

Quid Pro Quo Sexual Harassment Effects on Women in Liberia's Public Sector

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Abstract

Despite progress towards gender equality, women continue to be impacted by quid pro quo sexual harassment in employment. This study explored women's lived experiences of quid pro quo sexual harassment in Liberia's public sector. In-depth semi-structured interviews using Zoom were conducted with 13 working women aged 18 years and older who self-reported as victims of quid pro quo sexual harassment in Liberia's public workplaces. Interview data were analyzed using the hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore their lived experiences. Analysis of the data produced six themes: impediment of women's career prospects, undermining of women's job credibility, reinforcement of women's dependence on men, discouragement of academic pursuits, encouragement of workplace promiscuity, and impact on women's mental health. These themes show that quid pro quo sexual harassment harm women's sustained employability. The implications for social change include providing data that could serve as a roadmap to facilitate effective anti-sexual harassment policies in Liberia to support the ever-present push for improved equality for Liberian women from newly reported perspectives.

Keywords: *Quid pro quo sexual harassment, sexual harassment in the workplace, women, sexual harassment in Liberia, hermeneutic phenomenology.*

Introduction

For any nation desiring to improve the ever-present push for gender equality, they cannot ignore quid pro quo sexual harassment in employment. Quid pro quo is a Latin term for "something for something," where two or more individuals participate in a shared agreement to trade goods or services. In a quid pro quo arrangement, an individual's transfer is contingent upon the transfer from the other individual involved. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC; 2016) defined quid pro quo sexual harassment as compliance to or refusal of unwanted sexual advances as the condition for an individual's employment decisions. Quid pro quo sexual harassment involves employers promoting or demoting their employees based on their sexual compliance (Anita et al., 2020; Khumalo et al., 2015). In its simplest term, it involves the demands for sexual favors in exchange for employment-related benefits.

Several researchers found that quid pro quo sexual harassment is a prevalent concern, affecting women from all lifestyles (Ford et al., 2021; Halouani et al., 2019). Despite progress towards gender equality, women continue to be impacted by quid pro quo sexual harassment in employment. Quid pro quo sexual harassment reinforces discriminatory practices against women, making it challenging for them to advance in the workplace (Khumalo et al., 2015; Mcewen et al., 2021). These unfair practices impede women's future career prospects (Anita et al., 2020). McLaughlin et al. (2017) posited that sexually harassed women are likely to withdraw from their areas of employment to deal with the harmful effects of the harassment. Their work absence may result in penalties for nonperformance (Khumalo et al., 2015). They may be written up at work or fired, reinforcing their dependence on men for their financial well-being. Sexual harassment can lead to decreased self-confidence and respect (Aljerian et al., 2017). Throughout the harassment, victims might develop negative thoughts about themselves and often accuse themselves of the harassment.

They might feel the harassment would not have happened if they had not initiated contact with the perpetrator. These negative emotions impair their self-esteem, resulting in burnout at work.

Sexual harassment in the workplace impact women's physical and psychological health (Thurston et al., 2018). Sexually harassed women reported being angry, anxious and depressed, feelings of guilt, stress, and a host of other health symptoms (Boyle, 2017; Hakimi et al., 2018; Khumalo et al., 2015). Other health-related concerns include substance use conditions, mood change, and difficulty concentrating (Dworkin et al., 2017). These health complications affect their quality of life. Despite the public awareness of this issue, women's quid pro quo sexual harassment experiences in Liberia's public sector are unknown. The present study addresses such an informational gap.

Methods

The hermeneutic phenomenological research design that employs in-depth participant interviews was used to understand and interpret Liberian's women experiences. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach was appropriate for this research because it offered the opportunity to explore, construct, capture, and analyze women's lived experiences (Van Manen, 2014).

Recruitment and Participants

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from Walden's Institutional Review Board [09-08-21-0596668]. The recruitment flyers were advertised on a community organization's social media accounts, such as WhatsApp and Facebook. Interested women got in contact with the primary researcher through email and were screened for eligibility. Potential participants were eligible if they were 18 years of age and older, working for at least one year in the public sector, victims of quid pro quo sexual harassment, willing to be interviewed and audiotaped, and participate in a possible follow-up interview, and have the data published. Potential participants were excluded from participating if they were the perpetrators of the phenomenon of interest. Upon establishing eligibility, participants were sent the informed consent form via email. Participants indicated their willingness to participate in the study by replying via an email with the words "I consent." Study participation and conjointly agreed-upon interview schedules were established by phone and email. Since the initial recruitment process provided fewer participants than needed to meet the expected sample size, the snowball sampling technique was used to recruit more participants. The initial study participants were asked to refer other potential individuals with similar characteristics to take part until the point of data saturation.

Data Collection

Data were collected from in-depth semi-structured interviews, field notes, and audio recorder to capture the phenomenon's essence. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted from December 11, 2021, to January 19, 2022. A total of 13 participants were interviewed using Zoom. Following the hermeneutic phenomenology approach, the interviews were casual in style (People, 2021). Through the hermeneutic circle, the interviews began with overarching questions as described in the interview guide (see Table 1 for interview guide), with follow-up questions as a means of soliciting in-depth explanation and clarification (Holroyd, 2007). The Zoom interview sessions lasted 40 to 60 minutes and were audio-recorded. Participants were invited to review their transcripts, once produced, for accuracy. Those willing to participate in this member checking step provided their email addresses. Upon distribution of their individual transcripts, a follow-up Zoom meeting to review transcript accuracy and discuss interpretation accuracy was scheduled on a day and time convenient for each participant.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the audio recording was played numerous times for accuracy. Replaying the audio recording helped capture the essence of each participant's response, which could be crucial in bringing meaning to the phenomenon. The audio file was also played near a computer microphone to generate Microsoft Word interview transcripts. The generated transcripts were checked against the audio recordings to make corrections to the spoken words and immediately de-identified with pseudonyms that are reflective of names common in Liberia. The clean version of the transcripts was uploaded to NVivo v. 12 software for thematic analyses. Initial analysis of the evolving data and reflective journaling were also noted to ensure data collection trustworthiness.

Data Analysis

The hermeneutic phenomenology, as a method of analysis, provided the framework for understanding women's lived experiences of quid pro quo sexual harassment in Liberia's public sector. Understanding Liberian women's experiences were guided by the hermeneutic circle (Peoples, 2021). The hermeneutic cycling process began with each participant's transcript, field notes, and reflective journaling immediately after conducting the interview. The primary researcher performed the initial grouping and coding of data to enable the identification of the point of data saturation, in which more interviews did not result in new themes.

Upon completing all interviews, each transcript was read to gain an insight into each participant's story. Filler words like "ah," "um," "well," and "you know" were deleted, and notes were taken on important information while reading the transcripts. Also, in line with People's (2021) recommended approach, the shortest and most eye-catching transcripts were selected to develop preliminary meaning units. Through this process, each participant's transcript was evaluated to eliminate recurring statements and those unrelated to the research question. The preliminary meaning units led to the development of the final meaning units or codes from the actual data.

The final meaning units were aligned next to the relevant segments of the text, observing if new codes emerged. Each participant's experience was emphasized thematically using their own words from the transcript, and the developed themes were used to create general narratives to disclose participants' meanings of the phenomenon. These themes were joined into a composite whole by developing an overarching narrative of the common themes in all or most of the participants' stories.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Consistent with the research methodology, the researchers acknowledged their role in the data collection stage and maintained a bias-free attitude toward working women's experiences of quid pro quo sexual harassment. It also helped the researchers to be objective when analyzing the data. Additionally, the emerging codes were compared with the interview data, ensuring the meaning of the codes reflects the actual data, and an in-depth narrative of the settings and context in which the study took place was provided (Amin et al., 2020).

Findings

Thirteen women from Liberia's public sector participated in the study. Participants' ages ranged from 23-34 years. Participants' demographics are presented in Table 2. Data are presented using pseudonyms in keeping with qualitative research practice.

Analysis of the data produced six themes: (a) impediment of women's career prospects, (b) undermining of women's job credibility, (c) reinforcement of women's dependence on men, (d) discouragement of academic pursuits, (e) encouragement of workplace promiscuity, and (f) impact on women's mental health.

Theme 1: Impediment of Women's Career Prospects

Participants indicated that quid pro quo sexual harassment in employment affects women's future career prospects. They revealed that many women lose their jobs because of their unwillingness to succumb to their boss or associates of their boss's sexual advances. Musu explained,

after I was voted as the best employee for three consecutive months, I got fired for not doing my job right. It was because I refused to go on dates with one of the bosses from the other department who claimed he wanted to celebrate my success.

Participants described these quid pro quo sexual arrangements as a contributing factor. Janet said, *"I felt incompetent at work because I couldn't concentrate. I looked over my shoulder, expecting to be harassed by my boss."* Lillian added, *"when you go to work, all you can think of is, is he coming again to promise you a pay raise or promotion in return for sex."*

Participants also indicated that quid pro quo sexual harassment results in women being excluded from work activities, notably those designed to help them succeed. Nohn said,

when my boss saw I was turning down his sexual interest, he took my name from the list of those selected to travel for special training. I'm not one to cry easily, but this hurt. I needed this opportunity to excel in my field. Without the training, I was stuck.

Few of the participants revealed that quid pro quo sexual arrangements result in women not achieving their goal of having a productive career. OldLady said,

they blame young women for passing around, when in reality those that supposed to hire us, are asking us to have sex with them before giving us a job. How people expect you to have a career when you are not giving a chance to develop one.

Another participant, Pinky elaborated,

you worry a lot even when you start your career because you think maybe all this might come to an end if some boss comes in who has a sexual interest in you. It's hard to not think of it.

Charlesetta added, *"I feel like a woman career success rest on us agreeing to sleep with the employers. If we refused, we could forget about a career regardless of our qualifications."*

Some of the participants highlights the lack of a “stable job,” “absenteeism,” and “favoritism,” resulting from quid pro quo sexual harassment, narrows women’s chances to enhance their professional development.

Theme 2: Undermining of Women's Job Credibility

Participants mentioned that quid pro quo sexual harassment affects women's employment. Miatta noted, *“When you get a job, people just assume you slept with the boss for the position . . . [Hence,] they looked at you funny.”* Kou added, *“People don't take you serious. They think you are not qualified for the job.”* Underlining the severity of the issue, OldLady said, *“to tell you how sad the situation is, even if the job is an entry-level position, people still think there's no way you got the job without sleeping with the boss.”* Pinky explained, *“When I was hired as an administrative assistant (AA), one of my co-workers asked me to connect him with the boss. He felt I did not get the AA job on merit.”* Doree added, *“when I got promoted, some of my male co-workers thought I had an affair with my boss despite my qualifications.”* This public suspicion of women’s job credibility, resulting from quid pro quo sexual harassment was seen by participants as upsetting. Charlesetta explained,

it bothers me to know that because I am a woman, my education and experiences doesn't count for much. If I get a job, it's not because I'm qualified, but rather because I slept with someone in position of power.

Lillian added, *“Only us women endure such hypocrisy. When a man gets a job or a promotion, nobody assumed anything out of the ordinary”* Other of the participants used words like “slut” “woman's card,” “the boss toys,” “don't belong,” to discuss the effects of quid pro quo sexual harassment on women's credibility in the workplace.

Theme 3: Reinforcement of Women's Dependence on Men

Participants indicated that in a male chauvinistic society, like Liberia, women being denied equal job opportunities reinforces their dependence on men. They noted that the lack of employment or inadequate jobs with mediocrity benefits resulting from quid pro quo sexual arrangements harms women's socio-economic foundation. As a result, most women become compelled to “go after men with money” for their financial survival. They perceived these men as a scream from which success cometh. As such, they succumb to the demands of these men if they are to “taste the fruits” of these riches. Kou explained, *“sometimes, you don't really like the guy, but what can you do, he's the one providing for you and your family. You just do what he tells you.”* Doree added, *“I want to do things alone sometimes, but because the guy is the breadwinner, he thinks you don't have that right. If you go against him, he threatens to stop supporting you.”* Nohn stated, *“I think women who wants to work should be giving the opportunity, because having a man provide for you make, he wants to treat you like a child.”*

Few of the participants noted that it is emotionally draining to be under the financial shadow of men. Keb mentioned, *“Whenever you and your man argued, he takes away all the stuff he bought you and puts you outside no matter the time of the day if you stay together. It is stressful to be seen as unequal.”*

Theme 4: Discouragement of Academic Pursuits

Participants divulged that being coerced to offer their bodies as collateral in exchange for employment-related benefits reduced their enthusiasm for education. Lorpu put it this way, *“If your boss going to ask you to sleep with him before offering you a job, then what's the point of you making the sacrifice getting an education? It just makes you hate school.”*

Participants indicated that these quid pro quo sexual arrangements make it challenging to convince younger women about the importance of education, notably when many of her exemplars with universities degrees are still struggling to find a job. Janet stated, *“I know many young girls who rather spend hours beautifying themselves than investing time in their education. They tell you what's the point of suffering yourself to study, when it's your body the boss wants.”* Nohn added, *“My little sisters tell me why go to school when they are seeing others like them without a proper college degree having good jobs and living flashy lifestyles because they are sleeping with employers.”*

Theme 5: Encouragement of Workplace Promiscuity

Participants revealed that quid pro quo sexual harassment encourages workplace promiscuity. Lillian said, *“Men think just because nobody holds them responsible for their behavior, they can have any woman they want.”* Miatta mentioned, *“you find a boss having more than three girlfriends on the job. Everyone knows about it but find it cool.”* Pat explained, *“Some employees think it's normal. So, every guy approaching every female co-worker. You get assigned with a male co-worker to do a project; he leaves the project to start hitting on you.”* Keb added, *“Nowadays, it's hard to have a male co-worker as a friend at work.”*

Few of the participants noted that those that refused to participate in this promiscuous behavior are considered the outsiders or not a team player, resulting in employment consequences.

Theme 6: Impact on Women's Health

Participants indicated that victims develop health problems, such as depression, anxiety, anger, and withdrawal symptoms. Janet said, *"When you think about the situation, it makes you sad that you try to avoid people. You become traumatized."* Kou mentioned, *"I get angry easily on even the smallest of things, and it frustrates me. I think every guy that approach me want something."*

Participants reported that victims developed a negative self-image of themselves. Pat said, *"I used to be this positive person, but after my experience, I just lost that part of me. I felt I was not good enough and doubted myself a lot."* Lillian said, *"you become unpredictable; one minute you are happy and sad the next. It's not something you do on purpose. It just happened, which scares me."* Nohn added,

To tell you the truth, when you get in contact with me, I was like what this guy wants from me too. This is how bad it is. You think everybody is out to get you. You build this wall around you because you have constant flashbacks about what happen to you.

Few of the participants revealed they lost weight because of loss of appetite. OldLady stated, *"I used to be a little chubby, but started losing weight after my experience. All the food tasted the same in my mouth."* Musu mentioned, *"I hated eating because when I see the food, it made me think of him and for me I quick to lose weight if I don't eat."*

Discussion

This hermeneutic phenomenological study aimed to explore women's lived experiences of quid pro quo sexual harassment in Liberia's public sector. Consistent with previous studies, all the participants indicated that quid pro quo sexual harassment harms women as it intrudes on their sustained employability (Khumalo et al., 2015; McLaughlin et al., 2017). Participants illuminated that these de trop sexual advances affect women's active contribution at work. They explained that sexually harassed women are likely to withdraw from the organization's functions as a strategy to avoid the harassers. Their withdrawal may impede their ability to adequately implement their work responsibilities, resulting in punishment, including being demoted, fired, or made to attend training classes to enhance their performance. Participants also noted that women's unwillingness to succumb to employers' and their associates' sexual advances thwarted their future career prospects. Rather than the perpetrators directly firing their targets, they exclude them from work activities, such as job training that could help improve their career growth. These unfair practices resulting from quid pro quo sexual arrangements can be degrading and a 'slap in the face' for women because they may lack the skills needed to compete in the competitive job market (Mulugeta et al., 2022).

Echoing previous findings, participants reported that quid pro quo sexual harassment reinforces women's dependence on men (Khumalo et al., 2015; McLaughlin et al., 2017). They illuminated that women who prematurely quit a job due to employers' or their associates' unwelcome sexual advances often become unemployed or find themselves working in low-paying jobs, contributing to the income gap between women and men. This financial unevenness makes it challenging for the former to support themselves and their families. Hence, most developed intimate relationships with men they perceived to have money for their socioeconomic survival, resulting in women's marginalization in the homes.

Participants' lived experiences expand findings by other researchers that quid pro quo sexual harassment in employment undermines women's job credibility (see Eagly & Carli, 2007). When women fracture the glass ceiling and get a job, orthodox male chauvinistic views about their capabilities undermine their credibility. This distrust manifests itself in the public biased against women. Many believe the only logical explanation for a woman getting a job or a promotion is because she slept with the boss or someone with connections to the boss. Women are often seen as unworthy of the position regardless of their qualifications. This public distrust leads to individuals not taking women seriously because they do not have faith in them. Hence, making their input in decision-making within an organization inconsequential.

Participants also reported that they experienced health problems because of the harassment. One in three participants reported they experience mental health problems, including anger, anxiety, depression, insomnia, nausea, low self-esteem, self-blaming, and withdrawal symptoms. The participants' responses expand findings by existing researchers that victims of sexual harassment experienced psychological distress, such as depression (Cassino & Besen, 2019; Friborg et al., 2017). Few participants explained that they suffered from other health conditions, including sexually transmitted diseases, which is consistent with other researchers' findings (Khumalo et al., 2015). In addition, while Van Tu et al. (2020) found linkages between sexual harassment and obesity, this study's results disconfirm this view. Few participants reported losing weight because of stress resulting from the harassment. They reported that food began as the least of their concern, resulting in loss of appetite. Some participants illuminated that food reminded them of the harassers because their experience occurred after going on dinner dates.

The study's results offer novel insights about quid pro quo sexual harassment in employment. Participants illuminated that quid pro quo sexual harassment as a condition for employment weakens many young women's interest in education. These quid pro quo sexual arrangements make the value once attached to education less valuable. Many young women no longer see education as a "head-start to success," but rather a means to "drown in college debts," triggering public humiliation. Many people assumed the only logical explanation behind recent graduates' unemployment is that they are either cursed or "cannot defend their degrees." Participants further explained that many young women's demotivation in pursuing an education stemmed from seeing their peers without degrees nor work experience having lucrative jobs because they succumbed to employers' sexual advances. This shift in obtaining a job led many young women to channel their energy on enriching their physical appearance rather than developing their human intellect. They see beauty and the willingness to offer one's body as collateral in exchange for a job as the modern version of what society meant when they say, "sometimes who you know is better than what you know" to determine an individual's career success.

The participants also highlighted the financial struggles of many families brought on by education costs. They described that many parents sell on the streets and in the marketplaces and often risk their lives by traveling on dangerous roads to fund their children's education with the hope that when they graduate, they will, in return, help to improve the family's lifestyle. As a result, many parents sacrifice the future of some of their kids to be able to support one or two of their children's education endeavors, notably those they perceived to be doing well in school. They hope the child or children sent to school would be able to support their siblings, forced to drop out of school, but only to see this hope shattered because individuals in positions of authority refused to hire young women on merits.

Participants illuminated that workplace quid pro quo sexual harassment augments sexual promiscuity among employees. A few participants indicated that the prestige of male co-workers is no longer based on their practical contributions to an organization's growth but on how many "sexual partners" they have at work. This shift in what it means to be an epitome of reputable employee results in many male employees constantly pressuring female co-workers for dates to boost their workplace morale. The participants explained that workplace sexual promiscuity manifested in hindrances preventing sexually harassed women from reporting. The lack of adequate laws to prevent gender discrimination means that male co-workers can sexually harass their female counterparts and "walk-sky-free" or be "celebrated as lover boys." They highlighted that those supposed to create a safe working environment for their employees are themselves the touch bearer of these morally inexcusable undertakings. As a result, women who are apathetic to these workplace sexual dealings may work in isolation.

The findings suggest that these unfair practices result from divides within Liberia's public sector, where men have superior positions over women. These institutions and their cultural endorsement of men engaging in quid pro quo sexual harassment enable and perpetuates gender marginalization and inequalities as they are often indifferent to the ill-treatment inflicted upon women.

Strengths and Limitations

This hermeneutic phenomenology study's applicability is related to the findings' transferability. Participants were selected to ensure they were working women in Liberia's public sector who were victims of quid pro quo sexual harassment. We also provided an in-depth narrative of the settings and context of the study and a description of the research assumptions (Amin et al., 2020). The researchers also provided as many perspectives as possible of the participants' experiences using their own words in the emergent themes to achieve information-rich, thick descriptions of the findings.

However, the study did not include a representative sample of all working women population because all the participants were those that met the inclusion criteria. Hence, the study did not answer questions about working women who did not meet the inclusion criteria. It is conceivable that working women outside the study scope would respond differently to the posed research question, an area future studies could explore. Additionally, future research could explore the study's results from a quantitative lens in which legal records, police cases, and other data could be generated for statistical analyses.

Implications

This research is the first to explore women's lived experiences of quid pro quo sexual harassment in Liberia's public sector. By allowing Liberian women to add their voices to the overall sexual harassment narratives, we provided much-needed empirical data that policymakers could leverage to improve the ever-present push for gender equality in Liberia.

Participants' responses to quid pro quo sexual harassment suggest a need to provide ongoing education in bringing awareness to sexual harassment. For example, by educating those responsible for ensuring the safety of the citizens, they could approach victims' stories with care, enthusiasm, and empathy.

Conclusion

Quid pro quo sexual harassment in employment is pervasive, impacting women from all lifestyles. This suggests that women will continue to struggle to forge professional careers unless governments and organizations take sexual harassment cases seriously by reevaluating anti-sexual harassment laws and enacting new ones from newly formed perspectives. The study's findings suggest that excluding women in the workplace contributes to the gender marginalization of women as a group in society. It depicts an illustrative picture of career-oriented women-only achieving career success if they are willing to succumb to men in power positions who expect and demand quid pro quo sexual favors. Women unwilling to submit to these demands are at significant risk of not achieving career goals. To avoid quid pro quo sexual harassment, women become limited in their career opportunities resigning themselves to household tasks and raising families, perpetuating stereotypical gender-based roles. The marginalization of these women in the workplace is fundamentally patriarchal, indicating that women's professional development is not dependent upon their objective qualifications but rather on their willingness to succumb to men's sexual demands. Unless equal workplace treatment and career responsibilities are evenly distributed, gender marginalization and inequalities will continue.

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Table 1
Interview Guide

Interview questions

How would you describe your experience with quid pro quo sexual harassment in Liberia's public sector working environment?

What can you tell me about your experience with quid pro quo sexual harassment?

How did the experience affect you?

What changes, if any, do you associate with the experience?

What feelings were generated by the experience?

How did what you felt affect your public sector employment interest?

What incident connected with the experience stood out for you?

How did the incident affect your view of being a woman in the workplace?

How did the experience influence your ability to do your job – can you give me examples?

How did the experience influence your liberty in the workplace?

How did the experience influence your ability to pursue a career?

How did the experience affect your sustained employability?

Is there anything else you'd like to tell me as it relates to your experience?

Table

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Participants' Demographic Data

Participant	Age	Education	Employment Years
Charlesetta	28	Graduate degree	4.5
Doree	34	Graduate degree	10
Janet	30	Bachelor's degree	3.5
Keb	29	Bachelor's degree	3
Kou	26	Graduate degree	2
Lillian	31	Graduate degree	5
Lorpu	28	Graduate degree	2.5
Miatta	27	Bachelor's degree	3
Musu	24	Graduate degree	5.5
Nohn	26	Graduate degree	3
OldLady	23	Graduate degree	2.5
Pat	23	Graduate student	1.5
Pinky	30	Bachelor's degree	6.5