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Power Dynamics and Sexual Relationships between Professors and Students at an Urban University in Benin

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Abstract

This paper adds to the discussion of transactional sex relationships in Africa by examining the distinction between transactional sex and sexual harassment in the context of professor-student relationships and their inherent power dynamics. By exploring the ways in which female university students in urban Benin toe the line between empowered agent and victim, I show how the power differential between professor and student obstructs the professor's ability to objectively determine consent, and examine why, in spite of this differential, male professors are frequently perceived as the victims of these relationships. Ethnographic data was gathered through participant observation on a public university campus in Benin, and in-depth interviews and focus groups with 34 students and 5 professors from that university. Findings suggest that the problem of sexual harassment on campus will be difficult to address so long as transactional sex relationships between professors and students are permitted to continue.

Keywords: transactional sex; sexual harassment; university students; Benin; Africa

Amanda Eller graduated from the George Washington University with a BA in international affairs and a minor in sociocultural anthropology. While at GW, she was awarded a Lewis N. Cotlow student research grant in 2009 to study traditional healing and healthcare-seeking behaviors in the immigrant community of Little Haiti, Miami. In 2009, Amanda also spent a semester abroad in Dakar, Senegal. After graduation, in 2010, she taught English in Dunkerque, France, honing her French language skills. She spent 2011-2012 in Benin on a Fulbright US Student award where she did research on transactional sex and sexual harassment in the universities. While there, she was captivated by the entrepreneurship scene, and she worked with several local artisans to design and produce a line of fair trade hand bags. Upon returning to the U.S., she joined a woman-led start-up company called Dear Kate, helping to launch the brand in December 2012. She resides in Brooklyn, New York, and directs marketing for Dear Kate, which is a line of performance underwear for women.

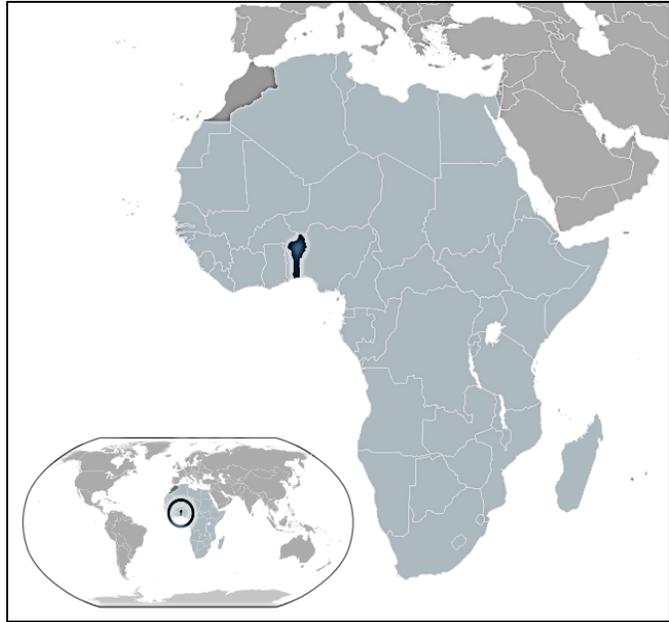
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INTRODUCTION

The classroom has been studied extensively as a setting for social reproduction, and in particular the reproduction of power and gender dynamics, in which the teacher acts as possessor of knowledge to be imparted upon students. This dynamic is further gendered when the vast majority of instructors are male. At the largest public university in Benin, 89% of all professors are men (Service de Statistiques, 2013). By nature of possessing a doctorate and a steady salary, professors are also almost always of higher social and economic status than their students.

This power differential forms the basis for transactional sexual relationships between male professors¹ and female students. Students in Benin refer jokingly to a phenomenon they call “Sexually Transmitted Grades”.² In the universities, where students are of legal age to consent, sexual relationships between professors and students are not expressly forbidden and have become quotidian. A student with a professor for a boyfriend can expect good grades in all of her classes, as well as meals in restaurants and monetary gifts. These relationships start appearing at a much earlier age, as documented by Kristina Sene (2010) in her study of secondary schools in northern Benin.



But while awareness of the issue at the secondary school level is increasingly mainstream and a myriad of NGOs are taking a stand to curb it, university students are considered old enough to “fend for themselves” and negotiate these relationships on their own terms.

In urban Benin, female university students have compelling reasons to initiate or accept such relationships with their male professors despite the associated stigmas, and many will actively pursue professors. In order to distance these young women from the restrictive and often inappropriate label of “victim”, Mark Hunter (2002: 57) explains that their active participation in transactional relationships for personal benefit is an “alternative form of power”. According to Tsitsi Masvawure, many young women in Zimbabwe are breaking out of the traditional gender mold by juggling multiple simultaneous boyfriends to serve their different needs. In this way, they avoid “the usual encumbrances of emotional commitment and sexual exclusiveness associated with standard boyfriend/girlfriend relationships”

¹ All professors interviewed in this study were men, and therefore “professors” will refer to “male professors”. Additionally, all professor-student sexual relationships encountered in this study were heterosexual relationships.

² In French, “Les notes sexuellementes transmissibles”.

(Masvawure 2010: 858). They also maximize their gains through these multiple relationships by including among their boyfriends the older men who act as gatekeepers to a myriad of scarce resources.

In a recent TED talk, Nigerian author Chimimanda Ngozi Adiche (2012) referred to Hunter's "alternative form of power" as "bottom power" and challenges the assertion that it empowers women. "Bottom power is not power at all", she says. "Bottom power means that a woman has a good root to tap into from time to time somebody else's power", thus leaving her vulnerable to the other's whims.

Given the power dynamics at play, can a relationship between a male university professor and his female student be entirely free of coercion? The very power differential underpinning the transaction simultaneously creates the potential for sexual harassment, which according to Beninois law, consists of "unwanted advances made under pressure of any form, in which the ultimate goal is to obtain favors of a sexual nature in a relationship of authority between the perpetrator and the victim" (Benin Parliament 2006). Thus a professor's position of authority over his student gives rise to the possibility for harassment, and it may be argued that in professor-student sexual relationships, a degree of pressure is always implicit even if not intended by the professor (Sene 2010: 52).

This paper focuses on the ways in which female university students toe the line between empowered agent and victim as they attempt to access a professor's power without being burned by it. These relationships are both desired and feared: professors have the power to make a student's life much easier, but stigma from peers is severe for those women who acquiesce, and the potential consequences grave should the relationship sour.

METHODOLOGY

Findings presented in this paper were gathered through key informant interviews and focus groups with 34 students and 5 professors³. All interviews and focus groups were conducted in French at a French-speaking public university in urban Benin. Student participants represented a variety of academic departments and ranged from first-year undergraduates to second-year Masters students, including 18 to 24-year-olds. Most participants were Beninois nationals from the urban areas in the south of the country, however, two female students and one male professor came from neighboring African countries. Additionally, one professor originated from a rural region in the north of Benin. IRB-approved methods for maintaining confidentiality were upheld, and interviews were voice-recorded only with prior permission from respondents. A semi-structured interview guide directed the questions, which were framed as general discussions of sexual relations on campus in order to maintain a non-threatening and non-interrogatory approach (Shefer et al. 2012: 436). Thus while some respondents volunteered personal stories, most spoke in third-person.

³ This study was carried out over the course of nine months while the researcher was in Benin under the Fulbright U.S. Student program, and was approved by the George Washington University Committee on Human Research, Institutional Review Board (IRB #011246). Given the stigma surrounding sexual harassment and transactional sex relationships, the researcher adhered to IRB guidelines for maintaining confidentiality of participants, including obscuring the name of the university and the identities of those interviewed.

SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT

When asked why a female student would want to go out with a professor, nearly every respondent gave one of two answers: grades or money. And upon further inquiry, grades and money are closely related, as the ultimate goal of grades in school is to secure a good job and steady income afterwards, or to maintain a scholarship. These responses are not surprising given the bleak economic climate in Benin.

Increasingly global images in the media have ignited strong desires for a “better life”, with the material comforts seen on TV and in movies. The vision of this lifestyle involves jobs in the formal sector, working in an office behind a computer and wearing a suit. Yet these desires clash with the current realities in Benin of widespread poverty and high unemployment, especially among the youth.

The growth of the university-educated, urban population has not been accompanied by a corresponding growth in the types of white collar, formal sector jobs desired by graduates. According to a 2005 study by the Institut National de la Statistique et de l'Analyse du Benin (INSAE), roughly 5% of jobs in Benin are considered formal sector jobs (Benjamin & Mbaye 2012: 58). The agricultural lifestyle of the rural villages is associated with poverty and backwardness; while most university graduates are loathe to work in the informal sector as motor taxi drivers or merchants in the sprawling markets. They also generally lack the vocational training to work as skilled laborers such as mechanics or tailors. The few formal sector jobs available tend to go to older workers, and there is a strong preference for hiring those who have lived abroad, preferably in Europe or the US. For this reason, nearly all young people from wealthy families leave the country. Facebook enables the friends they left behind to view carefully managed snapshots of this “better life”, making it feel closer even as it remains unattainable.

According to a 2010 study by the INSAE, 85.2% of Beninois between the ages of 15-24 are “underemployed”, defined as ‘working full time but earning less than the 2012 minimum wage of 27,500 FCFA’ (approximately \$54 USD per month) (Accrombessy 2013). And even for those earning a minimum wage salary, 27,500 FCFA barely affords a subsistence lifestyle.

Alcinda Honwana (2013) describes a trend she calls “waithood”. Young people who should, by their age, be defined as adults, have not yet been able to achieve social adulthood because of these economic circumstances. They are unable to find formal jobs, and unable to earn enough money to buy homes, marry and start families. They may even rely on their (often reluctant and impoverished) parents for continued support, and many continue to live with family.

SUGAR DADDIES AND SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED GRADES

Waithood leads some young women to seek relationships with older men because men their own age cannot provide for their needs. Young women expect to benefit materially from their romantic relationships, valuing this benefit as a sign of a partner’s investment and viability.

In many cases, parents are unwilling or unable to support a daughter who has likely already surpassed their own levels of educational attainment, leaving her to fend for herself financially while still a

student. Yet wealthy students were equally prone to pursue men who can enable the standard of living they enjoyed in their parents' homes. Mark Hunter (2002: 114) notes that "sex linked to subsistence" and "sex linked to consumption" are not mutually exclusive. Young women may engage in these relationships in order to gain access to the conspicuous consumption they see in the global media, but these motives may overlap with subsistence needs.

For female university students interested in this type of relationship, professors are the most accessible men of means. Yet professors themselves have limited finances. One university professor rejected the notion that students go out with professors for money, insisting that students only go out with him to secure good grades for themselves:

In the university setting, mostly it is for grades, to be sure of passing on to the next year of studies. If it was for money, well better go see the economists, the businessmen, the bankers. They're the ones with money! What does an instructor have for money? The little that you have is for your research and to feed your family with! How are you going to take on yet another mouth to feed? Then you're no longer talking about a girlfriend, you're giving charity.

Still, most students felt that even the scant salary of a university professor affords him vastly more disposable income than that of an unemployed male student. Another professor agreed that these relationships were often based on the students' financial needs, acknowledging the pressure young women may feel:

It's not only for grades! You could even say that it's more so for the money. Because sometimes it's very difficult for these girls⁴ to go to university. And it is also very difficult for them to ask for help. When they ask someone for help, he is going to say sex, sex, sex... It is also very difficult for them to find older women who will help them! It's always men. And here, we say, "you give, I give". You give something, I give something.

Although a professor's disposable income may be limited, he still has more to offer than most male students. Even if his ability to help financially is modest, it still factors heavily in to the professor-student relationship.

Grades also play an undeniable role given a professor's influence over students' academic and professional careers. With so many university graduates vying for scant formal job opportunities, the environment is cut throat. Some women choose to go out with their professors to get ahead: to ensure good grades and access to scholarships and potential internship or job opportunities. Professors are usually well-connected in their fields of study, and access to their professional networks is extremely valuable.

⁴ In French, "les filles". Students and professors alike used this term to refer to female students.

“DIVERSIFYING THE PORTFOLIO”

Although transactional sex is largely based on economic need, the young women involved feel they are actively doing something to satisfy their needs by leveraging their sexual power for personal gain. According to one male student in his fourth year on the campus:

Most girls cheat on their boyfriends. We say there are three things girls look for in a man: love, sexual satisfaction, and money. And it's almost impossible to find all three in one person, so lots of girls have multiple men. She'll have the guy she really loves, really connects with, and then another who knows how to make love to her (and another to pay the bills).

Honwana (2013: 44) found that these simultaneous sexual relationships were rooted in a desire for relative independence, such that “sexual engagement does not come from a single man who could exercise control over them, but from a changing and flexible network of men, none of who is able to wield power over them”.

Other young women expressed that it would be “risky” to rely on a single man. If your boyfriend is seeing other women, he can easily leave you for one of them, or spend more of his time and resources on them.

A female student preparing to start her final year of school further elaborated on the dating lives of most of her girlfriends:

I know plenty of girls (who maintain multiple boyfriends). It's very common....If there is a relationship where the girl is faithful to her man, the percentage is small. 60-70% are not faithful, I would say 40% are faithful. That's why I said, if the foundation (of the relationship) is solid, you won't have any problems. If you know that your man is trustworthy and that you're not hiding anything from each other, then you don't have the right to go elsewhere. But there are other girls who figure, if a man is just going to cheat on me, then why not? Let's say your guy is a student. Now, you have a CEO (of a company) who is pursuing you, and you know with him you can have anything you want. So why shouldn't I do as I please? This is why I said it all depends on the foundation of the relationship. If you don't trust that your guy will be faithful, then because you're a woman and there are other men who want you, well you line up some other options. Let's say, I have my guy and I love him because he's cute and all that. That's why I'm with him, and I really want to have something serious with him. But on the other hand, suppose there's my professor pursuing me. Well I have an interest in that. If I agree to be with him, then even in my other subjects he can help me. So I keep him. Now the CEO, suppose he is also pursuing me. He's living comfortably with his car and all...so I bring him on too. Suppose I want to go out, or I need to buy something. For these needs, he is there. So each one presents his advantages...Suppose that he works in medicine, and I am studying biomedical research. Why would this be a good relationship to have? I'm finishing school next year. He might be able to find me a job afterwards, or send me to meet the right people so that thanks to him I would have important contacts. So there's a little of everything. I have this one here, yes I love him, he gets breakfast money (from his parents) at the end of the month like me. He's in the same world as me, he's my sweetheart. Another is for going out, another is for grades...It doesn't get

complicated because once you start to lie one time, it becomes habit. And each time, it's as they say: a thief doesn't think twice, he just wonders if anyone will catch him.

As she pointed out, girls engaging in these simultaneous relationships worry about getting caught. Men expect fidelity from their girlfriends, and according to another female student in her second year, the wealthiest men will send money and gifts even when they aren't around to prevent their girlfriends from going elsewhere. In regards to professors, she explained, "If a professor finds out that the student he likes already has a boyfriend, especially if the boyfriend is also on the campus, that guy will have problems".

Likewise if the boyfriend her own age finds out, he will break up with her. While several respondents admitted the possibility that a young man could see the benefits of permitting his girlfriend to go out with an older man, they believed that most men would not tolerate it. Said another female student, "If a man lets his girlfriend sleep with the professor, either he's not serious about the relationship, or he sees how he can benefit from it".

Caught in a limbo of chronic under employment, too old to rely on parents and unable to depend on men of their own generation, young women are responding by attempting to maximize gains from their relationships while minimizing the risks of being controlled by a single man.

PERCEPTIONS OF FEMALE STUDENTS WHO GO OUT WITH THEIR PROFESSORS

Despite the apparent regularity with which female students pursue their professors, it remains highly stigmatized. If a student is rumored to be seeing a professor, her reputation will suffer. The most common words used to describe these women were "lazy", "materialistic", and "poor upbringing", along with frequent references to indecent clothing. They are generally resented for taking the "easy way out" in regards to schoolwork.

A focus group of five female students, mostly in their second year of studies, described the type of student who goes out with her professors:

These are easy girls, they love the easy life. They don't like to work for anything. When you see them, it just announces itself. They are girls who wear high heels and miniskirts to school. There are girls, you will see them, they have cars, Volkswagens and Tauregs. Sometimes it's their parents but more often it's men who are taking care of them. And it's in the night that they work, they work in the nightclubs and the men are their job....Either they do it because their parents are poor, or it's just ambition. But if you have a good upbringing, you're not going to do this type of thing. It also depends on the type of friends that you have....But we're not friends with these girls! You can't be friends with a girl with a Taureg! (laughter) Because when you start to talk with her, she is going to tell you things you don't want to hear! She is going to want you to do it too! Sex, sex, men, sex, men, sex, it's like that. No! We know them, but we just say good morning and good evening and that's it.

Nearly every young woman interviewed was eager to distance herself from the "type" of girl who would go out with a professor. Several participants felt that this "type" might be proud to go out with a

professor and happy to show it off, and that these relationships might be encouraged among certain friend groups. Yet when asked whether girls talk openly about going out with professors, the entire focus group agreed, “if they’re doing that, they’re not going to tell anyone”.

Another student elaborated in a private interview:

If it was me, if I was dating a professor, I wouldn’t tell any friend because even if you think you can trust her it’s never guaranteed. Today I could trust you, tomorrow you could betray me....so even if a girl is your friend, even if you ask her (whether she is seeing the professor), she will never tell you the truth.

Given the stigma, it’s not surprising that women are so reluctant to disclose their relationships. According to a female Master’s student:

You see, these girls, they are never going to say that they go out with professors and all that because whenever you hear someone say, “that girl went out with her professor”, right away it’s “Oh, that girl! She’s a...” No but it’s clear, if you say that you went out with a professor, you are finished. No one is going to see the fact that you were an adult doing this, that it is your decision. They are just going to say, “It’s bad, no question. Student-professor, no!” It’s the mentality! So to admit, “I dated a professor”, it’s so difficult!

When a female student goes out with a professor, she knows that her reputation is at stake. And so as the students explained, these women adopt the habits of lying and distrusting their friends to protect their reputations.

MASCULINITY AND THE NEW POLYGAMY

Given that the average age of university professors is 52 (Service des Statistiques, 2013), practically all professors are married with children. Sexual relationships with students thus entail extramarital affairs, and yet most participants felt that these affairs were not particularly taboo.

As a focus group of four male undergraduates concurred, “It’s a sign of power here to have multiple women”. Polygamy⁵ is traditional in Benin and remains prevalent, despite a law that officially recognizes only one wife. One professor noted that when he was fourteen years old, his father (who himself had five wives) told him, “If you want to have ten wives, you must work. Once you have money and the means, you can have as many wives as you want”. Multiple wives was thus equated with success and demonstrates a man’s ability to provide for those women and their children. In a context of polygamy, marriage does not necessarily imply the end of a man’s pursuit of other women.

In Benin today, polygamy is being reshaped by global cultural forces and changing socioeconomic landscapes. James Fenske (2013) noted a rapid decline in rates of polygamy over the past several decades in the country. He cites the Demographic Health and Surveys Data, according to which over 60%

⁵ ‘Polygamy’ will be used in this paper to refer to “polygyny” because the French “polygamie” is used in Benin to reference the practise.

of married women interviewed in 1970 were polygamists, while in 2000 this figure was less than 40%. This may be linked to several factors: Western or Christian ideals of monogamy as normative, the adaption of traditions from rural agricultural societies to modern urban environments, the increasing educational attainment and earning potential of women, and the high burden of paying a dowry.

Accompanying this decrease in prevalence, attitudes towards polygamy are shifting among young people. According to a focus group of male students, "Our parents and grandparents had multiple wives. As children, we grew up with this, so we're really accustomed to it". Yet despite having been raised in a society in which polygamy is normative, most students believed that the model was flawed. Children of polygamous parents felt particularly strongly that the practice spreads resources too thinly among wives and children.

In that same focus group, the men agreed that, "Today, most men of our generation want a single wife, but then they can have mistresses". One male student ruminated, "Ideally I will take one wife, but I don't know yet. It depends on the wife". The ideal of a polygamous family structure is losing popularity, but the notion that a man craves sexual diversity through multiple partners has largely remained intact.

It appears that traditional polygamy is being replaced by a model of one wife and multiple girlfriends. Whereas in marriage, a man makes a commitment to support his wife and her children and to integrate their families, he does not have the same obligations to a mistress. A mistress may be more expensive in the short term, and may need to be hidden in certain contexts given the less than 'respectable' nature of the relationship, but the arrangement allows him to engage with a woman who is stereotypically younger and more attractive than his wife, and to assert his power and masculinity, while escaping the burdens of a polygamous structure.

This preference for girlfriends rather than multiple wives implies an increasing number of relationships in which one or both parties does not consider marriage to be a probable outcome. As one professor observed, female students are not necessarily bothered by the arrangement:

Among us there is a strange tendency right now. When you tell a student that you are already married and that this is no more than a passing amusement, some girls are even more interested! Because of poverty and the economic situation that is tightening here, there are not many male students with the means to give them what they want. These young women are not dating their professors in pursuit of a husband, so it is of little importance if he is already married.

Although the students do not want their future husbands to engage in such affairs, many feel it is to be expected from men. These young women are looking out for their own interests and figure they might as well benefit from relationships that seem inevitable.

PRESSURES OF MASCULINITY: CAN A MALE PROFESSOR BE THE VICTIM OF HARRASSMENT?

Many participants commented on the tendency of female students to “harass” their professors. In stark contrast to the traditional “woman as victim” paradigm, respondents frequently framed men as the victims, complaining of women seducing their professors.

Examples of this “harassment” were cited over and over again by students and professors alike. Yet according to the Beninois legal definition of harassment, the perpetrator must necessarily be in a position of authority over the victim.⁶ Given the power differentials between professor and student, as well as the power dynamics inherent in their age and gender differences, it is legally impossible for a student to sexually harass her professor. While the pressure exerted by professors involves grades and academic influence (in other words, abuses of authority), the pressure exerted by the female students was through sexual temptation. Descriptions of the ways women seduce men focus highly on the female body as being “irresistible” to a man. Despite their supposed omnipotence on campus, male professors were perceived as being largely defenseless against a student dressed in provocative clothing and using seductive body language. A professor elaborated:

There are girls who harass as well, and if you are weak, you will quickly fall into it. You see these girls with their natural beauty, when they start making eyes at you, well if you are not strong you will fall...There are provocative gestures, the way they look at you and speak to you. Sometimes they wear provocative clothing, leaving parts exposed so that you see the intimate parts that can attract a man. Sometimes they sit in the classroom in such a way that you are in the middle of a class when suddenly you are directly in view of their panties! So you see, these are things we live daily as the faculty.

A focus group of male students estimated that 70% of professor-student sexual relationships were instigated by the young women, and they framed the men as victims of the female students’ “harassment”. According to one male student:

Then you have girls who harass their professors. Men sexually harass women by pressuring or threatening them. Women sexually harass men by seducing them into doing something they shouldn’t do. If a woman shows off her body to a man and seduces him, a man cannot really resist, he will give in. Men are that way, they are more sexually inclined.

When asked if men ever complain about being victimized, everyone agreed that as men, they should be happy and take advantage of an opportunity they are expected to desire and enjoy.

While relationships with female students are not exactly a topic for polite conversation, they are also not actively discouraged by the university administration. When female students make themselves sexually available to professors, the professors are therefore under greater pressure to give in than they are to resist. One professor commented that he is constantly teased by colleagues for his refusal to engage with students, and feels that he is in the minority in remaining faithful to his wife.

⁶ Differs in this respect from the US definition of sexual harassment.

A professor may also feel pressure from students themselves, who will gossip about his “impotence” if he refuses the flirtations of an attractive student. In this way, social constructions of masculinity shape the professors’ relationships with their female students, encouraging men to pursue multiple simultaneous relationships and to accept the overtures of female students.

DISTINGUISHING CONCENT FROM COERCION

Consent is in and of itself complicated by the power dynamics inherent in a professor-student relationship. Although these arrangements may be beneficial for the woman, the man most often makes the actual proposition. And while the acceptance of that proposition implies certain benefits, refusal implies consequences as well. A female student propositioned by a professor will automatically wonder how her grades might be affected by a refusal, even if the professor does not mention her schoolwork. Sene (2010: 53) adds that in addition to age, gender, and authority over grades, “knowledge and wisdom are power”, and when a student has been “singled out as “special” by the professor”, who is perceived to have superior judgment, he may be even more difficult to refuse.

Given that both female students and male professors could conceivably have an interest in these relationships or could be pressured into accepting them, it is important to look at how the relationships begin and who approaches whom. Traditionally and still most commonly today, the man makes the first overture. While it is becoming more common for a woman to initiate a relationship, this is usually achieved through flirtations and body language to prompt a man’s advances.

Participants described the ways students show their interest, including: wearing a short skirt or a low cut top to class, wearing high heels and long hair and nails, sitting in the classroom with her legs apart, calling the professor about schoolwork, and asking the professor for help with homework or studying for an exam. While occasionally a student will use a more direct approach, these signals most often rely on the professor’s interpretation.

Professors recounted numerous stories of the ways their female students had shown interest, some in a direct manner and others in more indirect ways:

I’ll give you an example: you’ve assigned a paper to write, and right away after class, the girl approaches to say, “Professor, the paper that you’ve assigned, I don’t know where to begin!” So you say, “Okay, come to this spot, the French Cultural Centre or the American Cultural Centre”, the places where we often meet up with students....and this is how it begins...it is not often the girls who bring up the topic of feelings or sex, but they know that us men, we will divert the conversation quickly to say “you are so pretty” and such. Often in the discussion, it is the professors who veer to this topic. But these girls, they are playing with hypocrisy! (They know what they are getting themselves in to.)

I experienced one case, two or three years ago, when I was teaching a class and the student told me, right in the middle of class, that everything I was saying she did not understand. I said okay, what part do you not understand? She said every part. She did this one time, two times, three times. One day she even accused me of allowing for too much debate in class. So I spoke about it with a few of my colleagues and one of them said that if she is acting like this, it means she

wants you...she wanted me, but she didn't know how to approach it so show was trying to provoke me, so that there would be an altercation and she could have direct contact with me!

She was supposed to submit the final draft of her Masters dissertation, this student. It was not well done when I corrected it, and I gave her my number to call me. Instead of calling me, I received a (text) message saying that when she sees me, her heart begins to beat... She sent this and I did not respond. Since I am her professor, I knew I would see her again. At which point I asked her to explain the message, and she told me that she had already said it all in the message. We called each other multiple times, and we met up in town, and all of this. But it was short-lived. Because for me, and I speak only for myself! Personally, when it is the woman who makes the first move, I am a bit reluctant. So it was almost over before it began. But when I approach a girl myself, it's different.

In all of these cases, the professors interpreted students' behavior as flirtation to use as justification for making an advance. The accuracy of this judgment becomes a key differentiator between consensual transactional relationships and coerced relationships or harassment. Yet if a woman does not feel free to tell her professor that he has misjudged her behavior, he cannot truly know whether he is coercing the relationship.

It is also very common in Benin for a woman to refuse a man the first time, or the first several times, he asks her out, even if she ultimately intends to accept. Women explain that they want a man to demonstrate his seriousness and dedication before accepting; Masvawure (2013) suggested this may be a relic of Victorian influences from colonial times. Therefore a man may quite rationally continue to pursue a woman long after she has refused, believing she may eventually change her mind. Here again, a man must interpret whether a woman's refusal is a true "no", or whether she is simply "playing hard to get".

These patterns are problematic in the context of the power differentials between professor and student, as outlined above. Students repeatedly commented, "Professors here are like gods". Certainly that power is attractive to some women, but for the men who become accustomed to this power and to what is often a newfound desirability among women, it becomes far too easy for ego to influence the interpretation of a student's behavior as "flirtatious". The task of distinguishing consent from coercion in the context of professor-student sexual relationships is far from black and white, and the grey area of interpretation has problematic consequences for the academic culture of the university.

VICTIM BLAMING

Despite the many instances in which female students desire or seek out relationships with professors, sexual harassment is a serious problem on campus. The fact that coerced relationships are so difficult to distinguish from consenting ones has begot a victim-blaming mentality. For example, one second-year business student, explained:

The girls who do not want to work, who cannot be bothered to study, they figure they will just go see the professor and do everything possible to meet with him. Then they wear these short skirts so that the

professor sees their thighs. And when the professor starts, that's when they say he is harassing. So harassment, in my opinion, it happens between two people.

Multiple participants concurred that a student's clothing was a major factor contributing to harassment:

Harassment also comes from the way you dress, you see? If you are wearing provocative clothing, you are already exciting the professor. And he will start to hit on you and when you refuse, then he insists. So you yourself have contributed to your harassment. (Female student, third year)

While everyone admitted that a girl who dressed decently could still fall victim to harassment, those who dress indecently were perceived as provoking the advances. Thus "provocative clothing" is often considered a sign that a girl "wants it", as is her interest in visiting the professor during office hours or asking him questions after class.

This mentality deters women from reporting, since they fear that the university administration as well as their peers will blame them for provoking the professor's attention. Most young women would prefer to keep these incidences secret to avoid damaging their reputations.

RECOURSE FOR VICTIMS

Women who have been subject to undesired attention from male professors face a number of barriers to seeking recourse. One professor claimed he would not want to engage in a coerced relationship and prefers a student give him an honest answer, yet all students felt that an honest 'no' was the last thing a woman should ever do. Horror stories of retaliatory professors abound, and the women feel they cannot trust a professor to be sympathetic. One young woman summed it up:

If a professor decides he likes you, you really only have two options. Either you accept him, or you fail. There is no one you can go to, there is no way to report him, that's just it.

Reporting an incident to the administration was out of the question. As one male student in his third year, explained:

That can really be dangerous for the girl. First, of course the administration will calm her down, tell her they'll do something about it. Then they'll send her away and call the professor and tell him what just happened, that this girl reported him. So the professor will stop after that, but she'll fail. He'll punish her for telling.

Another student laughed at the idea of telling the administration, emphasizing that the administration will always take a professor's word over a student's. According to a female law student:

Here the administration is corrupt, they protect each other. And if there was harassment, well what proof do you have? They have more relations (social capital) than you! A student cannot defend herself.

Confiding in another professor was likewise a non-option; students spoke frequently of the 'solidarity' among professors, and believed that the other professor would at best do nothing and more likely

would punish the student for speaking up. Numerous stories were recounted of women who had failed all of their classes for the year for refusing just one professor, and many students had repeated years for this reason.

Between faculty-administration solidarity and the victim-blaming mentality among students, it is widely felt that women have no recourse on campus when a professor abuses his power.

Sexual harassment is a criminal offense, however, crimes of a sexual nature are notoriously difficult to prove and are particularly challenging in Benin. Whereas in the United States, most sexual harassment cases are held in the civil court system and rely on employment law to hold the employer or institution accountable, in Benin they are relegated to criminal court. In this arena, it must be proven beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant committed the acts for which he is accused, rendering implicit threats inconclusive as evidence. Lacking any prominent cases in which a university professor was convicted in court for sexual harassment, students have little faith in the justice system. Virtually no one saw this as a viable option, as it would also bring unwanted attention to the victim:

Only if she is well-connected can she make a complaint. But if her connections are less powerful than the person who harassed her, she will be obliged to leave her major or even the campus, because the professors look out for one another. If you know the right people it's possible, but even the justice system is corrupt. (Female, first year Masters student)

Very few students fell into this "well-connected" category, and the majority felt powerless against professors who act with near-impunity. A focus group of second-year female students expressed their feelings of insecurity:

You just have to hope you don't catch the professor's attention, because then it's all over. If you won't give in to him and he wants to sleep with you, he's going to make you pay, he's going to fail you. And it makes some girls stop going to class. But if that happens you have to be very careful that the administration does not find out, because if they discover that you aren't going to class anymore because of that you will get in trouble. And they won't believe that it's the professor's fault. The only thing you can do is pray, pray every day that the professor won't want to be with you.

STRATEGIES FOR AVOIDING HARRASSMENT

Aside from prayer, students spoke of numerous strategies for avoiding compromising situations. For those women who do not want to engage in transactional relationships with professors, the primary strategy is to minimize contact. Women spoke of dressing in overly conservative or sometimes ugly and disheveled clothing, and never styling their hair or wearing makeup to class. Depending on the professor's reputation, they also avoid lingering in the classroom or asking questions after class. Students are keenly aware that they will be held responsible for their professors' sexual impulses.

Once a professor has expressed interest, the relationship becomes extremely delicate. Most women spoke of the need for tact, and above all to avoid bruising the professor's ego. Lies, excuses, and avoidance were all employed to stall his advances; that being said, lying was considered dangerous,

excuses were rarely accepted, and avoidance was challenging if the student wanted to continue coming to class.

A female student from a neighboring African country recounted a story of a particularly creative excuse:

I had a professor come on to me, but I had a really good excuse. In my country, people don't really do fetishes (sorcery), but here it's common, people believe strongly in it. So I told the professor that I was married, and that I left my husband back in my country. I said, my husband is jealous, and before I left, he cast a very powerful spell. If I cheat on him, I could die, or even the person who I cheat on him with could die. And it worked! The Beninois really believe in the fetishes! He completely understood. I even said, it's too bad professor, I like you too but it's too dangerous, we just can't. He asked, what if we just kiss? And I said no even that is too risky, it's a very strong curse. And he left me alone after that. He was perfectly nice about it, even. I took another class with him the next year and had no problem, we got along well.

While this student found a successful excuse, her story shows that having a boyfriend or even a husband did not in and of itself deter the professor. These situations led many students to skip school and fall behind in the material. As one young woman complained:

But actually these things are really discouraging. When the professor does this personally I forget all about his class. It's just finished, you will never see me there again! I won't come back until the day of the final exam...and then, what I know I will do and everything else on the test I just leave blank. If I get a bad grade, well that was my work and now it's reflecting on me. It's very unpleasant!

CONCLUSION

Sexual harassment has obvious consequences for the students involved, including poor grades and missed days of school, as well as psychological strain and social stigma. But both sexual harassment and transactional sex also have broader consequences for the academic culture on campus and ultimately in the workplace. They represent a corruption of the grading system, and uninvolved students resent the unfair advantage awarded to professors' girlfriends.

Professor-student relationships also undermine female achievement when peers suspect those successful women are using sexuality to get ahead. Women who do not take advantage of these relationships may be passed over for jobs or other opportunities in favor of less-competent women who are more willing to engage sexually. It also teaches young men that an abuse of power of this nature is acceptable and condoned by society.

While a nuanced understanding of this trend must acknowledge the agency of young women, it also cannot ignore the ethical dilemma that arises when a professor goes out with a student who he is currently responsible for teaching and evaluating. At least one professor acknowledged the inherent immorality of engaging in sexual relationships with students, even if they consent:

If I consider the moral code this is not good, when this girl who I am responsible for educating sees my nudity. Because then I show up in the classroom and what is she going to say? Can she

really pay attention after that? When she is in class she is going to think of what we have done!
But the more one has, the more one wants; once I had had one time, two times, I told myself
well, best put aside my professional conscience in this regard.

In the university context, where transactional sex involves unfair academic advantages, these relationships represent an abuse of power by professors. Such corruption has serious consequences in an institution that purports to prepare the next generation of Benin's bureaucrats and business leaders.

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