

A SURVEY TO ASSESS THE FEMALE SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTES OF KARACHI

Dr.Zulfiqar Sheikh¹, Dr.Fahmida Khatoon², Shiza Batool², Maria Mushtaq³, Farha Siddiqui⁴

Associate Professor, Department OF Community Medicine,Dow Medical Univesity,¹

Lecturer,Northern Boarder University, KSA²

PhD Schollar,PMAS,Arid AgricultureUniversity,Rawalpindi³

Lecurer ,Northern Boarder University, KSA⁴

Accepted 8 January, 2014

ABSTRACT

Objectives: To determine the nature and frequency of the exposure of female students to sexual harassment at the higher educational institutes; and **also** to explore the adverse effects of sexual **harassment** on the victims and coping strategies implied by them.

Background: Sexual harassment, whether at workplace, educational institution, street or leisure is a problem gaining increasing recognition in every society. Despite the widespread nature of the problem, there are still considerable misunderstandings as well as differences of opinion concerning whether particular situations or behaviours are sexually harassing in nature or not. **The** victim may feel threatened, humiliated, harassed, and would interfere with the performance, satisfaction, commitment, and undermine security, or create an intimidating environment.

Subjects and Method: A total 480 female students were conveniently selected from ten different educational institutes, and were provided a self administered questionnaire with their consent. The identity of all the study subjects was kept secret. They were given a definition of harassment for their ease. The study was conducted from January 6 to September 30, 2009. The data were analysed by using SPSS version 15.

Results: Out of total 480 female students, 460 i.e. 96% returned the filled questionnaires. Among them, 76% reported of sexual harassment of various degrees / levels irrespective of their residential area, appearance and attire. These females were harassed by the fellow students (20%), faculty (30%), and strangers (50%) who included patients, attendants, visitors and passersby. Although almost all of the participants (98%) wanted a punishment for the harassers, yet they (78%) were reluctant to disclose the name / identity of those perpetrators because of the fear of exploitation, social taboo, further embarrassment, adverse consequences, and career obstacles.

Conclusion: Many females were the victim of sexual harassment in various forms. There is a need to sensitize the society; and mass awareness programs should be carried out through variety of media.

KEYWORDS: Sexual harassment, females, gender discrimination, educational institutes.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is unwanted and unwelcome behavior of sexual nature which interferes with the students' right to learn, study, work, achieve or participate in educational activities in a comfortable and supportive atmosphere.

Sexual harassment, whether at workplace, educational institution, street or leisure is a problem gaining increasing recognition in every society (Brooks & Perot, 1991; Dzcich & Weiner, 1984; Matlin, 1993; I'attinson, 1991; York, 1989).

Perceptions differ about what behaviors constitute sexual harassment. However, typical examples of sexual harassment include sexually oriented staring, verbal harassment or abuse, subtle pressure for sexual activity, sexist remarks about a woman's clothing, body, or sexual activities, unnecessary touching, patting, or pinching, leering or ogling of a woman's body, use of pornographic material, **grabbing**, cornering, non-reciprocated requests for dates; intrusive letters and phone calls, gross sexual imposition or assault accompanied by implied or overt bribes or threats concerning one's job, grades, letters of recommendations; rape, etc. (Evans, 1978) W. 203-204). Osipow and Spokane (1987) Sexual harassment can occur when one person has power over another and uses it to coerce the person to accept unwanted sexual attention.

Sexual harassment in education remains a "forgotten secret," with educators and administrators refusing to admit that the problem exists in their institutes, or accept their legal and ethical responsibilities to deal with it.² The harassers are usually men, while victims or targets are usually women. This pattern reflects prevalent social power relations.³ Sexual harassment in the work place has consequences for psychological ill-health among adult women;^{4,5} and the young girls who reported being sexually assaulted or harassed often tend to develop emotional disorder and exhibit suicidal behavior more frequently compared with pupils who were harassed less or not at all.⁶ Sexual harassment at school is a reality for young adolescents, and girls are exposed more often than boys.^{7,8} Sexual harassment is so widespread that we often fail to recognize the harassing behavior as wrong. This is because so many of us (women and men alike) have become desensitized to offensive behaviors.

According to the official statistics, one woman is molested every 26 minutes in India. These statistics refer to the reported cases, whereas, if the unreported cases were to be included, it could be a matter of seconds, rather than minutes. The cases sexual harassment are not reported by victims because of various reasons such as family and peer pressures, unsatisfactory police behavior, the long and unjust processes in application of law and lack of insecurity on the part of the victim.¹¹ Sexual harassment is the least spoken issue in Pakistani society. Although all women know it and experience it but nobody cared or dared to report it because throughout their lives they had been discouraged to speak about such incidences (Anna (1995).

Corresponding Author: Dr.Fahmida Khatoon

Lecturer,Northern Boarder University, KSA

Email: drfahmida1@gmail.com, fahmida.khatoon@yahoo.com

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in ten institutes which included six medical, three engineering and one general colleges/universities of Karachi. Around 800 female students were contacted in these institutes and were explained the purpose of the study, but 480 of them volunteered to participate and the rest refused to talk about this social taboo. This also has been earlier reported that sexual harassment was difficult to study as it was the least spoken issue in Pakistani society. Avila (1995). After taking a verbal informed consent, a pre-tested questionnaire was distributed amongst study participants. A convenient sampling technique was adopted and the study subjects were approached in the girls' common rooms, canteens, libraries, class rooms, laboratories and corridors of these institutes. They were assured of the secrecy of their identity and their names were not mentioned in the proforma.

They were given a definition of harassment for their ease. The study was conducted from January 6, 2009 to September 30, 2009. The data were analysed by using SPSS version 15.

RESULTS

Of the 480 female students, 460 (96%) returned the questionnaires. Out of the returned forms, 286 (62%) were from medical, 96 (21%) from engineering, and 78 (17%) from the general university female students as shown in figure 1. The respondents were of 18 to 25 years, from various socioeconomic strata, and (16%) of them were married. Amongst them, 41% (188) reported experiencing harassment in the form of sexual comments, jokes, gesture, looks and being touched, grabbed or pinched in a sexual way (table 1); regardless of their appearance, attire and residential area. The unmarried women more often experienced harassment than married women. None of them reported a serious sexual assault.

In a majority (64%), they were harassed by strangers, who included patients, attendants, visitors and passersby, followed by the fellow students (21%), faculty / teachers (13%) and the staff working there (2%) as shown in table 2. The harassers' age varied from 18 to 60 years. Among these victims, 14 (3%) reported the incident to their family, 50 (11%) to the head of their institution, while the rest (86%) were afraid to discuss / disclose and felt small and depressed. These victims (40%) felt very uncomfortable, and frightened to move about in the college/university campus without a friend accompanying them. They were dependent on their family members, spouses, and friends.

The complaints were made against the fellow students, patients' attendants and the staff. The action was taken in the form of a verbal warning, and in case of attendants, their patients were discharged from the hospital. Although almost all of the participants (98%) wanted a punishment for the harassers, yet they (78%) were reluctant to disclose the name / identity of those perpetrators because of the fear of exploitation, social taboo, further embarrassment, adverse consequences, career obstacles, no action / response, and also because they (20%) considered it as a norm in the male

dominated society. Among the victims, 26% reported anxiety and depression, and that their studies were badly affected; and 11% had transient suicidal tendencies. Coping strategies. According to the 386 (84%) of the study participants, this issue should be taken seriously and awareness campaign must be carried out through various media.

Eighty two percent of the respondents believed that almost all the females are harassed irrespective of their appearance and status. According to them, the reasons behind the female harassment included psychological problems, fun / joke, show power and authority, lack of respect for women, sexual perversion, inferiority complex of male counterpart, and dislike against working women.

DISCUSSION

Bullying or harassment is considered a type of mental torture and should be accredited as the breach of human rights⁽¹²⁾. In all settings, existing studies of sexual harassment suggest that females are most often victimized.¹³ The study results showed more than 1 in 3 (41%) female students were harassed on the basis of gender. This suggests that whether recognized or not, sexual harassment persists in the educational institutes and is a giant but silent problem of our society. Another study revealed that more than 50% medical students in Pakistan faced bullying or harassment.¹⁵ Such a mess is also prevalent in other countries as females faced harassment at workplace or educational institutes. A study in the United Kingdom also reported that 1 in 3 female staff was harassed there.¹⁶

One of the difficulties in understanding sexual harassment is the fact that it involves a range of behaviors, and is often difficult for the victims to recognize and describe exactly what they are experiencing. A particular behavior that one person might consider harassing may be absolutely normal and usual for the other. Moreover, the perpetrators may be unaware of their wrongdoings. The harassers were strangers (patients, attendants, visitors and passersby), the fellow students, faculty / teachers and the staff. Because of routine practice of harassment, they could be unaware that their behavior was offensive or constitutes sexual harassment as was also found in other studies.¹⁷

It is a general concept that use of a particular clothing / dressing and outlook / appearance has an association with harassment issue. This study denied any connection between harassment and attire and appearance of women. Many victims did not report the incident because some of them assumed it to be a part of work, others considered useless to report since no satisfactory action was taken, and yet others were frightened of further humiliation and adverse consequences as is evident from the other survey.¹⁸⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻¹⁹

In many cases, the sexual harassment primarily is a manifestation of power, rather than sexual attraction. The females may be prone to harassment because of the male-dominated setup as is evident in our study. Such society structure usually has fewer women to demonstrate that they are equally proficient as males in all fields.²⁰ It has been suggested that harassment may have serious physical and

psychological consequences, such as fatigue, depression, and feelings of anger, fear, alienation and vulnerability. It can cause significant stress which can lead to anxiety, depression and substance abuse and may result in serious mental health disorders amongst the affected.¹⁸ The study participants also suffered from mental agony and their performance was adversely affected.²¹ Those who reported suicidal tendencies could have experienced serious form of sexual harassment.

CONCLUSION

Sexual harassment seems prevalent at varying degree and in various forms in higher level educational institutes. This often occurs in unequal power relationship like workplaces or educational institutions. The victims are reluctant to talk against their agony because of the fear of humiliation for themselves and their families. This terrifying issue must be recognized as a societal problem. There is a need to sensitize the society to tackle this issue seriously, and mass awareness programs should be carried out through variety of media.

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The Place of Study of the Research Participants

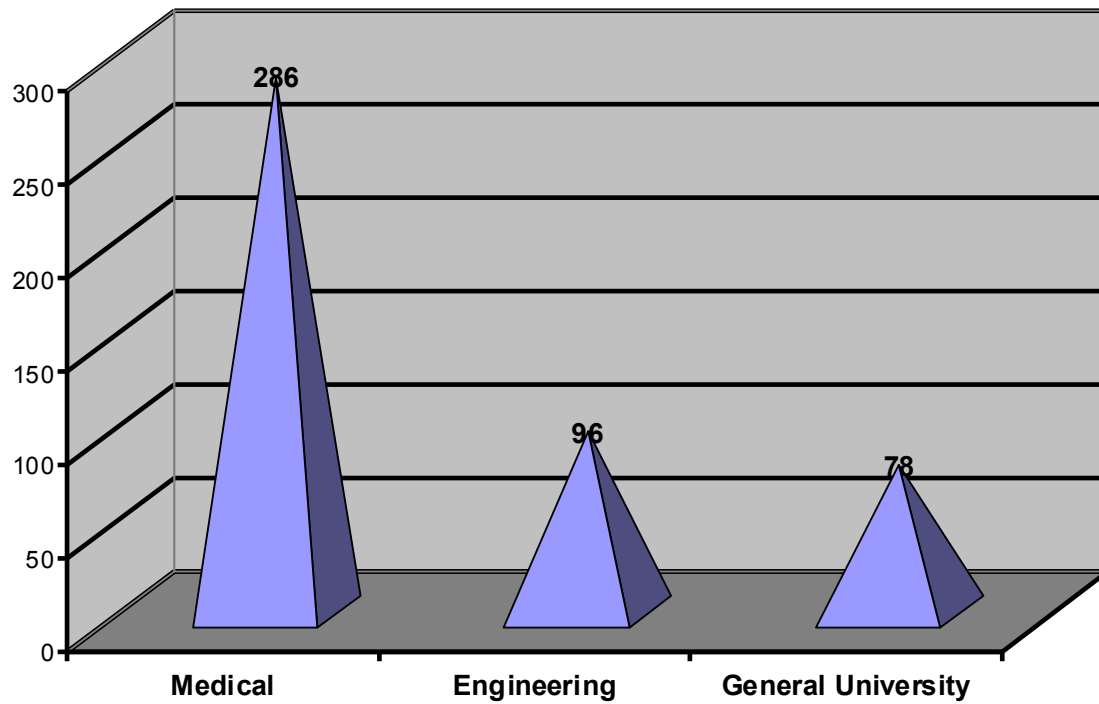


Table 2: The Harassers as identified by the Study Participants

Harassers	Frequency	
	Number	Percent
Strangers	294	64
Fellow Students	96	21
Faculty / Teachers	60	13
Staff	10	2