


Intersectional Struggles. Sexual Harassment and its Impact on Women Students with Disabilities in Ethiopian Universities

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Abstract: This study explores the intersectional forms of oppression that drive the sexual harassment of women students with disabilities in Ethiopian universities based on narrative interviews with twelve participants. Its findings reveal a range of sexual-harassment practices, including verbal and nonverbal conduct such as unwanted jokes, physical contact, sex requests for support, and rape attempts. The intersection of structural drivers with poverty, disability, gender, and problematic attitudes causes intersectional vulnerability. The participant women highlight hesitance to report harassment due to stigma, lack of support, distrust of peers and staff, and fears of losing crucial assistance. Consequently, they find themselves between academic survival and safety, which significantly influences their coping strategies. The present article argues that this double bind illustrates the need to shift the focus toward institutional responsibilities and commitments in addressing intersectional marginalization and fostering inclusive environments.

Keywords: Disability, Ethiopia, Intersectionality, Sexual Harassment, University

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Introduction and context

Sexual harassment in higher education is an alarming global issue that has serious impact on students. The UN Women 2026 report estimates that one in every three women in the world is vulnerable to physical and sexual violence (United Nations Women 2026). Studies have found that women report more sexual harassment than men, which reflects broader gender inequalities and norms in the higher-education landscape (Athanasiaides et al. 2023; Ramos et al. 2025). One problem that exacerbates the situation is the way higher-education institutions manage sexual-harassment reports. Keeping complaints by women students “behind closed doors” (Ahmed 2021, 244) leads to exclusion from academic activities, silencing, or even withdrawal from education, thereby failing to ensure justice (Ahmed 2021). Sara Ahmed (2021) emphasizes that when complaints are made public, institutions may seek to silence the complainants, which constitutes institutional harassment. According to Semonti Dey (2024) and Marjorie R. Sable et al. (2006), women students are typically hesitant to report sexual harassment because they fear retaliation, cultural shaming, not being believed by their friends and departments, and the lack of immediate intervention. Consequently, women students find themselves in a double-bind, forced to choose between their safety and academic survival. Reporting harassment would result in stigma and a loss of academic support, while remaining silent would force them to endure ongoing harassment, so either choice comes with great academic and psychological cost.

Sexual harassment can take multiple forms, including verbal abuse, non-verbal communication, physical contact, and sexual requests for favors, with extreme forms including sexual assault and rape (Young/Mendez 2008). Research also shows that multiple driving factors are associated with sexual harassment; particularly, women students with disabilities are frequently vulnerable to sexual harassment as they are singled out not just because of their disability but also because of their gender. Structural institutional drivers such as inaccessible physical environments, lack of accommodation, and problematic attitudes

among peers and staff contribute to their vulnerability (Friedman et al. 2021). The impact of harassment can be severe, adversely affecting both academic participation and social engagement. Frustration, anxiety, stress, trauma, withdrawal (Friedman et al. 2021; Oyetunji-Alemede/Omole 2014), and lowered self-esteem (Kim/Park/Park 2017) are some of the consequences that women who experience sexual harassment, regardless of their disability, report. Sexual harassment negatively impacts women's educational progress, potentially resulting in low self-efficacy and self-esteem (Fitzgerald et al. 1997; Okeke/Anierobi/Ezennaka 2021). It can also lead to withdrawal from studies and subsequent mental-health issues that negatively impact academic performance and persistence (Guarderas-Albuja et al. 2025; Ramos et al. 2025).

Ethiopia is not isolated from global patterns; however, as any country, it is embedded in distinct sociocultural and institutional realities that shape the experience of its residents, including university students and staff. Research shows that sexual harassment and gender-based violence are significant challenges faced by women in Ethiopian higher-education institutions (Tebeje/Cuthbert 2014; Semela 2006; Mersha/Bishaw/Tegegne 2013). The fact that the institutions have no anti-sexual-violence policy and only few reporting procedures for maintaining justice and providing appropriate measures makes the situation more challenging. Similarly, disability-focused studies in Ethiopia have revealed that despite steady improvements in regard to their enrollment in higher education, women with disabilities face limited opportunities. Attitudinal gaps and structural barriers such as inaccessible physical environments, lack of attention from university leadership, and limited assistive resources are reported by students with disabilities as obstacles (Asres 2019; Tadesse/Manathunga/Gillies 2018; Tirussew et al. 2014; Vickerman/Blundell 2010) that lead to psychological problems, causing students with disabilities to "hate their classes, education, and sometimes life in general" (Tirussew et al. 2014, 47). Collectively, existing studies offer valuable insights into gender-based harassment and disability-related barriers. However, current scholarship leaves the intersection of these dimensions of disadvantage underexplored, which makes it inadequate for fully understanding how complexity and multidimensionality influence these experiences.

Sexual harassment needs to be understood as an intersectional phenomenon rather than a gender-based issue only. Intersectionality is "greater than the sum" (Crenshaw 1989, 140) of the parts of an issue that cannot adequately be addressed in an analysis of one particular factor (Crenshaw 1989). "Race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn

shape complex social inequalities” (Collins 2015, 2), resulting in unique forms of vulnerability within educational environments. Sociocultural norms and poverty deepen women’s vulnerability to harm and limit their ability to seek justice, further intensifying the situation (Dunne/Humphreys/Leach 2006; Morley 2003). Disability cannot be isolated from other social structures; it is produced within social and structural relations influenced by gender, class, and other factors (Erevelles 2011). Understanding how sexual harassment functions in (Ethiopian) higher education, where gendered power relations are ingrained in larger systemic injustices, requires an intersectional lens.

Although scholarship on sexual harassment in higher education is growing globally, there has been little research on the multidimensionality and intersection of multiple factors in relation to education, specifically higher education, in the context of Ethiopia. Previous studies have mostly concentrated on a single factor, for example, disability (Adams/Brown 2006; Arefaine 2008; Nardos 2016; Tebeje/Gale 2014) or gender (Semela 2006; Wudu/Getahun 2010; Mersha/Bishaw/Tegegne 2013). Few studies adopt an intersectional framework, and their focus is on different contexts other than education, such as household chores (Katsui/Mojtahedi 2015), societal attitudes (Nardos 2016), and issues related to access to justice (Habtemariam 2015).

The present study makes multiple contributions to this underresearched field. It examines sexual harassment as creating a double bind between safety and survival that arises from the intersection of disability, gender, and poverty relations. It provides unique perspectives on the lived experiences of women students with disabilities in Ethiopian higher education that are underrepresented in research on sexual harassment. Additionally, it contributes to intersectional scholarship by illustrating how institutional power structures produce silence and resilience as survival strategies for women students with disabilities. Accordingly, it argues that the focus in research as well as in prevention and support work should shift from individual vulnerability to the institutional structural responsibilities of higher education.¹

Framing through the intersectionality lens

The present study explores sexual harassment within an intersectional framework by exploring the individual and contextual factors that shape individual experiences in higher-education-institution environments. Intersectionality is defined as a framework for understanding how various social factors func-

¹ In the following, the terms university and higher-education institution are used interchangeably to refer to institutions providing post-secondary education.

tion not as isolated categories but as interconnected factors that collectively influence social inequalities (Collins 2015). In this way, intersectionality helps to understand the distinctive experiences and viewpoints that arise when two or more social or cultural categories and positions come into contact and interact in complicated ways (Hancock 2007). Studying only a single axis of the issue, such as gender, disability, or poverty, may not achieve sufficient nuance in understanding and documenting sexual-harassment experiences.

Considering that individuals possess multiple social identities related to their roles, responsibilities, and social and demographic groupings (Kang/Bodenhausen 2015), each contributing factor for sexual harassment; the adverse effects of gender, disability, and poverty; and structural barriers may combine in some contexts. Intersectionality theory considers these multiple social factors to be interrelated and to constitute each other rather than existing independently (Dutta 2015; Lykke 2010). When a woman student with a disability is viewed only for her womanhood and her disability, economic status and other contextual factors are overlooked, the simultaneity of these factors and their interactional effects are ignored, and interpretations cannot provide sufficiently accurate information (Museus/Griffin 2011). In other words, a person's lived experience can change over time and depending on various inter-related circumstances, and issues of privilege and oppression can be involved simultaneously (Etherington et al. 2020).

In higher-education settings, exploring sexual harassment is important as power relations and deeply rooted gendered expectations can silence the voices of some and increase the dominance of others (Wood et al. 2021). An intersectional lens presents an appropriate tool to explore how higher-education structures interact with gender norms and disability to produce vulnerability for women students with disabilities (Collins 2000).

Due to the limited evidence in regard to this topic within the Ethiopian higher-education context, there have been calls to investigate the sexual harassment of women with disabilities, particularly at the intersection of disability, gender, economic factors, and structural barriers (Katsui/Mojtahedi 2015). The present study, therefore, contributes one answer to these calls in addressing contextual gaps by exploring the sexual-harassment experiences of women students with disabilities in Ethiopian higher-education institutions. Using an intersectional lens allows better comprehension and documentation of the unique experiences of these women students in analyzing the specific social constructions in which they are embedded. Specifically, my study sought to answer questions of how disability, gender, poverty, and structural barriers intersect to shape women students' expe-

periences of sexual harassment, its impact on them, and their coping mechanisms within Ethiopian higher-education institutions.

Methodology

The findings discussed in this paper resulted from part of a larger research project conducted in 2023 at two Southern Ethiopian universities. The study explored the experiences of women students with disabilities as well as the intersection of disability, gender, and poverty as experienced by these students. Two universities were selected, based on the number of students with disabilities enrolled, with one being among the leading institutions and having established cooperation that facilitated communication and data collection.

This study employs a qualitative-research approach, utilizing narrative interviews. Participants engaged in individual narrative interviews in order to explore deep personal matters and a nuanced understanding of emotions, context, and personal meaning (Johnson/Rowlands 2012). In-depth interviewing is a suitable method for collecting personal and oral narratives, which is crucial in doing intersectional analysis (Christensen/Jensen 2012; Ludvig 2006) and for providing richer data (Vernon 1999), while allowing participants to control their responses. All interviews were conducted face-to-face at a university, audio recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, privacy, and voluntary participation were addressed. Interview transcripts were provided.

The study was conducted with twelve women students with disabilities (see Table 1), utilizing a convenience-sampling technique. Initially, fifteen women were contacted; however, three declined to participate. All the participants were enrolled in regular undergraduate programs, with the exception of one weekend student. Disability centers facilitated contact with women students with disabilities, but only one was referred by another participant.

Interviews at the university were conducted in locations chosen by the participant women to enhance comfort. To establish rapport, casual conversations unrelated to the study preceded each interview. This approach aimed to create a positive environment, allowing participants to discuss their experiences openly and reducing tension. In regard to this, some interviews continued to be conducted this way through the narrative prompts, depending on how the conversation developed. In most cases, I initiated the interview by asking participants to tell me about their experience at the university, which made them feel open to exploring their experiences thoroughly. For accuracy and any modifications

to the interview transcript, participants received the respective transcript in print, as they preferred, due to limited access to smartphones and laptops.

Table 1: Table 1: Characteristics of participants: Women students with disabilities ($n = 12$)^{2,3}

Characteristics		
Type of disability	Full Blindness $n = 5$ Full Deafness $n = 1$ Motor impairment $n = 3$	Partial hearing loss and blindness $n = 1$ Partial sight loss $n = 1$ Multiple $n = 1$
Class/year	Senior $n = 4$	Graduating $n = 8$
Admission type	Regular $n = 11$	Private $n = 1$
Withdrawal	Yes $n = 2$	No $n = 10$

This study applies a thematic analysis (Braun/Clarke 2012), which offers a structuring method for analyzing data and facilitates detailed examination of patterns within the data. The process began with gaining familiarity with the material; I thoroughly read each interview transcription while I listened to the respective recording.

In order to capture analytically important content, the data set was imported to NVivo and read using the inductive method to obtain an impression of the content. Next, potential patterns were identified and systematically coded. Emerging codes were reviewed and categorized into initial themes that represented experiences among participants and were pertinent to the study's questions. Then, themes were examined to make sure they fit the data and to ensure a coherent pattern. As the themes took shape, they were elaborated, labeled, and structured to capture their analytical relevance. Extracts selected from across the data around each theme were presented and analyzed, and a final analytical description based on the themes was produced.

The research question was used as the headline for each analytical phase to ensure that the relevant meaning was found. Intersectional complexity was taken into account during the analysis process. I started by identifying factors that surfaced in the participant narratives when analyzing the intersection of

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- 2 Regular students meet Ethiopian Ministry of Education's university-admission criteria, while private students join in a private stream, covering education costs via their own means or with the support of external organizations.
 - 3 Efforts to capture the voice of women with disabilities who had left the universities without finishing their studies were not successful due to the unavailability of contact information. Students with disabilities and lecturers confirmed that some women had dropped out of their studies due to academic and nonacademic reasons, including discipline cases from participating universities.

various factors. Following that, I connected the factors as they appear in the transcript in a meaningful way. Finally, I described the relationships of how the factors interrelate with one another.

A crucial aspect of this study entails properly representing students' experiences while considering the researcher's interpretations. In this case, I as the researcher, a university lecturer and former gender-office coordinator, engaged in reflective practice to critically analyze how my insider status, the power dynamics that affect me, and my personal experiences as a woman may influence data management and interpretation.

Findings: Experiences of sexual harassment

The experiences of sexual harassment (Young/Mendez 2008) encountered on a daily basis by female students with disabilities at both universities are disclosed in the following accounts, which highlight how the students were made vulnerable to a variety of forms of sexual harassment by men students, male staff, and men outside of the university, ranging from sexually oriented comments and explicit sex talk to physical contacts and forced sexual attempts:

"The library is crowded in the evening and at night, so I often read in 'Space' [an informal name for classrooms]. That night, I was approached by three men; one was my classmate, and I did not know the other two. I thought that there was nothing wrong with that. Because anyone can share the room and study there. But when they came closer to me, I felt uncomfortable and became afraid of what was going on. So, I began collecting my stuff to leave [...], but they grabbed me [...] one of them saying, 'Are you going to escape from us?', and I struggled, but I could not resist them. My classmate said, 'Let's enjoy; we'll leave you.' He literally asked me to sleep with them. Suddenly, I screamed loudly. Then, they ran away." (A woman with a mobility disability)⁴

This account makes a crucial convergence visible: her gender made her sexuality targetable, her mobility limitation and the ableist environment that she was in both contributed to making her more vulnerable, and the time and context of the event made the chances of receiving help minimal. In this instance, vulnerability to sexual assault was not inherent to just one of these axes; instead, it resulted from the intersection of multiple factors within the specific institutional context (Crenshaw 1989).

⁴ translated into English by the author

Certainly, the lack of accommodation options and the disabling physical environment increase the need for personal assistance in studying and daily living, which not only reinforces dependence but also creates vulnerability for abuse and harassment (Nosek et al. 2001). Similarly, because of structural drivers such as the lack of Braille-transcribed materials and assistive-reading equipment in conjunction with the inability to purchase their own computers due to poverty, women students with blindness at these universities are dependent on readers and assistants to access materials. Often, they then experience that their readers take advantage of providing the reading service:

“They [readers] persistent harassing and abusive behavior like, touching me as it happens accidentally and asking me for my opinion on certain topics like relationship, satisfaction, sex, etc. I understand that these conversations are meant to attract me into something unwanted. They do not just come with the intention of reading. They also have hidden interests.” (A woman student with blindness)

“They make unnecessary jokes that are uncomfortable. Some say “I love you” but it’s all a lie.” (A woman with blindness)

“Sometimes, they ask me strange questions. I get very emotional at times and it really lowers my mood. Besides, they think of me as weak, foolish, and ignorant and wish to use my femininity.” (A woman with a mobility difficulty)

Some women students with disabilities were asked for sex in exchange for assistance by their readers – “you do something for me and I’ll do something for you” (Young/Mendez 2008, 8–9):

“Others read to me without expecting payment; they just want to get satisfied (to sleep with him). These are the things I faced repeatedly.” (A woman with blindness)

“It might surprise you that, there was a student who openly asked to have sex with me instead of paying money for his reading service.” (A woman with blindness)

The sexual harassment not only comes from other students but also from staff, who are supposed to provide academic support. A deaf woman shared her experience with being harassed by her tutor, a member of staff at the university’s disability center:

“He [a member of staff] used to stick to our schedule and arrive on time. But later, he began to come outside of our scheduled times, and he sent me inappropriate text messages. When we meet, he doesn’t tutor as before; instead, he talks nonsense stuff, he tries to touch me, and hug me. He completely stopped tutoring me.”

In this case, the perpetrator knew that the woman had a hearing disability and, thinking that it may prevent her from reporting the assault, considered her powerless. At the same time, his role as a staff member positions him as an institutional authority figure. This dynamic makes the harassment experience not merely individual misconduct; instead, it is embedded within a web of interconnected factors, including power differentials, gender, attitudes toward disabilities, and dependency (Crusto/Hooper/Arora 2024).

Analysis shows how this intersectional structural vulnerability (Friedman et al. 2021) to harassment of women students is caused by structural factors, including inaccessible physical environments combined with issues in attitudes. Some university lecturers denied students with disabilities classes due to accessibility issues, forcing them to attend unfamiliar campuses. A blind woman student shared how the interplay of impairment restriction and structural barriers made her vulnerable to harassment at the hands of a stranger:

“On that day, after I got off the motorcycle at the main entrance of the campus, I asked for help, like usual. Then, a man approached me and asked what I was looking for, so I told him that I was looking for someone going inside. He said, ‘Don’t worry, it’s my way, so we can stroll together.’ He nevertheless took me to a different place away from the campus.”

Another participant’s experience reflects how ableist power dynamics within peer relations, which combine with disability-related vulnerability, led to her exposure to risk. A blind woman student shared a story of an exploited friendship in which her friend took advantage of their relationship, putting her in a risky situation with a stranger outside campus: “I trusted her, but she left me in a hotel with a stranger, and they had talked and planned for it.”

This finding corroborates other research findings on exploited friendships that show that disability-related dependency and ableist power dynamics can make people with disabilities vulnerable to verbal and sexual abuse as well as exploitation by friends (Sivabalan/Haji Mas’ud/Carlo 2022; Landman 2014).

The emotional, academic, and social impact of harassment

Research indicates that sexual harassment in higher educational settings can cause psychological distress, including symptoms such as depression, anxiety, fear, trauma, low self-esteem, and self-blame (Friedman et al. 2021; Okeke/Anierobi/Ezennaka 2021). In face of the harassment they encounter, women students with disabilities tend to experience reactions ranging from discom-

fort to helplessness, fear, annoyance, and hypervigilance, and may develop intense stress:

“From that day on, I lost all my trust, and I just couldn’t trust anyone. Because it is impossible to know what people are thinking, and I do not know if they are framing me to get hurt.” (A blind woman student whose friends took advantage of their friendship)

“I was arguing with myself with questions: Is this my destiny? Why do I expose myself to risks? What if I got infected? What can I do if a man catches me again? I nearly became restless with questions like these.” (A blind woman student who escaped from a stranger)

“I recall being upset with the abusive readers quite frequently.” (A blind woman student who was harassed by readers)

“I continuously got nervous with his [her tutor’s] bad behavior, and I felt that it was too much.” (A deaf woman student who faces harassment by a staff member, her tutor)

Another participant’s self-esteem was negatively impacted by an experience of harassment (Kim/Park/Park 2017) in a way that lead to self-blame and the internalizing of vulnerability as a sign of personal weakness:

“Over time, I started to doubt myself. They thought that I was easy? Why did they pick me out of all those students around? I could only conclude that they considered me to be weak. Sometimes, I claim to be weak because I cannot do anything, and no one has helped me.” (A woman with a mobility disability who escaped a rape attempt)

Some of the experiences highlight the social and educational impact of sexual harassment. One participant woman recalled the time she decided to quit her studies in order to protect herself due to harassment in the university environment and her feeling unsafe: “I first went to the department and asked for a withdrawal.” A blind woman student mentioned how she had changed in social interactions and academic routines due to her experience: “That year, it was only when we had a class or mealtime that I would leave the dormitory.”

When harassment comes from their assistants, women students with disabilities are forced to decide between their safety and academic survival. Refusing “support” that is abusive may preserve their dignity but leave them to struggle in inaccessible academic settings. They find themselves with no other options: either accept assistance and suffer abuse or refuse assistance and make achieving academic requirements more difficult. This illustrates the intersection between structural inaccessibility, assistant violence, and institutional failure to safeguard the students:

“It got challenging to survive by just reading the handouts.” (A deaf woman student)

“Without a reader, I found it difficult to keep up. When the final exams approached, I became quite anxious.” (A blind woman student)

The consequences participants faced for their decisions, which highlight significant psychological harms as well as their social and educational impact, are prevalent and strongly supported by other studies (Athanasziades et al. 2023; Guarderas-Albuja et al. 2025; Ramos et al. 2025). The present study further demonstrates how the complex intersectional manifestations of structural determinants in higher education exacerbate the psychological distress experienced by women students with disabilities.

Coping strategies

Research on harassment has identified several coping strategies, such as confronting the harassers, avoiding the harassers and situations that are seen as likely to lead to harassment, seeking mental support, and official reporting of the incidents to the authorities (Vohlídalová 2015). Many of these strategies were indeed adopted by the participant women students with disabilities. Many did not use a single strategy but tried various and multiple ways in different contexts. It became clear as one key finding that a highly common response to sexual harassment was avoiding the harassers, for example, by replacing a reader that had been abusive with another reader or by quitting any such support in order to avoid getting in contact with any tutors.

As soon as I noticed this inappropriate behavior, I left him and replaced him with another reader. Again, this reader attempted to do similar things and I replaced him with another reader. I change readers because of their irritating actions. But for how long will I keep switching readers? I don't know. (A blind woman student harassed by multiple readers)

“Finally, I stopped getting assistance from him.” (A deaf woman student harassed by tutor)

Another coping strategy was identifying and avoiding situations that may lead to sexual harassment:

“I no longer read in “Space” [the classrooms], and instead I go to the library or read in the dormitory. I also stopped going anywhere alone. I always am with my friend or with my dormmates.” (A woman with a mobility disability who escaped a rape attempt)

Although avoidance was a common strategy used in their attempts to prevent sexual harassment, the interplay between the lack of accommodation, gender,

and disability placed women students with disabilities in situations in which they remained vulnerable with no options. Under these conditions of having to rely on others' support to do their studies, even the perpetrators are considered important. Relying on them is a means for survival for these students until they are met with harassing behavior that is even more dangerous. As a result, they persist in seeking support despite harassment:

"He started behaving differently and saying nonsense [...], but no matter what he said, as long as he helped me, I didn't give him the cold shoulder; otherwise, he would stop reading." (A blind woman student and reader user)

"I eventually made the decision to stop using the reader, but it was not possible to cope with a classroom lecture alone in the absence of any Braille-transcribed material or a computer. Sadly, I must go on and endure all this discomfort." (A blind woman student and reader user)

Seeking peer support was another strategy used by some women. These women students with disabilities shared the incident with others and sought help from their dormmates and close friends. A blind woman student acknowledged receiving support via her classmate:

"He [a blind classmate] had a guide. So, I told him what happened to me and asked him if they could accompany me during class and mealtime. His guide then began to guide both of us. It's because of them [that I stayed]; otherwise, I would have returned home."

Two of the women participant students discussed their respective friends, who were encouraging and advised them to report the incidents to the university's offices. One woman shared her experience of benefiting from one-on-one counseling provided by a disability center that helped her: "I wasn't doing well for some days. So, I visited the center and met a woman who offered guidance to women with disabilities. She gave me some advice during our consultation that somewhat helped me."

Similar to prior studies' findings (Nyakurerwa 2025; Gyawali/Karki 2023), seeking help from peers and professional services emerged as a coping strategy in managing the social, educational, and psychological consequences of harassment. Participants further indicated the importance of emotional support in overcoming post-trauma disturbances and highlighted the use of peer support to avoid harassment that resulted from structural barriers in conjunction with disability-related restrictions.

Unlike the other participants, one blind woman shared her experience of how she chose to use dating as a way to avoid sexual harassment and eventually

stopped criticizing other women students with disabilities for doing so at university:

“I assumed it was just to pretend to own one’s own guilt. Because I believed it was wrong to begin relationships at the university, especially for disabled women students. The most important thing here is to plan and focus on our education. But I think it was in my second year that I just started dating like most blind female students do. I therefore stopped passing judgment. Because while it doesn’t matter to men, it does to us.

For women, it does. Other men won’t dare you if you have a man.”

This participant chose to have unwanted relationships not simply because she faced sexual harassment by men readers but to reduce her vulnerability to harassment by avoiding readers as she had to continue her studies in a setting where no Braille-transcribed materials were available and accessing learning materials depended on her reader. This illustrates a structural double-bind situation (Crenshaw 1989) in which she either avoids an unwanted relationship (with a reader) and faces sexual harassment or enters an unwanted relationship (with a dating partner) and reduces harassment.

Although the participant women students with disabilities all reacted to harassment in their own distinct ways, most of them did not make a formal report to the university’s responsible offices, and some who did make an attempt to report did not receive help but were met with negative responses instead. For one woman who had escaped rape, it was the fact that encountering the perpetrator frequently was disturbing and caused negative psychological consequences (Mullu et al. 2015) that prompted her to report the case. Despite her efforts, she was unsuccessful in meeting the person responsible at the university’s gender office and faced gender barriers at the university’s disability center.

“I was ashamed to discuss the situation with a man [the director] at the disability center. At the gender office, I couldn’t find her [the person responsible]. They [the employees] gave me different explanations, like she was in a class or at a meeting. I finally realized they couldn’t help me.”

Common myths about people with disabilities, including the lie that they are generally abused, and the difficulty they face in regard to being believed as survivors of abuse contribute to accusations against them of engaging in offensive behavior, increase their vulnerability to victimization, and prevent them from receiving proper help (Bowers Andrews/Veronen 1993; Cole 1984).

One of the participant women who reported harassment from a staff member to the university faced second victimization, was falsely accused of misbehavior, and received a “shocking” warning from the disability center: “I was told

that no assistance would be given to me as they believed that it was my fault.” Institutions are required to support and provide a procedural response when harassment happens. In contrast to these responsibilities, when women students report harassment by instructors, it is them as victims who become the “problem”. In the present study, it became visible that the institutions involved reproduced vulnerability for those who reported harassment. Ahmed (2021) calls this “institutional harassment”: higher-education institutions take steps to stop the complainer by minimizing harassers’ actions and forcing or encouraging the student who experiences harassment to leave the institution in order to protect the reputation of the institution and/or staff. For these participants, already positioned at the intersection of ableist marginalization and non-disability-inclusive learning spaces, the decision to face the consequences of reporting harassment is therefore not only an individual or moral choice but a structurally influenced risk evaluation.

Conclusion

This study explored the sexual-harassment experiences, its different kinds of impact, and coping strategies of women students with disabilities in Ethiopian higher-education institutions through an intersectional lens. The findings demonstrate the intersection of structural barriers, gender, disability, and poverty as it creates layered vulnerability to sexual harassment. The results demonstrate that sexual harassment is structurally rooted in a combination of multiple complicated factors and cannot be interpreted as mere personal misconduct. The study further documented the significant psychological, social, and educational impact of sexual harassment. Consequences ranged from discomfort to helplessness, fear, annoyance, hypervigilance, and intense stress, with some women even thinking of quitting their studies, which has implications for academic and social engagements. In spite of the barriers and challenges, the participant women students with disabilities demonstrated resilience and employed coping mechanisms, such as avoiding harassers and situations that could lead to harassment as well as seeking support from peers and professional services. Some participants mentioned efforts at formal reporting that were not successful due to institutional harassment. Collectively, the results show that addressing institutional failures in disability inclusion and gender sensitivity is essential to combating sexual harassment in higher education. Therefore, it is imperative that universities adopt intersectionally informed policies and practices as well as fundamental structural reforms. Finally, in this study, it was difficult to include the voices of women with disabilities who had left their university studies for

various reasons; future research that specifically considers their experiences is needed to provide additional knowledge.

Data Availability Statement

The research materials will not be published for ethical and privacy reasons.

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