment are frequently constrained by unclear procedures, lack of transparency, and insufficient accountability mechanisms. Although universities may adopt policies that define and prohibit harassment, these frameworks are often poorly communicated to students and staff. Research shows that the absence of accessible reporting systems and clear guidelines can discourage victims from seeking support or pursuing complaints (Voth Schrag, 2017). In practice, this leads to a situation where policies exist more as symbolic commitments than as effective tools for protection. Consequently, the institutional response fails to match the seriousness of the issue it aims to address.

Another critical dimension of this gap lies in the barriers that prevent victims from reporting incidents of sexual harassment. Fear of retaliation, social stigma, and lack of trust in institutional processes are commonly cited reasons for underreporting. Studies have shown that students often perceive reporting mechanisms as ineffective or biased, particularly when cases involve individuals in positions of authority (Ssali et al., 2021). This perception is reinforced when institutions fail to take visible and decisive action against perpetrators. As a result, many cases remain unreported, allowing harassment to persist and creating a culture of silence within the university environment.

The gap between law and practice is further exacerbated by institutional cultures that prioritize reputation over accountability. Universities may be reluctant to acknowledge cases of sexual harassment due to concerns about public image or institutional credibility. This reluctance can lead to the minimization or dismissal of complaints, undermining trust in the system and discouraging further reporting. Research indicates that such institutional behaviors contribute to the normalization of harassment by signaling that violations will not be adequately addressed (McDonald, 2012; Eric et al., 2025a). In this way, the failure to enforce existing policies becomes a key factor in perpetuating the problem.

Bridging the gap between legal frameworks and institutional practice requires a comprehensive approach that strengthens both enforcement and cultural change. Universities must ensure that policies are not only clearly defined but also effectively implemented through transparent procedures and independent oversight mechanisms. Training programs, awareness campaigns, and accessible support services are essential for empowering students to report incidents and seek assistance. At the same time, accountability must be reinforced through consistent and fair disciplinary actions against perpetrators. Aligning legal standards with institutional practices is therefore crucial to creating safer and more responsive higher education environments.

Silence, Stigma, and Barriers to Reporting Sexual Harassment

Silence and underreporting remain defining features of sexual harassment in higher education, often concealing the true scale of the problem within universities. Despite the existence of formal mechanisms to address such misconduct, many cases never reach institutional attention due to complex social and psychological barriers. Research consistently shows that victims are reluctant to report harassment,

particularly when they perceive that doing so may lead to negative consequences or no meaningful action (Ssali et al., 2021). This culture of silence not only protects perpetrators but also reinforces the normalization of inappropriate behavior within academic environments. As a result, sexual harassment persists as a hidden yet pervasive issue.

Stigma plays a central role in shaping victims' decisions not to report experiences of harassment. Individuals who come forward often risk being blamed, judged, or socially isolated, particularly in contexts where gender norms discourage open discussion of sexual violence. Such stigma can be especially pronounced for female students, who may fear reputational damage or negative labeling. Studies on sexual harassment highlight that victims frequently internalize these societal attitudes, leading to feelings of shame and self-blame (Pina et al., 2009). This internalization further discourages reporting and contributes to the psychological burden experienced by victims. Consequently, stigma operates as both a social and individual barrier to justice.

In addition to stigma, fear of retaliation and academic consequences significantly limit reporting behavior among students. The hierarchical nature of universities means that perpetrators are often in positions of authority, such as lecturers or supervisors, who have direct influence over students' grades and academic progression. Victims may therefore perceive reporting as a risk to their academic future, particularly in systems where accountability mechanisms are weak. Research indicates that such power imbalances create environments in which silence becomes a form of self-protection (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Eric et al., 2025b). This dynamic is particularly evident in cases where harassment is linked to academic evaluation, making resistance more difficult.

Institutional factors also contribute to barriers in reporting sexual harassment, particularly when systems are perceived as ineffective or inaccessible. Universities may lack clear procedures, confidential reporting channels, or trained personnel to handle complaints appropriately. Even when such mechanisms exist, students may not trust them due to past experiences or perceptions of bias. Evidence suggests that institutional responses often fail to provide adequate support or protection for victims, further discouraging reporting (Ali, 2026). This lack of confidence in institutional systems reinforces the cycle of silence and allows harassment to continue unchecked.

Addressing silence, stigma, and reporting barriers requires both structural and cultural interventions within higher education institutions. Universities must establish transparent, accessible, and confidential reporting mechanisms that prioritize victim protection and support. At the same time, awareness campaigns and educational programs are essential to challenge harmful stereotypes and reduce stigma associated with reporting harassment. Creating a supportive environment where victims feel safe to come forward is critical for breaking the cycle of silence. Ultimately, improving reporting mechanisms and transforming institutional culture are key steps toward effectively addressing sexual harassment in universities.

Strengthening Legal and Policy Frameworks for Safer Universities

Effective prevention of sexual harassment in universities requires robust legal and policy frameworks that go beyond symbolic commitments to ensure real protection and accountability. While many higher education institutions adopt formal regulations addressing gender-based violence, their impact depends on clarity, enforceability, and alignment with broader legal standards. Research shows that policies often exist but lack specificity or practical guidance, limiting their effectiveness in addressing complex cases of harassment (Ali, 2026). Without clear definitions, procedures, and sanctions, institutional responses remain inconsistent and insufficient. Strengthening these frameworks is therefore essential to creating safer academic environments.

A key element of effective legal and policy reform is the establishment of comprehensive and accessible institutional policies that clearly define sexual harassment and outline reporting procedures. Such policies must be widely communicated to students, lecturers, and administrative staff to ensure awareness and understanding. Studies indicate that unclear or poorly disseminated policies contribute significantly to

underreporting and institutional inaction (Voth Schrag, 2017; Ratna et al., 2026; Sulla et al., 2026). In addition, policies should incorporate victim-centered approaches that prioritize confidentiality, protection from retaliation, and access to support services. These measures are crucial for encouraging reporting and ensuring that victims feel safe within the system.

Beyond policy design, enforcement mechanisms play a critical role in determining the effectiveness of legal frameworks. Universities must establish transparent and independent bodies responsible for handling complaints, conducting investigations, and imposing sanctions. Evidence from higher education contexts suggests that weak enforcement and lack of accountability allow perpetrators to act with impunity (McDonald, 2012). Consistent and fair disciplinary actions are necessary to demonstrate institutional commitment and deter future misconduct. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms also helps bridge the gap between legal norms and actual practice within universities.

Legal and policy frameworks must also be supported by preventive strategies that address the root causes of sexual harassment. This includes integrating gender equality education, awareness programs, and professional training for staff and students. Research highlights that cultural change is a critical component of effective prevention, as legal measures alone are insufficient to transform entrenched norms and behaviors (Damous and Guillopé, 2021). By promoting awareness and challenging harmful attitudes, universities can create environments that discourage harassment and support respectful interactions. Prevention efforts should therefore be embedded within broader institutional strategies.

Finally, strengthening legal and policy frameworks requires alignment with national and international standards on gender equality and human rights. Universities must ensure that their internal regulations are consistent with existing laws and reflect global best practices in addressing sexual harassment. This alignment enhances institutional credibility and ensures that victims have access to broader legal protection. At the same time, continuous monitoring and evaluation of policies are necessary to identify gaps and improve effectiveness over time. A comprehensive and well-enforced legal framework is thus fundamental to ensuring safe, inclusive, and equitable higher education environments.

CONCLUSION

This study found that sexual harassment at the University of Toliara primarily occurs through abuse of academic authority, verbal and unwanted sexual advances, and quid pro quo practices in which academic evaluation is linked to sexual demands. The findings further reveal that female students are the most affected due to unequal gender and institutional power relations, while fear of retaliation, social stigma, and limited confidence in university reporting mechanisms discourage victims from reporting incidents. In addition, the study demonstrates a clear gap between existing legal protections and their implementation within the university, reducing the effectiveness of institutional responses. These findings contribute to the literature by showing how gender inequality, institutional power, and legal implementation interact to sustain sexual harassment in higher education within the Malagasy context. Therefore, universities should strengthen independent reporting mechanisms, consistently enforce anti-harassment policies, and provide regular gender-sensitivity and legal-awareness training for students and staff. Future research should examine multiple universities across Madagascar using comparative or mixed-methods approaches to generate broader evidence for policy development.

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