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An evaluation of the gender justice project in safeguarding students and young adults in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

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Abstract

Sexual harassment and abuse (SHA) in Nigerian Tertiary Educational Institutions has been a persistent issue, contributing to a rise in gender-based violence and creating an atmosphere of fear among students. The 2019 BBC documentary 'Sex for Grades: Undercover in West African Universities' revealed the alarming prevalence of SHA, prompting significant public and legislative attention. In response to renewed public scrutiny following the BBC documentary, the Shehu Musa Yar'Adua Foundation (SMYF) launched the Gender Justice Project (GJP) to institutionalize safeguarding mechanisms across higher education institutions (HEIs) in Nigeria. This study evaluates the development and effectiveness of the GJP's safeguarding policy at the American University of Nigeria (AUN), using the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) and the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) theoretical framework to examine coalition-driven policy change and institutional rule reform. The ACF highlights the role of coalitions of stakeholders with shared beliefs in driving policy change, while the IAD framework focuses on the institutional arrangements and rules that govern decision-making processes. Adopting a mixed-methods case study design, the research integrates survey data (n = 290 pre-project; n = 116 post-project) and in-depth interviews to assess perceptions of SHA prevalence, policy awareness and institutional response. Findings indicate that while the GJP contributed to policy innovation and increased stakeholder engagement, post-project awareness and confidence in safeguarding mechanisms declined, revealing persistent gaps in policy implementation, access and cultural ownership. We argue for the integration of safeguarding into national education frameworks, expanded accountability mechanisms and culturally grounded strategies to ensure long-term protection for students and young adults in HEIs.

Keywords Gender justice, Sexual harassment, Sexual abuse, Safeguarding, Tertiary institutions, Nigeria

1 Introduction

Sexual harassment and abuse (SHA) is a phenomenon that significantly affects higher education institutions (HEIs) across the globe, impacting not only the physical and emotional well-being of students but also the institutional culture and educational outcomes

of universities. These violations are often underreported due to stigma, fear of reprisal, and limited institutional support, particularly in contexts where gender inequality and authority hierarchies are entrenched [1]. For many students—especially women, young adults, and those from marginalized backgrounds—SHA constitutes a profound barrier to educational attainment, psychological safety, and full participation in academic life.

In African HEIs, SHA is further compounded by weak policy enforcement, lack of student-centred grievance mechanisms, and cultural norms that trivialize or normalize predatory behaviors. Despite growing awareness and international commitments to gender equality and safe education, systemic responses have lagged, especially in Nigeria [2].

In Nigeria, SHA in tertiary institutions has been a longstanding issue, with decades of anecdotal and documented cases involving coercive practices by academic and non-academic staff. However, it was the release of the 2019 BBC documentary "Sex for Grades: Undercover in West African Universities" that catalyzed widespread public outcry [3]. The exposé revealed the prevalence of exploitative power dynamics in universities such as the University of Lagos and the University of Ghana, drawing international attention and compelling legislative and institutional responses [4]. Following this media spotlight, Nigerian lawmakers reintroduced the Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal of Sexual Harassment in Tertiary Educational Institutions Bill, which had previously lapsed. While the Bill made notable advances—such as expanding the definition of "educator" and recognizing prospective students as potential victims—it remains stalled at the executive level pending presidential assent.

In parallel to these legislative efforts, civil society organizations and development partners mobilized to address the policy and institutional gaps exposed by the scandal. Among these, the Gender Justice Project (GJP), initiated by the Shehu Musa Yar'Adua Foundation (SMYF) and supported by the Ford Foundation, sought to institutionalize safeguarding mechanisms within HEIs, starting with the American University of Nigeria (AUN).

This study is guided by two complementary frameworks from policy studies and institutional analysis:

a. The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), developed by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, posits that policy change emerges from the interaction of coalitions—network of actors across public and private spheres—who share core beliefs and coordinate over time [5]. ACF is especially relevant in sectors characterized by high conflict and value-driven discourse, such as gender justice. It enables the analysis of how coalitions (e.g., donors, universities, advocacy groups) mobilize to influence safeguarding policy agendas.
b. The Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework, developed by Elinor Ostrom, focuses on the rules, actors, and decision-making arenas that shape policy implementation [6]. This framework helps evaluate how formal and informal rules ("rules-in-use") evolve within an institution like AUN and how these affect the sustainability and efficacy of SHA safeguards.

This paper examines the development, implementation, and effectiveness of safeguarding policies against SHA at the AUN, as part of the broader GJP. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach—including pre- and post-intervention survey data and qualitative interviews—the study assesses policy awareness, stakeholder perceptions, reporting

mechanisms, and institutional responsiveness. It addresses the key questions on how did advocacy coalitions influence the adoption of SHA safeguarding policies at AUN?; To what extent have institutional rules and procedures adapted to enable effective implementation?; and What challenges persist in embedding safeguarding culture and accountability in Nigerian HEIs?

Divided into seven broad sections, Sect. 2, preceded by this introductory section, reviews the evolving legal framework governing SHA in Nigeria while Sect. 3 surveys the literature on SHA in HEIs and safeguarding theory. In Sect. 4 the methodology of the work is explained while Sects. 5 delved into the GJP. Section 6 reports the study results with Sect. 7 being the discussion section of the study. Section 8 draws conclusions and policy recommendations.

2 Legal framework on sexual harassment in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

Sexual harassment and abuse (SHA) in higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly recognized not only as individual violations but also as systemic issues rooted in institutional structures and societal norms [7]. In Nigeria, the legal and policy landscape surrounding SHA has evolved over the past two decades, shaped by legislative activism, international commitments, and civil society pressure. However, legal frameworks often remain fragmented, and enforcement within HEIs is marked by inconsistency and under-resourcing.

The legal framework for protection against SHA in Nigeria is firmly established by the international and regional commitments of the country. As a state party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Nigeria is required to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in education. General Recommendation 19 of CEDAW explicitly recognizes sexual harassment as a form of gender-based violence.

Nigeria is also a signatory to the International Labour Organization's Convention 190, which mandates the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work—including educational settings. Moreover, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly Goal 5 on gender equality and Goal 4 on inclusive education) call for concrete steps to make learning environments safe, equitable, and empowering.

At the regional level, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) of 2003, to which Nigeria has ratified alongside other 41 African countries, places an obligation on member states to take measures to prevent and punish all forms of violence against women, including in educational institutions. Article 12 specifically mandates member states to protect women from sexual harassment in workplaces and learning environments.

Also, in furtherance of the realisation of the African Union Agenda 2063, the African Union adopted the 10 year—Continental Education Strategy for Africa (2016–2025) (CESA) which prioritizes gender-responsive policies to eliminate barriers to education, including violence and discrimination. The CESA specifically calls for mandatory reporting mechanisms for sexual abuse in schools.

Despite these commitments, Nigeria has yet to institutionalize these standards within national education policy or university accreditation frameworks. The early legal frameworks surrounding protection against SHAs in Nigeria can be traced to prohibitive laws

that attract sanctions. The Criminal Code Act of 1916, applicable in the southern states, and the Penal Code of 1960, applicable in the northern states, include provisions criminalizing acts of "indecent assault" and non-consensual sexual contact. Section 360 of the Criminal Code, for instance, prescribes imprisonment for such offenses. However, these provisions are not tailored to the dynamics of SHA in academic institutions. They have limited scope, restrictive definitions, and inadequate remedies for addressing sexual offenses in contemporary times [8] and most importantly, the provisions frame harassment primarily as individual moral misconduct rather than an abuse of institutional power.

In some cases, the Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Act, 2000 has been used to prosecute sexual harassment, particularly when framed as an abuse of public office [9]. The case of Professor Richard Akindele at Obafemi Awolowo University—convicted for demanding sex in exchange for academic grades—illustrates the potential of anti-corruption law to fill the legislative vacuum. Yet this approach treats SHA as a form of institutional impropriety rather than a gendered power violation, thus obfuscating its broader implications for gender justice.

Similarly, the Child's Rights Act (CRA) of 2003 provides protections against sexual exploitation for individuals under 18. However, the law is not consistently domesticated across all Nigerian states and has limited relevance for most students in higher education, who are typically young adults. In states like Kwara, where the legal definition of a child extends only to age 15, protections afforded by the CRA are even more constrained [10]. These early laws reflect a piecemeal approach that fails to address the specific contours of SHA within HEIs.

The Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPP), passed in 2015, broadened legal definitions of sexual violence but initially applied only to the Federal Capital Territory. Although more states have adopted the Act, it is rarely enforced in tertiary education contexts. This disconnect between normative commitments and practical enforcement underscores a recurring theme in Nigerian public policy: the symbolic adoption of global norms without their systematic domestic implementation.

The most comprehensive legislative attempt to address SHA in Nigerian universities emerged in 2016 with the introduction of the Sexual Harassment in Tertiary Educational Institutions Prohibition Bill. Although the 8th Assembly failed to pass the Bill before its term ended, it was reintroduced in 2019 with renewed urgency following the BBC Africa Eye documentary "Sex for Grades," which exposed systemic abuses at the University of Lagos and other institutions [3, 4]. The Bill was subsequently passed by the National Assembly but remains pending for presidential assent of April 2025.

The Bill offers several progressive elements. It defines sexual harassment broadly, encompassing not only physical acts but also verbal, written, and electronic communications with sexual intent, including propositions linked to academic advantage. Notably, it expands the definition of "educator" to include both academic and non-academic staff—acknowledging the multiple gatekeeping roles through which power can be exercised over students. It also extends protection to prospective students, who are often vulnerable during admissions processes. However, the Bill has faced criticisms. Its definition of "unwelcome behaviour" is seen as vague, potentially making it difficult to enforce [11]. It also omits peer-on-peer harassment, a growing concern in coeducational and digital learning environments. Moreover, while the legal definition of "educator" in

the Bill includes non-academic staff, enforcement in practice often targets faculty members more than administrative personnel, reflecting cultural biases about authority and professionalism.

Furthermore, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has opposed the Bill on grounds of academic autonomy, arguing that it infringes on universities' internal disciplinary procedures [12]. While public hearings indicated broad civil society support for the Bill, including from student groups and advocacy coalitions, these institutional objections have contributed to the executive delay in granting assent.

Despite the lack of specific legislation to address SHA in HEIs in Nigeria, the media attention and advocacy agitations appears to have pushed institutions into action as several tertiary institutions developed and adopted SHA policies.

2.1 Institutional safeguarding policies in HEIs

In the absence of a binding national law, HEIs across Nigeria have developed a variety of internal safeguarding policies, often influenced by donor-funded initiatives and civil society advocacy. These institutional responses vary significantly in depth, enforcement, and visibility. While some universities have established gender centers, whistleblowing platforms, and sensitization programs, others lack even basic complaint mechanisms or clear procedural guidelines.

The AUN provides an illustrative case. In response to the GJP, spearheaded by the SMYF and funded by the Ford Foundation, AUN developed a comprehensive safeguarding policy. This policy consolidates SHA-related provisions previously dispersed across the Student Code of Conduct, the Staff Handbook, and faculty governance documents. It institutionalizes a whistleblowing mechanism, training modules, a safeguarding committee, and defined escalation procedures. The GJP also supported the creation of a toolkit designed to be scaled across other HEIs. Despite this progress, challenges remain. Awareness of the policy, especially among students, declined in the post-project phase (53.8% compared to 79.4% pre-project), raising concerns about institutional complacency following external funding cycles.

Other universities, such as UNILAG, UNN, and BUK, have begun similar initiatives, often in response to reputational crises. However, without national benchmarks, external audits, or sustained institutional support, these policies risk remaining symbolic. The fragmentation of safeguarding provisions across institutional documents further reduces their accessibility and enforceability.

Table 1 below is a representation of the current legal framework status of Nigeria on SHA.

Table 1 Legal framework of SHA in Nigeria

Year	Development	Status/impact
1916	Criminal Code Act (Sect. 360)	Criminalized indecent assault
2000	ICPC Act	Used to prosecute SHA framed as corruption
2015	Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act	Broadened SHA definitions; federal scope limited
2016	SHA Prohibition Bill (8th Assembly)	Lapsed without passage
2019	SHA Bill reintroduced in 9th Assembly	Passed in 2023, awaiting Presidential assent
2020	GJP Policy Framework at AUN	Institutional safeguarding policy adopted
2023	Safeguarding Toolkit deployed at AUN	Formalized training and reporting mechanisms (whistleblowing platform)

2.2 Implementation and enforcement gaps

Although legal and institutional frameworks on SHA in Nigeria have expanded, enforcement remains the weakest link in the safeguarding architecture because multiple structural and cultural barriers inhibit effective implementation. First, there is a consistent disconnect between formal rules and their application—what Ostrom's IAD framework calls the divergence between "rules-in-form" and "rules-in-use" [6]. Policies may be codified, but informal norms, fear of reprisal, and bureaucratic complexity deter victims from reporting.

Second, reporting mechanisms often lack legitimacy among stakeholders. Students and staff, from the GJP, cite mistrust, lack of confidentiality, and opaque investigative procedures as reasons for non-engagement. Even when complaints are made, bureaucratic delays and inconsistent outcomes contribute to a sense of futility [13, 14]. Third, universities often prioritize institutional reputation over justice. Allegations against influential staff are sometimes handled informally or not pursued at all, reinforcing a culture of impunity. The absence of publicized outcomes further reduces the deterrent effect of safeguarding policies.

Finally, there is no performance-based incentive system linking safeguarding efforts to institutional evaluation or funding. University administrators are not held accountable for the presence or absence of functional safeguarding mechanisms, and safeguarding offices remain underfunded and marginal within university governance structures.

3 Literature review

3.1 Conceptualising SHA

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in HEIs is a well-documented global phenomenon that undermines student safety, academic freedom, and gender equity. While universities are often regarded as citadels of learning and personal development, they also serve as sites where power hierarchies, patriarchal norms, and institutional silences enable the perpetration and normalization of sexual harassment and abuse [15]. Traditionally viewed as morally upright and insulated from such misconduct, increasing incidents and public disclosures have revealed universities as spaces where power, gender, and silence converge to allow abuse to persist unchecked. Thus, SHA in HEIs have moved from the margins of scholarly and policy concern to the center of debates on educational equity and institutional accountability.

The term 'sexual harassment' was not widely recognized as a systemic problem before the mid-1970s [16] when sexual harassment became increasingly visible through feminist legal scholarship and rising complaints within professional and academic spaces. The term SHA remains difficult to define universally because it is shaped by cultural, legal, and institutional norms that vary widely. Definitions across jurisdictions—embedded in criminal law, labour codes, anti-discrimination legislation, and institutional policies—reveal how context-dependent the phenomenon is. The United Nations General Assembly (1993) broadly categorizes sexual harassment as a form of violence against women, positioning it within the global human rights framework. Still, what constitutes harassment often depends on the perception of the recipient, with acts ranging from overt physical advances to more subtle forms of sexualized communication, including innuendo, coercive flirting, and suggestive digital messages.

MacKinnon, a foundational feminist legal theory scholar, defines sexual harassment as "the unwanted imposition of sexual requirements in the context of a relationship of unequal power" [17]. This definition is especially relevant in HEIs, where power asymmetries between students and educators shape interactions. In African HEIs, including Nigeria, this asymmetry is magnified by patriarchal norms and institutional hierarchies, making students—especially women and marginalized individuals—vulnerable to exploitation.

The University of Zambia defines sexual harassment as 'unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conducts of a sexual nature, when submission to or rejection of this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects a person's employment or education, unreasonably interferes with a person's work or educational performance, or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive working or learning environment [18]. We therefore adopt a culturally grounded understanding of SHA as "any sexually charged, unwelcome, and morally inappropriate advance, request, communication, or behavior that—whether perpetrated by persons in positions of authority, peers, or third parties—creates an intimidating, hostile, or inequitable environment within academic settings."

This expansive definition recognizes that vulnerability to harassment in HEIs arises not only from hierarchical relationships but also from systemic cultural, institutional, and gender-based inequalities.

In the African context, SHA in HEIs is exacerbated by systemic gender inequalities, limited accountability mechanisms, and socio-cultural barriers to disclosure (Kevin Namiiro [19]). A 2011 survey found that over 70% of female university graduates in Nigeria reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment during their academic careers. These experiences range from inappropriate verbal conduct and coercive exchanges, such as "sex-for-grades", to outright physical violence, and disproportionately affect young women, LGBTQ + students, and those from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds [2].

Crucially, underreporting remains rampant, fueled by stigma, fear of retaliation, and mistrust in institutional mechanisms. As such, the existence of safeguarding policies alone is insufficient to prevent or redress SGBV in educational spaces—their uptake and enforcement depend on institutional will, clarity of process, and cultural legitimacy [20].

In response to mounting pressure, many HEIs—both globally and in Nigeria—have adopted safeguarding frameworks aimed at preventing and responding to sexual harassment and abuse. These frameworks typically include sexual misconduct codes, whistleblowing platforms, disciplinary protocols, and psychosocial support services [21]. However, the effectiveness of these institutional responses varies significantly. Studies have shown that even when policies are in place, their visibility, accessibility, and enforcement are often limited [20, 21]. Challenges include poorly defined complaint procedures, lack of survivor-centered services, and inadequate training for investigators and faculty. Furthermore, safeguarding initiatives often rely heavily on donor funding or crisis-triggered interventions, raising concerns about sustainability and institutional ownership.

Within Nigeria, universities such as the University of Lagos, University of Nigeria Nsukka (UNN), Bayero University Kano (BUK), and the American University of Nigeria (AUN) have made policy advances in recent years, often in response to external scrutiny

or funding opportunities (e.g., the Ford Foundation-backed Gender Justice Project). Yet, these advances remain largely unexamined through the lens of policy change theory or institutional analysis, limiting scholarly understanding of what enables (or inhibits) effective safeguarding in practice.

3.2 Theoretical frameworks for policy change

Despite the growing body of research on SGBV in HEIs, most of the literature remains descriptive or sociological in nature, focusing on prevalence rates, survivor experiences, or gender ideology [22, 23]. Fewer studies engage with political science or public policy frameworks that could explain how and why institutional change occurs—or fails to occur—over time. This omission is significant. As Ostrom [6] and Sabatier [5] argue, policy outcomes are shaped not only by content and context, but by the institutional rules, actor coalitions, and strategic interactions that mediate them. Understanding safeguarding failures thus requires attention to power, rules, and agency—elements underexplored in the education and gender violence literature.

To address this gap, this study applies the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) and the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) theoretical frameworks in tandem to examine the policy and institutional dynamics of safeguarding reform in Nigerian universities. The ACF posits that policy change occurs through the interaction of advocacy coalitions—groups of actors from various public and private institutions who share a set of beliefs and coordinate their activities over time [5]. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding the GJP, as it involves multiple stakeholders, including the Shehu Musa Yar'Adua Foundation, educational institutions, advocacy groups, and donors such as the Ford Foundation. These stakeholders form coalitions based on their shared belief in the necessity of robust safeguarding policies to combat SHAs.

The ACF emphasizes the role of coalitions—networks of actors with shared normative beliefs—in driving policy change in complex and contested domains such as gender justice. In the Nigerian SHA context, coalitions involving civil society organizations (e.g., SMYF), international donors (e.g., Ford Foundation), and reformist administrators have catalyzed the adoption of safeguarding frameworks post-crisis (e.g., after the BBC "Sex for Grades" exposé). The ACF helps illuminate how these coalitions mobilize resources, frame problems, and sustain advocacy over time, despite resistance from entrenched interests like academic unions or conservative leadership.

In contrast, the IAD framework focuses on the institutional "rules-in-use"—both formal and informal—that shape actor behavior within specific arenas. It enables an evaluation of how safeguarding policies are interpreted, implemented, and internalized (or not) within university structures. For example, the IAD lens can explain why whistleblowing mechanisms remain underutilized or why disciplinary committees fail to deter repeat offenders, even when rules exist on paper. By connecting the dots across gender, policy, and institutional analysis, we contribute to a more integrative understanding of safeguarding challenges in HEIs by arguing that addressing SHA requires not only good policies, but supportive coalitions, culturally resonant interventions, and institutional rules that reinforce—rather than undermine—survivor-centered protection.

3.3 Strengthening

Traditional SHA policies typically focus on addressing incidents after they occur, emphasizing disciplinary actions and legal recourse [24]. In contrast, safeguarding approaches are more holistic, aiming to prevent SHAs by addressing underlying power asymmetries and creating a safe and supportive environment for all students [21].

Safeguarding in schools can be described as measures put in place by schools to keep learners safe from harm and abuse and to create a safe learning environment. According to Chambers, Cantrell and Booth, in safeguarding, the health, human rights and well-being of people, especially children, young adults and other vulnerable people, must be considered to ensure that they live free from fear of harm, abuse and neglect [25]. Safeguarding can therefore be described as the process or system of preventing harm to people and the environment in which they are. In this instance, the people in question include students and vulnerable young adults in Nigerian tertiary institutions, representing the environment alluded to in the opening statement. Consequently, for the purpose of this article, safeguarding means taking reasonable and proactive steps to prevent any form of harm, harassment, abuse, or exploitation of students and young adults in the learning environment and how to respond or deal with these vices whenever they occur. The goal is to create a safe and secure learning environment for students without fear of harm or abuse and with confidence in how to deal appropriately with SHAs if they occur.

Children and young adults, during their educational pursuits as students, are usually seen to be more vulnerable to abuse and harm in most societies; hence, they need to prioritize their safety and wellbeing. Generally, parents and guardians do not have control or much influence in schools or on how learning environments are run; thus, it is often expected that in educational communities, safeguarding is crucial. This is underscored by the fact that both children and young adults are vulnerable to different forms of abuse, harm, or exploitation at different stages of their lives [26].

In essence, safeguarding and protecting children and young adults within a learning environment includes the formulation and implementation of comprehensive policies and procedures across educational institutions, as well as equipping the children, young adults, staff, and volunteers with the confidence to recognize and report any issues through training and appropriate resources. Additionally, measures such as hosting an effective and anonymous whistleblowing platform would also serve as safeguarding agents, with possible perpetrators being aware that feedback mechanisms within the educational system can spotlight incidences of SHA and address such incidences accordingly. This would also strengthen students' ability to resolve institutional needs to protect their rights to safe education.

4 Methodology

4.1 Design

This study adopts a qualitative-leaning, mixed-methods case study design to examine the prevalence of SHA and the effectiveness of safeguarding policies at a private university in Nigeria. The case study method, as defined by Yin, is particularly appropriate for exploring complex social phenomena within their real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are blurred [27]. In this context, the case study allows for an in-depth examination of SHA not merely as isolated incidents but as embedded within institutional cultures and policy structures.

The study integrates two complementary theoretical frameworks—the ACF and the IAD framework—to guide data interpretation and analytical framing. The ACF is employed to explore the role of stakeholder coalitions, shared beliefs, and coordinated action in shaping policy change. The IAD framework, on the other hand, is used to analyze the institutional arrangements, rules-in-use, and actor interactions that influence how safeguarding policies are implemented and sustained. This dual-theoretical lens allows the research to move beyond surface-level policy description to engage with the underlying political and institutional mechanisms of reform.

4.2 Study setting

The study was conducted at AUN, a private, development-oriented, university located in the Northeast Nigeria, West Africa. As the first "development university" in Africa, AUN emphasizes leadership, entrepreneurship, and social responsibility. The university had an approximate student population of 3,000 during the 2020/2021 academic session, with follow-up data collected in the 2024/2025 session. AUN offers a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs and is known for its integration of information and communication technology (ICT) in pedagogy. The student body of AUN is diverse, comprising individuals from across Nigeria, other African countries, and beyond. At the time of the study, student leadership was officially open to all genders, although it remained male-dominated. The academic staff also reflected significant international diversity, with representation from over 30 countries.

AUN had an existing sexual harassment policy at the time of the study, embedded across several institutional documents, including the Staff Handbook, Student Code of Conduct, and HR policies. While the policy aimed to promote a harassment-free academic environment and protect students from abuse, preliminary assessments suggested limited awareness and uneven enforcement. These initial insights provided the rationale for the GJP and its attempt to strengthen safeguarding through a formalized, policy-based approach.

4.3 Population and sample

The target population for the study included all members of the university community: undergraduate and postgraduate students, academic faculty, and administrative and support staff. Due to the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, data collection during the baseline phase in 2020 occurred entirely online. Students were attending classes virtually at the time, and campus activities were largely suspended.

The survey instrument was created using Google Forms and distributed through official university channels. To ensure that only members of the AUN community participated, responses were limited to users with institutional email addresses. Each respondent was allowed only one submission, and no personal identifying data was collected. Survey invitations were disseminated via email from the Office of the Provost, Student Affairs, Human Resources, and through the university's official communications bulletin.

This sampling strategy was designed to achieve broad institutional representation, though the online-only modality presented challenges in capturing the perspectives of less digitally engaged community members. Nevertheless, responses were received from

a cross-section of the institution, enabling preliminary needs assessment and post-project evaluation of safeguarding practices.

4.4 Data collection procedure

The study utilized multiple data collection methods, including surveys, interviews, and institutional document analysis, across two main phases: a needs assessment survey in June 2020 and a post-project evaluation between June and December 2024.

4.4.1 Survey instrumentation

The survey instrument was developed following an extensive review of the literature on SHA and safeguarding frameworks in higher education. Expert consultations further ensured the instrument's relevance and sensitivity. Questions were written in clear, accessible English, and the survey was pre-tested with a small group of 10 students and 5 staff members. For examples, questions asked include "what documents exist to protect you against SHA in all forms?"; "to what extent do you feel confident in reporting a case of SHA for yourself or on behalf of another person? Feedback from the pre-test was used to improve clarity, flow, and cultural appropriateness.

In the initial round (2020), a total of 291 people accessed the survey, with 290 consenting to participate and providing complete responses. The post-project survey in 2024 used the same format and distribution method, though the response rate was significantly lower, with 116 participants completing the survey. This decline in participation may reflect pandemic-related disruptions, research fatigue, or limited awareness of the post-project assessment.

4.4.2 Qualitative interviews

In the 2024 post-project phase, qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with four institutional actors, including safeguarding officers, administrators, student leaders, and faculty involved in the policy implementation. These interviews explored perceptions of the impact of the GJP, challenges in enforcing SHA policies, and institutional lessons learned. Interviewees were anonymized and selected based on their involvement in the safeguarding process. Interview protocols focused on themes such as stakeholder coordination, institutional response mechanisms, procedural fairness, cultural barriers to reporting, and recommendations for improving safeguarding implementation.

4.4.3 Document review

Institutional documents reviewed included the official safeguarding policy of AUN, codes of conduct, orientation materials, and training manuals developed during the GJP. External reference materials, such as the 2023 Sexual Harassment in Tertiary Institutions Bill and the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015, were also analyzed to assess legal-institutional alignment. This triangulation of data sources ensured a robust evaluation of both policy content and implementation processes.

4.5 Ethics

Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, the study adhered to strict ethical protocols. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the

American University of Nigeria, with protocol number PRO-20-04-04 and approval number AUN-20-04-04. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured of their anonymity, and granted the right to withdraw at any point. Consent was built into the survey design: participants could not proceed without formally indicating their consent. If consent was denied, the survey automatically terminated. Participants were also allowed to skip any question they were uncomfortable answering, reinforcing the voluntary nature of participation.

For interviewees, written consent was obtained, and all data was anonymized during transcription and analysis. Given the emotional weight of SHA-related experiences, participants were provided with information on how to access psychosocial support. The medical director of AUN, trained in mental health and GBV response, was made available for any participant requiring follow-up counseling. The entire research process adhered to ethical standards in line with both international norms and the internal policies of AUN.

All data, both electronic and paper, were kept secure. The online survey results were kept in the institutional Google Drive of the principal investigator (PI) with only the PI having access to the password. All recorded zoom interviews and paper documents were stored electronically in the same institutional Google Drive with only the PI having access to the files.

4.6 Limitations

The methodology is not without limitations. The use of online surveys during the baseline phase likely excluded some voices, particularly those with limited digital access or discomfort with online platforms. Additionally, the relatively small sample size in the post-project phase (n = 116) may constrain the generalizability of findings, though it provides meaningful insights into policy impact.

Also, the qualitative component reflects a narrow range of perspectives, with only four interviews conducted. While these interviews were informative, a broader sample could have enriched the findings. Furthermore, the temporal gap between the two phases (2020 and 2024) introduced variables beyond the project's control, including leadership changes, resource constraints, and broader socio-political shifts. Nonetheless, the mixed-methods design, theoretical grounding, and institutional triangulation of the study enhance its validity and provide a strong basis for evaluating the safeguarding approach of the GJP at AUN.

5 The gender justice project: context and implementation at AUN

The emergence of safeguarding reform in Nigerian HEIs has been catalyzed by a growing recognition of the widespread prevalence of SHA, alongside increasing public scrutiny of institutional failures to respond effectively. A major turning point in this regard was the release of the BBC Africa Eye documentary, which exposed entrenched patterns of sexual exploitation within prominent West African universities. This documentary not only galvanized national discourse but also served as what Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith [5] term a "focusing event," opening a critical policy window for reform-oriented coalitions.

It was in the aftermath of this event that the GJP was launched by the SMYF, with support from the Ford Foundation. The project was designed to improve safeguarding

for women and vulnerable groups in educational and workplace settings across Nigeria, with a particular emphasis on institutional transformation through the creation of safe reporting platforms, the development of standardized policies, and the promotion of gender justice. While the focus of the GJP includes addressing SHA directly, it also adopts a broader lens of safeguarding as a structural and cultural process.

The GJP was implemented as a flagship case study at the AUN. The project commenced with a comprehensive needs assessment, which identified several institutional gaps. These included fragmented policies, limited awareness of reporting mechanisms, and insufficient protection for victims of SHA. The assessment revealed that while AUN had a number of documents that addressed misconduct—such as the Staff Handbook, Student Code of Conduct, and Human Resource policies—these lacked a unified safeguarding framework and were inconsistently understood or applied across the university community.

In response to these findings, the GJP facilitated the development and adoption of a formal safeguarding policy by the University Senate. This policy aimed to harmonize existing regulations while introducing new measures tailored to the institutional context of AUN. One of the core innovations was the establishment of a confidential whistleblowing platform, enabling students and staff to report incidents of SHA anonymously and without fear of retaliation. This addressed a critical barrier to disclosure that had been identified in prior studies [2].

Implementation was further strengthened through the creation of a safeguarding committee composed of representatives from all university departments, including student leaders. These individuals were trained to manage cases professionally and confidentially, using a trauma-informed approach. To ensure wide institutional reach, the policy was disseminated through a safeguarding toolkit and integrated into both academic and administrative routines. Notably, safeguarding training became mandatory for all staff and was embedded into AUN 101, a required first-year orientation course. The Student Government Association (SGA) also played an active role in peer education, contributing to a more decentralized and participatory approach to training and advocacy.

The GJP was designed not only as an internal intervention but also as a model for systemic reform in Nigerian higher education. The lessons learned from the implementation at AUN were shared with other institutions, including UNILAG, BUK, and UNN, where the project has informed similar safeguarding initiatives. These inter-institutional collaborations have enabled the diffusion of policy tools and best practices, and they reflect a core principle of the ACF—namely, that long-term policy change is sustained through iterative learning, shared belief systems, and network-based coordination.

The GJP also aligns closely with the IAD framework, which emphasizes the importance of rules-in-use, actor configurations, and feedback loops in shaping institutional behavior. Prior to the intervention, the safeguarding infrastructure of AUN was characterized by fragmented policies and limited enforcement capacity. Through the GJP, a new set of institutional arrangements was introduced—encompassing preventive strategies, formalized complaint procedures, and ongoing monitoring initiatives. These changes were not merely procedural but represent a shift in the underlying logic of institutional response to SHA, from reactive discipline to proactive safeguarding.

Importantly, the GJP exemplifies how externally supported, coalition-driven interventions can catalyze policy learning and institutional innovation within higher education.

The emphasis of the GJP on inclusivity, its responsiveness to local needs, and its commitment to sustainability through training and documentation distinguish it from short-term awareness campaigns. It provides a replicable model for safeguarding reform, one grounded in participatory governance and integrated policy development.

This study analyzes the implementation of the GJP at AUN as a case of institutional safeguarding reform. It investigates the extent to which the project influenced policy awareness, institutional trust, reporting behavior, and stakeholder perceptions. The analysis draws on data collected through surveys, interviews, and institutional documents, and is guided by the ACF and IAD frameworks. The next section presents the empirical results of the study, serving as a basis for the subsequent discussion.

6 Results

6.1 Demographic information of the participants

For the needs assessment, a total of 290 respondents, comprising 130 females and 155 males, were part of the survey. Five participants declined to disclose their sex. A total of 65.5% (n 190) of participants were between the ages of 15 and 24 years, while 34.5% (n 100) were older than 24 years. There were no participants younger than the age of 15. For the post project survey, a total of 120 participants responded, 4 declined to proceed, and 116 participated in the study. The post project participants included 75 females and 40 males, while 1 participant chose not to disclose their sex. According to the post project survey, 72.4% (n 84) of the participants were aged 15 to 24 years, while 27.6% (n 32) were aged older than 24 years. No respondent was younger than 15 years. The demographic information is shown in Table 2.

Most of the participants (71.4%, n 207) were students, while the other participants were spread over 21% (n 61) of the non-academic staff, 3.1% (n 9) of the faculty members, 3.1% (n 9) of the interns and corp members and 1.4% (n 4) of the volunteers at the university. In comparison with the post project survey, 71.6 (n 83) of the respondents were students, 21.6% (n 25) were nonacademic staff, 4.3% (n 5) were faculty, 0.9 (n 1) were interns and 1.7% (n 2) were volunteers. A total of 73.7% (n 213) of the participants in the needs assessment were single, 22.1% (n 64) were married, 0.3% (n 1) were divorced, and 3.8% (n 11) preferred not to disclose their marital status. According to the postproject survey, 80.2% (n 93) were single, 14.7% (n 17) were married, 1.7% (n 2) were divorced and 3.4% (n 4) chose not to disclose their marital status.

6.2 Experience of the SHA of participants

Table 3 shows the distribution of the experiences of participants with SHAs within the HEI studied. A total of 78.3% (n 227) of the participants confirmed having experienced sexual harassment, while 21.7% (n 63) of the participants had never experienced sexual harassment in any form. The post project survey revealed that 75.9% (n 88) of the respondents had experienced one form of sexual harassment or the other, while 24.1% (n 28) had never experienced sexual harassment.

Eighty-nine of the needs assessment respondents participated in the section on the nature of SHA experience. The most common feature of SHA is unwanted physical touch (58.4%), while suggestive remarks (33.7%), demand for sex (20.2%), request for a relationship (16.9%) and threats and verbal abuse (13.5%) topped the list of forms of SHA experienced by participants. The least common form of SHA was associated with

Table 2 Demographic distribution of the respondents (n = 290 for needs assessment and 116 for postproject)

Response	Needs Assessment Frequency (n 290)	Needs Assessment Percentage (%)	Poststudy Frequency (n 120)	Post-study Percentage (%)
Sex				
Male	155	53.4	40	34.5
Female	130	44.8	75	64.7
Prefer not to disclose	5	1.7	1	0.9
Total	290	99.9	106	100
Age				
Below 15	0	0	0	0
15–24	190	65	84	72.4
> 24	100	35	32	27.6
TOTAL	290	100	116	100
Category				
Student	207	71.4	83	71.6
Staff (nonacademic)	61	21	25	21.6
Faculty (academic)	9	3.1	5	4.3
Intern/NYSC	9	3.1	1	0.9
Volunteer	4	1.4	2	1.7
Total	290	100	116	100
Marital status				
Single	213	73.7	93	80.2
Married	64	22.1	17	14.7
Divorced	1	0.3	2	1.7
Undisclosed	11	3.8	4	3.4
Total	290	100	116	100

cat calling (1.1%) and drunk-induced exposure (1.1%). On average, individuals who reported sexually offensive materials (9%) and who were phoned and emailed about their sexual nature (10.1%) were also experienced.

Of the 43 respondents who participated in the post project survey, 50.9% (n 28) experienced unwanted physical contact, 32.7% (n 18) experienced harassment in the form of jokes and suggestive comments, 7.3% (n 4) experienced demand for sex, 12.7% (n 7) experienced threats and verbal abuse, and 1.8% (n 1) were raped. The responses show that multiple incidences of SHA behaviors were experienced by some respondents. While very few of the needs assessment participants (3.9%) (13.5% (n 5) of the post project) experienced SHA regularly, a larger percentage of the needs assessment participants experienced SHA once (51.3%) or occasionally (44.7%). Very few of the participants in the needs assessment participated in the postproject survey which can be attributed to initial participants who have either left the university or students who have graduated. This indicates that there were new participants in the post-project survey. The reduction in the incidences of SHA could also be attributed to the awareness of the safeguarding policies instituted through the GJP. However, this could not be explicitly deciphered from the survey results.

6.3 Perpetrators of SHA

Among the perpetrators of SHAs at the HEI studied, only 79 need assessment participants responded, and the responses showed that students (50%) were mostly perpetrators, while nonacademic staff (13.7%), faculty members (12.6%), management staff

Table 3 Experience of the SHA of participants

Response	Needs Assessment Frequency (n 290)	Needs Assessment Percentage (%)	Poststudy Frequency (n 109)	Poststudy Percentage (%)
Experience of SHA				
Yes	227	78.3	88	75.9
No	63	21.7	28	24.1
TOTAL	290	100	116	100
Frequency of SHA				
Regularly	3	3.9	5	13.5
Occasionally	34	44.7	22	59.5
Once	39	51.3	10	27
Nature of Sha				
Unwanted physical contact	52	58.4	28	50.9
Jokes and suggestive comments	30	33.7	18	32.7
Demand for sex	18	20.2	4	7.3
Threats and verbal abuse	12	13.5	7	12.7
Display of sexually offensive materials	8	9%	5	10.2
Demand or request for a relationship	15	16.9	4	8.2
Phone or email communication of a sexual nature	9	10.1	7	14.3
Physical exposure	11	12.4	6	12.2
Drunk female harassing a male	1	1.1	5	10.2
Cat calling	1	1.1	0	0
None	14	15.5	9	20.2
Raped	0	0	1	1.8

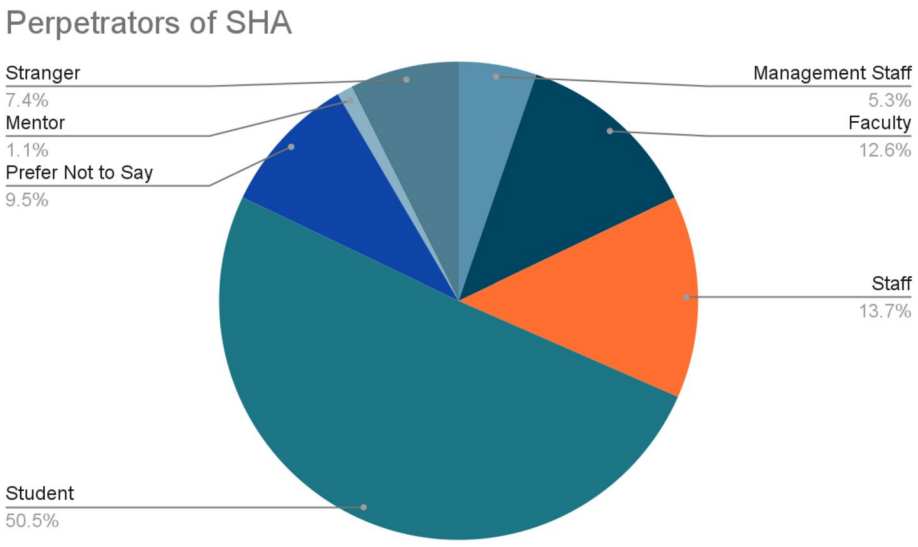

Fig. 1 Perpetrators of SHA

(5.3%) and strangers (7.4%) were also known to be perpetrators. This lends credence to the literature which indicated that despite the suspicion of male academics as major perpetrators of SHA students and other administrative staff within HEI are potential perpetrators [11]. No religious leader was recorded as a perpetrator of SHA, while a mentor (1.1%) was recorded as a perpetrator by one of the participants. The distribution of the perpetrators of SHAs is represented in Fig. 1 below.

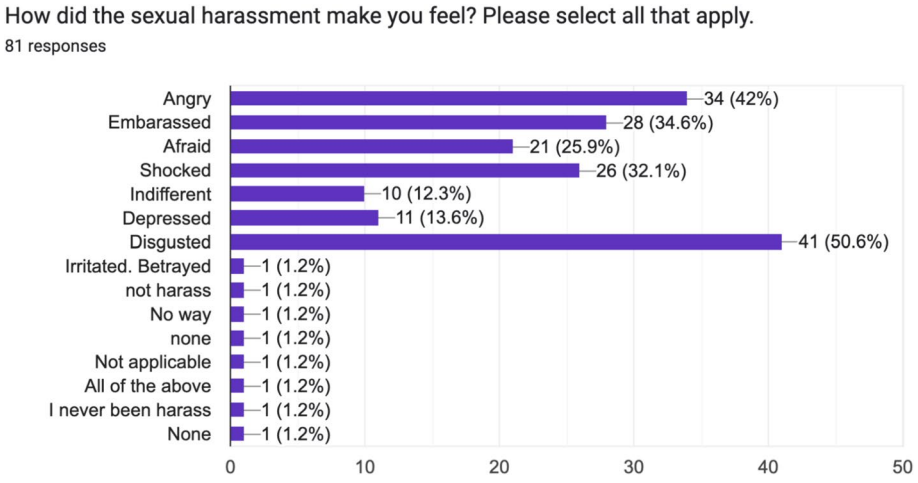

Fig. 2 Effect of SHA on participants

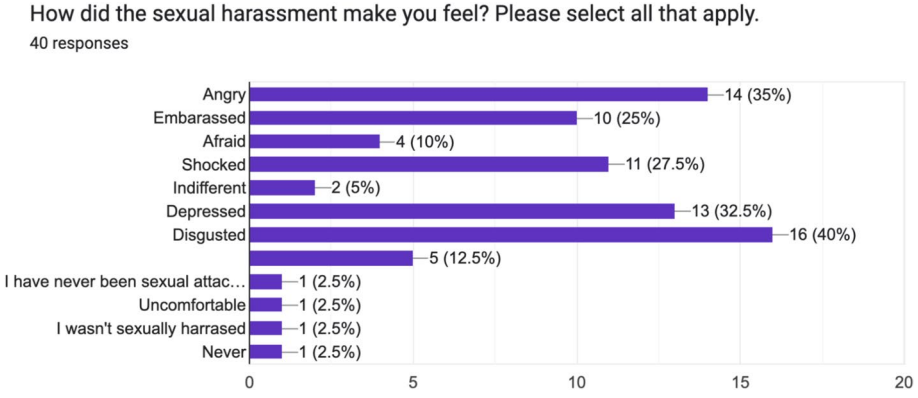

Fig. 3 Effect of SHA on postsurvey participants

6.4 Effect of SHA on respondents

The experiences of the respondents with SHAs differ. Eighty-one participants responded to this section, and the feelings evoked by SHAs differed across the participants, as indicated in Fig. 2.

Common emotions associated with the experience of SHA include anger (42%), embarrassment (34.6%), fear (25.9%), shock (32.1%), indifference (12.3%), depression (13.6%), disgust (50.6%) and betrayal (1.2%). While the feeling of disgust was mostly experienced, the least experienced was the feeling of betrayal from the participant who experienced SHA from the mentor. No survivor reported requiring psychosocial support.

While 24.8% (n 27) of the 109 participants who responded to the question on the need for support believed that they required support or help, 39.4% (n 43) believed that they did not need any form of support. However, 35.8% (n 39) were not sure whether they required support. Only 2.5% (n = 6) of the 266 respondents approached the health center of the HEI for help with SHAs.

The effect of SHAs on the respondents of the postproject survey was like that of the participants in the needs assessment, as reflected in Fig. 3 above.

6.5 Effectiveness of existing policies

A total of 283 participants responded to the awareness of existing policies that address issues of SHAs in the HEI studied in this research. A total of 61.8% (n 175) were aware of the existence of policies, while 38.2% (n 108) were not aware that there are policies in place on SHAs.

Of the 194 respondents to this question, 12.9% (n = 25) were aware of policies on SHAs in the faculty manual, 24.7% (n = 48) were aware of such policies in the staff manual, and 79.4% (n = 154) were aware of the policies in the students' code of conduct. While 44% of 243 respondents read the sexual harassment policies in these various documents, 56% have not read them. While most of the respondents (63%) believe that the policies are adequate to protect them, 37% believe that the policies cannot adequately protect them.

Table 4 shows the level of awareness of the three major forms of policies existing at the HEI prior to the project and the policies in existence after concluding the project.

Regarding accessibility to the policies, 52.8% (n 123) of the needs assessment respondents answered negatively, while 47.2% (n 110) answered positively. 91% of the respondents believe that there is a need to intensify efforts to create more awareness of the policies, while 2.3% believe that there is no need for more awareness. A total of 6.8% held the view that there was somehow a need to create more awareness. A total of 65.1% (n 153) of the 235 respondents who answered the question on confidentiality were positive that confidentiality was guaranteed when they handled sexual harassment complaints, while 34.9% (n 82) of the respondents believed that confidentiality was not guaranteed.

After 3 years of project implementation, the postproject survey revealed an increase in the level of awareness of the policy in the faculty manual, SHA policy in the staff

Table 4 Level of awareness of existing policies

Response	Needs Assessment Frequency (n 290)	Needs Assessment Percentage (%)	Poststudy Frequency (n 109)	Poststudy Percentage (%)
Awareness on existing policies				
Policy in Faculty Manual	25	12.9	12	13.2
Policy in Staff Manual	48	24.7	24	26.4
Policy in Students' Code of Conduct	154	79.4	49	53.8
Safeguarding Policy on Women and Young Adults	–	–	43	47.3
Knowledge of the content of the sha provisions in the policies				
Yes	107	44	60	57.7
No	136	56	55	56.7
Perception on extent of protection from sha				
Yes	133	63	56	58.3
No	37	78	40	41.7
ACCESSIBILITY				
Yes	110	47.2	46	46.9
No	123	52.8	52	53.1
Need to increase awareness of the policies				
Yes	242	91%	96	87.3
No	6	2.3	4	3.6
Somehow	18	6.8	10	9.1
Confidentiality guarantee				
Yes	153	65.1	63	64.3
No	34.9	82	35	35.7

manual and SHA policy in the Student's Code of Conduct. A total of 48.2% (n 43) of the 91 respondents confirmed being aware of the new Safeguarding Policy on Women and Young Adults adopted after the Gender Justice Project.

The postproject survey further revealed that the level of awareness of the content of the SHA policies was approximately the same, with only a slight increase compared with the number of respondents. A total of 58.3% (n 56) of the respondents of the postproject survey believe that the SHA Policies adequately protect them, while 41.7% (n 40) believe that the Policies are inadequate. This shows an improvement compared with the needs assessment. Like in the needs assessment, respondents in the postproject survey believe that there is a need for an increase in awareness creation. However, there was a significant increase in the confidentiality level of handling cases considering the number of respondents.

6.6 Complaint processes

A total of 39.8% of the needs assessment respondents knew who to complain about whether SHA occurred, while 31% did not know the appropriate channel to complain about. A total of 29.2% were not sure of the compliance mechanisms for SHAs. The postproject survey showed that almost half of the respondents (49.5%) understood the complaint process, 22.9% did not know about the complaint process, and 27.6% were unsure of the reporting mechanism.

As indicated by Fig. 4, judicial affairs (39.2%) and anyone whom the complainant feels comfortable (37.7%) top the list of appropriate people/departments for reporting a complaint to the SHA, while the police (0.7%) is the least common person to whom such a complaint should be made.

Like in terms of the results of the needs assessment, many respondents in the postproject survey believed that complaints about SHAs should go to judicial affairs (43.1%) or anyone whom they are comfortable with (30.3%), as shown in Fig. 5.

Most of the needs assessment respondents (62.9%) believed that such a complaint should be in person, while other respondents believed that the complaint could be by email (31.6%), phone call (2.9%), memo (1.5%) or text message (1.1%). Comparatively, 53.2% of the postproject survey respondents believed that complaints should be in person, while 39.4% believed that they should be by email.

Most of the 157 respondents (49%, n 77) who were satisfied with the complaint and investigation processes were neutral about how pleased they were with the processes in the past, as indicated in Fig. 6.

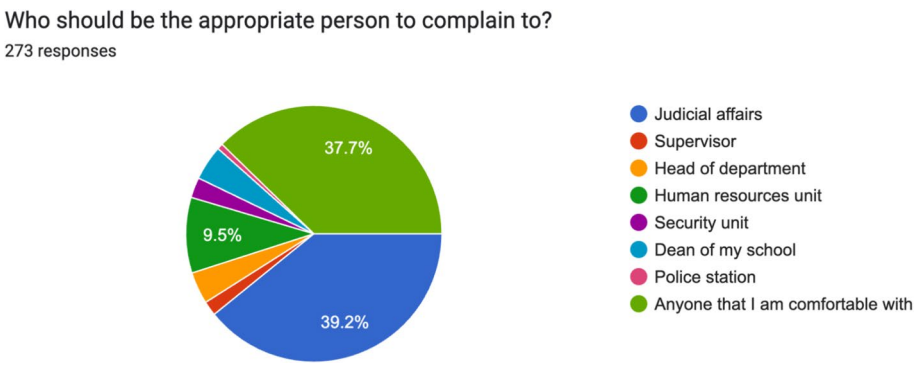

Fig. 4 Appropriate authority to report an SHA complaint

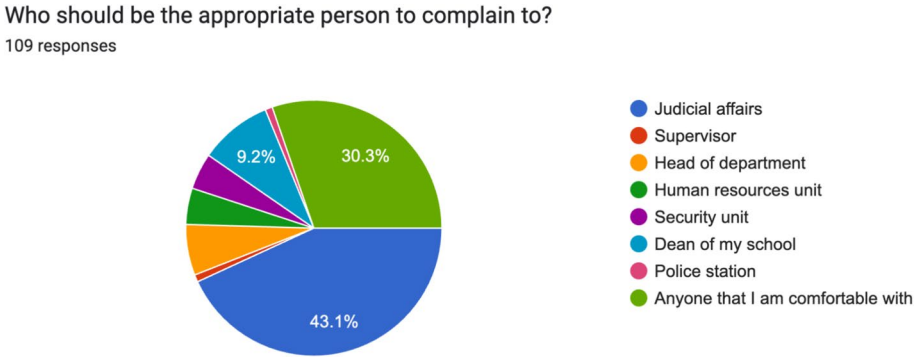

Fig. 5 Perceptions on the appropriate authority to report SHA complaint

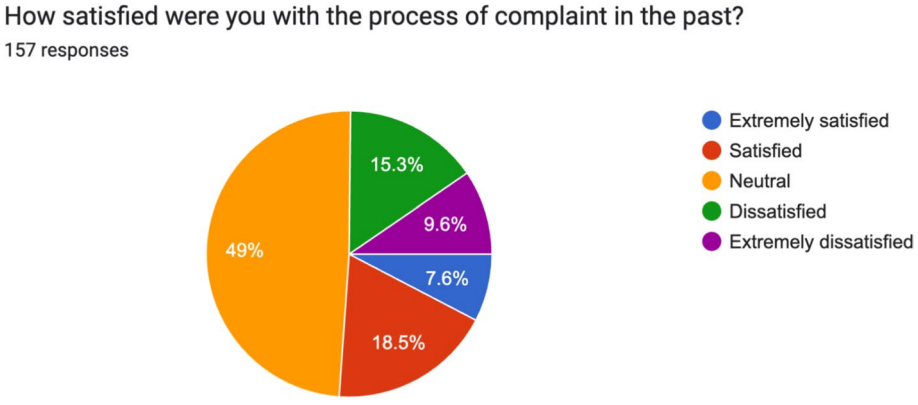

Fig. 6 Satisfaction with the complaint process

Only 7.6% (n = 12) of the needs assessment respondents were extremely satisfied, while 18.5% (n = 29) were satisfied. A total of 15.3% (n 24) were dissatisfied, while 9.6% (n 15) were extremely dissatisfied with the processes. Like in the needs assessment, 63.2% of the postproject survey participants maintained their neutrality in terms of their level of satisfaction with the complaint process.

In addition to the postproject survey, two students and two faculty members were interviewed by the principal investigator. The interviews were conducted at high magnification and recorded. Participants in the interviews were recruited through mass email to the university community with the instruction to reach out by email if they were willing to complete an interview. Three of the interviewees were females, while one student was male. The two students were between the ages of 19 and 21, while the two faculty members were between the ages of 38 and 43. Prior to recording the interviews, the participants were informed of their rights and the confidential nature of the interviews. All the participants consented to the structured interviews, which lasted for approximately one hour per participant. Most questions are open ended to allow the participants to express themselves freely.

Regarding the level of awareness of the recently adopted Safeguarding Policy, Participant A (a male student) was of the opinion that the existence of the Safeguarding Policy has led to increased awareness of the rights of students and the mechanisms of reporting a complaint. Participant C, a female faculty member, agreed with participant A.

On the level of safety offered by the Safeguarding Policy, participant B, a female student, held the view that the Safeguarding Policy was able to control illicit activities both among the students and from faculty and staff who would otherwise exploit students. However, she holds the view that students tend to abuse the Policy because they arbitrarily report cases. When prompted, if such students who arbitrarily report cases are penalized in any form, participant B responded that the nature of the penalty for such students is not enough to deter students from setting up lecturers or their fellow students. Participant D believes that the Safeguarding Policy strikes a balance on the rights of the parties and is all encompassing. She stated that 'the major problem is not the policy but the attitude of those that it seeks to protect.' She said that most of the HEI community has not taken time to read and understand the Safeguarding Policy but rather relies on the information given during training sessions and from what members of the community discuss among themselves. She said that this attitude is largely responsible for the misconceptions among faculty members that the Safeguarding Policy is targeted at male faculty members.

However, all the interviewees agreed on the need to intensify training and create more awareness of the policy. According to participant D, 'there is a need to take community ownership of the policy so that it will become effective.'

6.7 Postproject study

To test the effectiveness of the GJP, a survey was conducted after three years of project implementation using the same survey used for the needs assessment but with the addition of the Safeguarding Policy in addition to structured interviews of key stakeholders involved in the implementation of the Safeguarding Policy. The findings show a gradual relapse in the efforts made by the GJP, which could be attributed to several factors, including institutional leadership interests/continuity, inadequate access to the Safeguarding Policy and reduced awareness and training on the Policy. The postproject survey revealed that while there was an improvement in the protection of women and young adults in AUN, there was still a gap reflected in the level of awareness and complaint mechanisms.

A perusal of the available documents on AUN's website shows that while AUN sexual harassment policy is publicly available, the same cannot be said of the Safeguarding Policy that was posted on the website shortly after the closure of the GJP. It is therefore imperative to adopt a sustainable approach to maintaining a protective culture against SHAs in HEIs. It is also important to involve students actively in the protection and awareness culture of SHAs in HEIs, as achieved at the University of Lagos [20].

7 Discussion

This section critically examines the outcomes of the Gender Justice Project (GJP) at the American University of Nigeria (AUN), drawing on quantitative and qualitative data gathered during baseline and post-intervention surveys, as well as stakeholder interviews. Using the dual lenses of the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) and the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework, the analysis provides insight into how advocacy networks, institutional arrangements, and local norms shape the implementation and sustainability of safeguarding measures in higher education institutions (HEIs).

The demographic profile of respondents, predominantly young adults aged 15–24 years, reflects the typical composition of HEIs. Consistent with global and regional studies [28, 29], the results show that although SHA affects individuals of all genders, female respondents reported higher frequencies and recurring experiences of harassment. Interestingly, male respondents appeared somewhat more willing to disclose experiences, aligning with complex gender norms around vulnerability and disclosure. The persistence of SHA, despite significant interventions, suggests that while the GJP succeeded in improving institutional scaffolding, cultural and behavioral change within the university environment remains an evolving process. From an IAD perspective, although formal safeguarding rules (rules-in-form) were successfully introduced, embedding them as everyday lived practices (rules-in-use) has proven more challenging.

Contrary to prevailing assumptions that SHA in HEIs is predominantly perpetrated by male faculty members [3], this study revealed that students themselves were the most frequent perpetrators (50%), followed by non-academic staff and faculty members. This pattern aligns with findings by Aina-Pelemo et al. [30], highlighting that safeguarding interventions must address a broad range of vulnerabilities, not only hierarchical abuses. The GJP's inclusive approach to safeguarding policies and training interventions reflects an appropriate response to this reality. However, continuous reinforcement and community sensitization are necessary to address peer-to-peer harassment dynamics more systematically.

The emotional burden of SHA is evident in the findings. Participants frequently reported feelings of disgust (50.6%), anger (42%), and embarrassment (34.6%). However, despite the availability of reporting platforms and psychosocial support structures, only 2.5% of respondents accessed institutional support services. This significant underutilization highlights the persistence of stigma and skepticism surrounding SHA disclosure. In IAD terms, the existence of formal structures has not yet succeeded in fostering sufficient trust to encourage widespread use. As observed globally [20], without psychological safety and credible assurance of protection, institutional reforms risk being underutilized.

While many respondents were aware of the existence of SHA policies, relatively few had read the documents, and fewer still expressed strong confidence in their protective value. Even after the GJP intervention, awareness improved only marginally. This points to an enduring awareness–action gap, where formal knowledge does not easily translate into behavioral engagement. As the IAD framework suggests, rules must not only exist; they must be credible, accessible, and perceived as legitimate by the communities they intend to protect. The integration of safeguarding education into compulsory student orientation (such as the AUN 101 course) is a progressive development, but sustained and expanded institutional efforts are necessary.

The GJP's success in driving safeguarding reforms at AUN lies heavily in its coalition-based strategy, consistent with the ACF. The 2019 BBC "Sex for Grades" exposé served as a powerful focusing event, creating a policy window for reform. Coalition actors, including the Shehu Musa Yar'Adua Foundation, the Ford Foundation, Gender Mobile, WRAPA, and student groups, mobilized rapidly around shared normative commitments to gender justice. Through resource mobilization, coordinated advocacy, and strategic learning, the coalition achieved critical material outcomes, such as the development of a Safeguarding Toolkit, the establishment of a whistleblowing platform, and the adoption

of a university-wide safeguarding policy. These successes underscore the importance of coalition-driven policy entrepreneurship in institutional change processes.

Nonetheless, post-project findings reveal significant challenges in the institutionalization of safeguarding reforms. While the GJP introduced comprehensive policies, training programs, and confidential reporting systems, institutional commitment at AUN waned once external project leadership exited. Policy awareness among respondents declined from 79.4% at baseline to 53.8% three years post-project. As Participant C (Faculty) noted:

> *"The project team left, and with them went the momentum. Training became sporadic, and the Safeguarding Committee met less frequently."*

This observation reflects Sabatier's [5] argument that while advocacy coalitions can initiate policy change, enduring transformation depends on sustained institutional ownership.

Although the university had clear disciplinary sanctions outlined in its policies, the enforcement of these sanctions was inconsistent. One student (Participant B) described her experience:

> *"My case took six months. The professor kept teaching, and I had to see him every day."*

Such enforcement lapses likely contribute to underreporting among female students and indicate the persistence of institutional barriers despite policy reforms. From an IAD perspective, the failure lies not in the absence of rules, but in weak monitoring, inconsistent application, and inadequate reinforcement of those rules-in-use.

Faculty resistance also surfaced as a major challenge to safeguarding implementation. Participant D (Faculty) articulated this resistance, stating:

> *"Male professors call it a 'witch hunt.' Many of them resent mandatory training, calling it 'Western feminism,' especially when the faculty members that led the project were seen as championing the former president's cause."*

This feedback highlights the cultural contestation surrounding safeguarding reforms and reinforces the necessity of building normative legitimacy, not merely mandating compliance.

While the interventions of the GJP aligned closely with Ostrom's [6] principles for designing robust institutions—such as clear boundary rules and conflict resolution mechanisms—weaknesses in monitoring and the absence of clear positive incentives for compliance limited their effectiveness. Although sanctions for violations were established, the absence of proactive incentives for promoting safeguarding behavior among staff and students contributed to the erosion of trust and institutional fragility, a pattern similarly observed at the University of Lagos [11].

Importantly, participant interviews revealed not only frustration but also recognition of progress. Students and faculty acknowledged the increased visibility of reporting mechanisms and improvements in training sessions. Yet concerns about arbitrary accusations, inadequate deterrents for policy abuse, and misconceptions about the policy's purpose persist. These concerns underscore the need for moving beyond awareness toward policy ownership. Feminist institutionalist scholars [31] argue that sustainable

reform must be participatory, deliberative, and foster a sense of co-production among stakeholders.

The participatory elements introduced by the GJP—student advocacy, cross-unit safeguarding committees, and regular policy forums—were crucial steps in this direction. However, ensuring the sustainability of these structures requires deeper institutionalization, resilience to leadership turnover, and ongoing investment in community engagement and trust-building.

Overall, a holistic assessment of the GJP at AUN reveals a nuanced picture. On the one hand, the project successfully established a comprehensive safeguarding framework, catalyzed awareness, and laid a foundation for broader replication across Nigerian universities. On the other hand, persistent high rates of SHA, weak trust in enforcement mechanisms, and gaps in community ownership suggest that the work of transforming institutional cultures remains unfinished.

Through the combined application of ACF and IAD frameworks, this study demonstrates that while strategic coalition mobilization and formal rule-setting are necessary, safeguarding sustainability depends critically on fostering trust, shared norms, and adaptive governance structures. The GJP's experience at AUN offers important lessons for safeguarding reforms not only in Nigeria but across similar higher education contexts, where institutional transformation is an inherently long-term, participatory endeavor.

8 Conclusion and recommendations

This study critically examined the implementation and outcomes of the Gender Justice Project (GJP) at the American University of Nigeria (AUN), a flagship intervention aimed at institutionalizing safeguarding against sexual harassment and abuse (SHA) in higher education. Drawing on mixed-methods research and framed by the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) and the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework, the study assessed the GJP's impact on policy awareness, institutional behavior, and stakeholder perceptions.

The findings reveal a complex but instructive landscape. Despite persistent high rates of reported SHA—underscoring the depth and resilience of the problem—the GJP catalyzed measurable improvements in institutional structures and processes. These include the development of a standardized safeguarding policy, the establishment of a confidential whistleblowing platform, the formation of a multi-stakeholder safeguarding committee, and the integration of safeguarding education into staff development and student orientation programs. Nevertheless, although policies existed at AUN before the GJP, awareness of and engagement with these policies remained limited. Having formal frameworks in place is necessary but not sufficient; effective safeguarding requires not only documentation but strong, impartial implementing bodies, continuous education, and authentic cultural integration. Without adequate enforcement and institutional ownership, policies risk being perceived as symbolic rather than transformative.

Theoretically, the GJP represents a compelling case of policy change driven by strategic coalition mobilization, triggered by critical focusing events, and sustained—at least initially—through institutional adaptation. It leveraged external pressure, donor support, and advocacy partnerships to catalyze innovation within AUN and influence safeguarding reforms in other Nigerian universities. However, the AUN experience also illustrates the fragility of reforms that are not sufficiently anchored internally. Once external

project leadership receded, momentum weakened, demonstrating that safeguarding sustainability depends fundamentally on internal leadership commitment, accountability systems, and stakeholder ownership.

Persistent challenges were identified, including limited trust in reporting mechanisms, underutilization of psychosocial services, inconsistent understanding of policy provisions, and residual skepticism among both staff and students. Moreover, the enforcement of safeguarding rules, while formally articulated, was inconsistently applied, undermining the credibility of institutional responses. Participant interviews revealed important nuances: while stakeholders acknowledged progress, concerns about arbitrary reporting, mistrust of procedures, and misconceptions about safeguarding remained evident. These findings emphasize that safeguarding must move beyond policy adoption to become an integral part of everyday academic culture, practice, and behavior.

A central lesson from this study is the critical need to deepen institutional ownership and cultural integration of safeguarding principles. Safeguarding must be framed as an intrinsic part of academic excellence and human rights, rather than as an external compliance obligation. Regular training, public leadership endorsement, and integration into departmental and student activities are necessary to entrench safeguarding values. Enhancing the accessibility and literacy of safeguarding policies is equally important. Policies must be simplified, visually disseminated, and embedded into digital student handbooks, staff portals, and co-curricular platforms. Dialogue-based platforms such as student clubs, podcasts, and town halls should be expanded to normalize safeguarding conversations and foster community engagement.

Strengthening trust in reporting and response mechanisms is vital. Institutions should introduce greater transparency into investigative procedures while safeguarding confidentiality, establish feedback loops where survivors can evaluate their experiences, and appoint safeguarding ambassadors across departments to guide students and staff. Beyond internal reforms, coalition-based learning and policy replication should be encouraged by building networks among universities, NGOs, and regulatory bodies. Transparent documentation of challenges and successes will foster iterative learning and evidence-based advocacy across the sector.

Addressing underlying sociocultural barriers remains indispensable. Efforts to challenge gender norms, patriarchal assumptions, and stigma must be mainstreamed into the academic, social, and institutional fabric of universities. Collaborations with faculties of law, social sciences, and public health to host conferences, review curricula, and advance research on gender justice can facilitate long-term cultural change. Furthermore, safeguarding should be positioned within the broader agenda of equity, transformative justice, and student wellbeing.

Institutionalization of monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive learning mechanisms is critical to sustaining reforms. Regular assessments—using both quantitative and qualitative methods—must be conducted to measure safeguarding effectiveness and inform revisions to policies and practices. Students and early-career faculty should be actively involved in evaluation processes to ensure that safeguarding efforts remain inclusive, dynamic, and credible. Safeguarding reforms must also be financially embedded within institutional budgets. Future projects must mandate budget lines dedicated to safeguarding implementation and empower student leadership to monitor compliance through

initiatives such as Safeguarding Scorecards, building on successful models piloted at Makerere University and the University of Zambia.

At the national level, legislative frameworks must also evolve. The Sexual Harassment in Tertiary Educational Institutions Prohibition Bill should be reframed to expand its definition of perpetrators beyond lecturers and academic staff, acknowledging the wide spectrum of harassment dynamics—including peer-to-peer and administrative misconduct—observed within HEIs. A holistic, inclusive legal approach is required to align national policy with the complex realities of sexual harassment across diverse university contexts.

In conclusion, while the GJP achieved significant progress at AUN by laying a strong foundation for safeguarding, the study underscores that institutional change is a long-term process requiring continuous investment, adaptability, and collective ownership. The partial success of the GJP is not a failure, but rather a reflection of the challenges inherent in transforming deep-seated institutional cultures. Without addressing structural power asymmetries and embedding safeguarding principles into everyday governance, policies risk becoming symbolic rather than substantive. Sustained efforts to build trust, promote participatory governance, and integrate safeguarding into the very identity of higher education institutions are essential for realizing a safe and equitable learning environment for all. Further research, including replication studies across other HEIs that have adopted safeguarding policies, will be vital to monitoring progress, fostering innovation, and ensuring that the promise of safeguarding becomes an enduring institutional reality.

Acknowledgements
The authors acknowledge the support of the entire Gender Justice team of AUN and SMYF. Specifically, the authors acknowledge the support and contributions of Dr. Dawn Dekle, Dr. Margie Ensign and Dr. Paul Dogara Manga towards the success of this work.

Author contributions
The first author was responsible for the methodology adopted in the research including the research design, results and data interpretation. The second author developed the outline, wrote the introductory part, literature review, explored the GJP and wrote the discussion section of the paper. The third author was responsible for the legal and institutional frameworks as well as the discussion on the safeguarding policies of AUN and the implementing gaps. The fourth author developed the theoretical framework upon which the study was build, the conclusion and recommendations section as well as the proofreading of the manuscript. The fifth author was responsible for the harmonization of the research and proofreading.

Funding
This research received no external funding.

Data availability
All data, both electronic and paper, were kept secure. The online survey results were kept in the institutional Google Drive of the principal investigator (PI) with only the PI having access to the password. All recorded zoom interviews and paper documents were stored electronically in the same institutional Google Drive with only the PI having access to the files. All files were coded with none having any identifier to the respondents. The data is still available and safe in the institutional Google Drive. However, the data for this research are not publicly available to protect the privacy of the research participants in accordance with ethical approval of the research and the Nigeria Data Protection Act, 2023. The interviews were video recorded with the approval of the participants but the interviewers did not give approval to share the recordings with third parties. The survey contains sensitive information about AUN, and the university has not given permission to share the data publicly. Clarification on the data can be requested directly from the PI. However, the data for this research are not publicly available to protect the privacy of the research participants in accordance with ethical approval of the research and the Nigeria Data Protection Act, 2023. The interviews were video recorded with the approval of the participants but the interviewers did not give approval to share the recordings with third parties. The survey contains sensitive information about AUN, and the university has not given permission to share the data publicly. Clarification on the data can be requested directly from the PI.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate
Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the AUN, Nigeria, with protocol number PRO-20-04-04 and approval number AUN-20-04-04. The research was carried out in accordance with the

guidelines of the IRB as listed in the ethics statement. The data collection tool (Google survey form) contained an explanation on the purpose of the research and the voluntariness of the research. Participants were made to understand that they could log out at any point of the survey if they choose to discontinue with the study. Participants had to either consent or decline to consent before they could proceed. Where participants click on 'I agree', they were directed to the survey but where the participants click on 'I decline', they were automatically logged out of the survey. For interviewees, written consent was obtained, and all data was anonymized during transcription and analysis. For the interviews conducted via Zoom, the consent was read out to participants and they were made to understand that if they do not wish to consent to the interview, they could log out. Consent was sought and obtained to record the Zoom interviews for the purpose of transcription alone.

Consent for publication

The introductory and consent section of the survey form stated how the findings of the research will be disseminated. This includes a project report, presentation in workshop and conferences, inclusion in curriculum and training resources and publication in academic outlets. The consent to participate includes the consent to the mode of dissemination of the research findings. Participants who did not consent were automatically logged out from participation.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Received: 28 February 2025 / Accepted: 31 October 2025
Published online: 10 November 2025

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