

Understanding, Experience and Response to Sexual Harassment among the Female Students: A Mixed Method Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Sexual harassment has received global attention and has been recognized as a public health problem with increased physical and mental health risks among the victims. This study attempted to assess understanding, experience, response and effect of sexual harassment among the secondary school female students in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Methods: It was a mixed method study conducted among 441 secondary level female students. In quantitative component, a structured questionnaire was used to collect information relating to socio-demographic characteristics, and understanding, experience, response and effect of sexual harassment from 441 participants from three clusters (schools) of Tokha Municipality, Kathmandu. For qualitative method, two focused group discussions were conducted to assess the understanding of and response to sexual harassment. Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed using Chi square test and thematic analysis method respectively.

Results: Around 76% of the participants had experienced some forms of sexual harassment in their life. Sexual harassment was significantly associated with religion and parental occupation. Majority of participants who faced sexual harassment reported that the perpetrators were strangers and they either ignored it or did nothing at the time of events. School, roads and public places were the most common settings where participants encountered sexual harassment.

Conclusions: Sexual harassment is prevalent among female secondary students in Kathmandu. However, they lacked a clear understanding of and ways to respond to sexual harassment. Raising awareness to recognize and respond to different forms of harassment and to change the victim-blaming attitudes can be a potential strategy for tackling the problem in Nepalese society.

Keywords: Abuse; sexual harassment; victimization; violence.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment (SH) is unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature, which can include unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors or other verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature.¹ Apart from being an issue of public health concern, SH is considered a severe violation of the human right and has thus received growing attention globally.²⁻⁴ Increased health risks have been documented among those facing SH that relate to multiple body systems, including the nervous, cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, genitourinary, reproductive, musculoskeletal, immune and endocrine systems.⁵ In this context, the current study assessed

the nature and extent of sexual harassment, victim's understanding of SH, their response and self-perceived effect after experiencing SH.

METHODS

This was a mixed methods study conducted among female students of secondary school in Kathmandu. For the quantitative component of the study, the sample size was estimated considering prevalence to be 50%, confidence interval of 95% and 5% allowable error. The calculated sample size was adjusted for a 10% non-response rate making the final sample size of 427. Tokha municipality, a semi-urban area located in the

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outskirts of Kathmandu metropolitan city was selected purposively. Initially, seven schools were divided into two groups- the first group having total girls more than 125 at grade 9-12 and second group having total girls less than 125 at grade 9-12. From the first group, two schools and from the second group one school were selected randomly. There were total of 441 participants present on the day of data collection who completed the quantitative component of the study.

A structured questionnaire containing questions related to socio-demographic characteristics, knowledge regarding SH and attitude on towards SH. Questionnaires were first distributed to research participants and were collected back on the next day after the completion of the assent and consent forms and survey questionnaire.

For the study purpose, SH was defined as all types of unwelcome, sexually determined behavior, whether directly or by implications, such as physical contact and advances, a demand or request for sexual favors, sexually colored remarks and any other unwelcome physical, verbal, or non-verbal conduct of sexual nature. It consists of non-verbal sex cues (e.g. looking someone up and down in a sexual way), verbal (e.g. unwelcome dirty jokes related to sex), physical (e.g. pulling someone's clothing or inappropriate touching [e.g. Patting, touching, kissing or pinching]), and hostile environment (e.g. showing sexually obscene photographs on mobile phones or electronic requests for sexual favors).

Two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted to assess the understanding of the SH, experience of the different type of SH, response to SH, effects of SH and possible options adolescent girls can protect themselves from being the victim. We purposively selected 6 participants from each category of the school took part in focused group discussion.

Quantitative data were entered into EpiData version 3.1 and analyzed the data through SPSS version 21. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies) were used to summarize the data. Chi square test was used to compare the proportions of SH across different socio-demographic characteristics. FGDs were recorded, which were later transcribed and translated into English. Transcripts were then repeatedly read, coded then grouped into broad themes. Four broad thematic areas emerged in analysis of FGD: experience of different forms of SH, perceived consequence, action taken during SH and suggestion for preventing SH.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the

Institutional Review Committee (IRC) of the Institute of Medicine, Maharajgunj Medical Campus. Approval was obtained from respective school and District Education office, prior to approaching the students. Written informed consent was obtained from the research participants and their parents after explaining the voluntary participation, potential risk and benefits, privacy and confidentiality. The participants got the opportunity to share their queries regarding the topic during the survey and the researcher had tried to solve their queries as far as possible. To protect the participant's confidentiality, participant names were not included in the completed questionnaires. All study related documents are maintained in a secured area.

RESULTS

Of the total 441 participants who participated in the study, the mean age and standard deviations were 16.3 years and 1.45 years respectively (not shown in table). The majority of the participants (59.2 %) were 16-18 years of age with the highest proportion of participants belonging to grade 9 (37.6%) and Janajati groups (56.9%). Likewise, the majority of the participants reported having their mothers' education as primary and lower (Table 1).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents.

	Characteristics	Number (n=441)	Percent
Age in years	13-15	139	31.5
	16-18	261	59.2
	19-21	41	9.3
Grade	Grade 9	166	37.6
	Grade 10	115	26.1
	Grade 11	81	18.4
	Grade 12	79	17.9
Ethnicity	Dalit	21	4.8
	Janajati	251	56.9
	Madhesi	1	0.2
	Brahmin/Chhetri	149	33.8
	Thakuri/Dashnami	19	4.3
Religion	Hindu	347	78.7
	Buddha	68	15.4
	Christian	25	5.7
	Islam	1	0.2

Education status of the mother	Illiterate	174	39.5	Being continuously suggested or demanded for sexual favors or sexual relationship (66.4%) and being rubbed or touched against on purpose (65.1%) were two most common circumstances which research participants perceived as SH. Being looked up or down in sexual way (62.8%), being made sexual gesture/movement (57.6%), pulling up clothes (56.1%), continuously being followed up in public areas and being shown or passed pornography (53.7%) were other most common situations participants perceived as sexual harassment (Table 2).
	Primary	154	34.9	
	Secondary	88	20.0	
	Bachelor	25	5.7	
Occupation of father	Service	72	16.3	
	Business	93	21.1	
	Labour	105	23.8	
	Farmer	139	31.5	
	Other	32	7.3	

Table 2. Understanding of sexual harassment (SH).

Circumstances considered as SH	Considered as SH (%)	Not considered as SH (%)	Not sure (%)
Suggesting, proposing or demanding for sexual favors/sexual relationship	66.4	26.1	7.5
Touching or rubbing against someone on purpose	65.1	27.9	7.0
Looking up or down in a sexual way.	62.8	23.4	13.8
Making sexual gestures/movements someone	57.6	30.2	12.2
Pulling clothes	56.1	31.7	11.6
Following continuously in public areas	54.0	27.9	18.1
Showing and passing pornography	53.7	34.0	12.2
Talking about sex all the time despite your interest	53.5	34.2	12.2
Calling 'tart', 'whore', or using similar words	52.6	30.4	17
Spreading sexual rumors and jokes	52.6	34.2	13.2
Writing sexual messages/graffiti in public areas	52.6	33.3	14.1
Rating for sexual attractiveness publicly	50.3	33.3	16.3
Making of sexual comments or jokes	48.1	34.9	17.0
Bothering someone about dates, leaving messages despite not answering	44.9	39.7	15.4
Asking to talk about sexual topics with the same/opposite sex	38.5	42.0	19.5

Table 3. Prevalence of SH among the participants.

Experience of SH	Number (n=441)	Prevalence (95% CI)
Any type of sexual harassment	335	76% (71.7%-79.7%)
Being looked up and down in a sexual way, whistling, and having sexual gesture	291	66% (61.4%-70.1%)
Unwelcome dirty jokes related to sex	172	39% (34.6%-43.7%)
Pulling clothes, touching, patting, kissing or pinching	106	24% (20.3%-28.3%)
Being shown obscene or suggestive photographs	68	15.4% (12.3%-19.1%)
Being requested for sexual favors or being sent a nude picture, sexual joke or suggestion for such type of website	50	11.3% (8.7%-14.7%)

Among the 441 participants, 335 participants (76%) reported they had experienced some forms of sexual harassment in their life. Non-verbal harassment (66%) was most common form of SH experienced by participants followed by verbal (39%) and physical (24%). Similarly, 15.4 percent were sexually harassed through mobile phone, 11.3 percent had experienced electronic requests for sexual favors or sending nude picture, sexual joke through Facebook, email and internet (Table 3).

Majority of the participants (76.7%) experienced SH events on the way to home/school/other places. SH was high in 16 years to 18 years age group, at grade 11 and among Dalit students.

Around half (50.7%) of the participants experienced SH in public vehicle. More than three fourth (70.7%) participants had been harassed by strangers while one fourth (27.2%) had been harassed by known persons other than their relatives. For 15.8% of participants, perpetrator were peers/friends (Table 4).

Table 4. Place and perpetrator of sexual harassment.

		Number (n=335)	Percent
Place of SH	On the way	257	76.7
	Public vehicle	170	50.7
	School	59	17.6
	Victim's home	16	5.1
	Harasser's home	10	3.3
	Workplace	16	4.7
	Other	12	0.9
Perpetrator of SH	Strangers	237	70.7
	Known person but not relative	91	27.2
	Peer/friend	52	15.8
	Relatives	20	6.0
	Others	2	0.6

Students had different responses when they experienced SH. More than one third of participants reported that they ignored it (34.9%). More than a quarter of participants reported that they did nothing (25.6%) when the sexual harassment occurred because they didn't know what to do. Only 6.9% of participants had sought help from others. More than one third of the participants said they had been depressed (34.3%) and had trouble sleeping (33.7%). One out of every four participants (26.5%) who had been harassed had changed their way to school while more than one tenth (15.5%) were unwilling to go

to school. One out of every five participants (19.1%) had problem studying. A relatively small proportion (4.5%) shared that they get afraid while seeing males while other few (3.6%) shared that had no effect due to SH (Table 5).

Table 5. Response and action against SH and its self-perceived effect.

		Number (n=335)	Percent
Response to SH at the time of the incident	Ignored it	117	34.9
	Nothing- I didn't know what to do	83	24.8
	Told the harasser to stop	60	17.9
	Tried to defend myself	36	10.7
	Seek help for others	23	6.9
	Not answered	11	3.3
	Others	3	0.9
	Tried to turn it into a joke	2	0.6
Action taken by participants after SH	Talked to a friends	226	67.5
	Talked to a parent or other family member	125	37.3
	Didn't do anything	52	15.5
	Contacted the police	19	5.7
	Reported the incident to a teacher at school	9	2.7
	Effects of SH		
Feeling depressed	115	34.3	
Trouble sleeping	113	33.7	
Changed the way you to school	89	26.6	
Found it hard to study	64	19.1	
Did not want to go to school (feeling unsafe)	52	15.5	
Felt sick to your stomach	7	2.1	
Afraid seeing male	15	4.5	
No effect	12	3.6	

After being sexually harassed, more than half of the participants (67.4%) reported that they talked to their friends about what happened. Only 5.67 percent

reported the incident to the police.

More than one-third of participants (38.1%) had suggested punishments for people who harass and enforce them can reduce sexual harassment in school. Nearly one third of the participants (30.2%) said it would be useful if schools had such a person assigned to help with sexual harassment. 12.5 percent wanted a way to anonymously report sexual harassment problems. Creating a reporting mechanism would increase students' willingness to report the problem. More than one in ten (12.5%) said there's nothing the school can do to reduce sexual harassment and 6.8 percent participants said they don't know .

In bivariate analysis, SH was significantly associated with religion and paternal occupation. Almost 91.4% of participants born to father whose occupation was labour had faced sexual harassment (Table 6).

Table 6. Socio-demographic distribution of SH

	Characteristics	Sexual harassment (%)	P value
Age in years	13-15	73.4	0.56
	16-18	77.8	
	19-21	73.2	
Grade	Grade 9	71.7	0.12
	Grade 10	79.1	
	Grade 11	84.0	
	Grade 12	72.2	
Ethnicity	Dalit	81.0	0.15
	Janajati	79.7	
	Brahmin/Chhetri	69.8	
	Thakuri/Dashnami	73.7	
Religion	Hindu	73.2	0.04
	Buddha	86.8	
Education status of the mother	Christian	84.0	0.51
	Illiterate	78.2	
	Primary	77.3	
	Secondary	70.5	
	Bachelor	72.0	
Occupation of father	Service	79.2	<0.001
	Business	67.7	
	Labour	91.4	
	Farmer	67.6	
	Other	78.1	

In FGDs, participants shared about their experience of different forms of SH, perceived consequence, action taken during SH and suggestion for preventing SH.

Participants shared that rape, giving a gesture of sexual nature, passing bad words, and bad behavior by the opposite sex as a form of sexual harassment. Participants shared their experience of SH in school, roads, public places and other settings during FGD. One of the participants had been shown a lewd (naked) photo of man and women by the senior in the school. The other girl from grade 12 shared that two men opened their pants, touched the penis and played with it and showed it to her. When some of the participants shared their experience, other participants also started to talk openly. One participant from grade 12 shared her experience of SH while traveling to Kathmandu from Udaypur in which an adult man at her side seat put his hand to her thigh and gradually started to touch her private parts. Other participant shared her childhood experienced being harassed by relatives touching her private parts and being talked about sex even before she was aware that it was a form of SH. Other forms of harassment included comparing body parts to some other objects and using sexual words. Few participants had also encountered cyber harassment where they had been shared the link to porn sites.

Consequences of SH shared by participants in FGD were similar to that of quantitative study. Most of the participants reported that the most obvious effects are the psychological and educational effects. Participants shared that they had felt depressed, couldn't concentrate on study and had problem sleeping. A participant from grade 8 shared that she rejected a proposal from her senior in grade 10 which was followed by spreading of sexual rumors. Spreading of rumors had made her think about committing suicide.

Participants shared that they were unaware of how to handle the situation with SH. Almost all participants said they just ignored it. Participants shared that they had been taught by parents to maintain silence and not to react in such situations. Some participants had the fear that people would blame her for what has happened.

Participants suggested that being self-disciplined and not being too close to boys could be a potential strategy to prevent SH. Not being too close prevents the perpetrator from taking advantage and thinking that they can have an opportunity. Not wearing clothes that evokes sexual emotions was other options suggested. Participants also suggested that preventing talking with boys at night also prevents SH.

DISCUSSION

This study assessed the understanding, experience, place, perpetrator, response and impact of sexual harassment among the secondary school female students in Kathmandu. Study findings suggest that sexual harassment is highly prevalent and disproportionately distributed across age, grade and religion. Large proportion of the participants had no clear understanding of sexual harassment, did not respond appropriately during the events and had serious post-event consequences.

In our study, 76% of participants had experienced some form of SH. Proportion of participants facing SH varies widely across countries ranging from 48% of the American students in grades 7-12,⁸ 79% in South African⁹ to 90% of the Ugandan female students.¹⁰ Other studies found estimates of the number of middle and high school students who report being sexually harassed within school has ranged from 83-92% for participants.^{3,11-13}

This study found that SH is higher between 16 years and 18 years of age compared to other age groups. Evidence suggests that sexual harassment can begin as early as elementary school, but the prevalence increases in higher grades as more students enter puberty.⁶ A study of middle and high school students in Canada found that SH at school appeared to increase from 6th grade to 10th grade, after which it leveled off.⁷

Different forms of sexual harassment were faced by participants ranging from making part of sexual jokes, sexual gesture, showing sexual contents, spanking/ touching or grabbing in a sexual manner, pulling someone's clothes off, or intentionally brushing against someone that also complies with the previous study.⁸ Non-verbal SH is most common (66%), followed by verbal SH (39%), physical SH (24%). Around 15.4 % of participants had been shown sexually obscene photographs on mobile phones and 11.3 % has reported they had experienced electronic request for sexual favors or sending nude pictures or suggestions for such type of website. With the increasing use of social media and access to the internet, the nature of SH might shift to cyber harassment which might demand appropriate strategies for control. Considering the co-occurrence of traditional and cyber sexual harassment, preventive strategies that address both forms harassment, traditional and online contexts can be useful as suggested in one of the previous study.¹⁷

Most of the participants had faced SH on the way (76.7%) and from a stranger (70.74%). Among those harassed, most of the participants did not react or ignored the incidence. This is further justified by the other finding

that participants are often taught to maintain silence and be non-reactive because of social stigma and other concerns which also complies with findings from other studies.¹⁸ SH seems to have been normalized or seem to have been taken for granted as a part of normal life in our setting which could be potential because it has been occurring in high rates as indicated in one of the previous studies.¹⁹ Normalizing SH can also distort the boundaries of what has to be considered as a part of normal life and what has to be considered as SH which can largely conceal the hidden burden in society.¹⁹

Published literature has linked SH to emotional stress, depression, anxiety, inability to concentrate in study, anger, etc¹⁴ which has also been replicated in this study. Similar to one previous study, suicidal ideation and feeling unsafe in school were among other effects of the SH.¹⁵ SH has to be considered seriously as it has serious and pervasive economic and legal consequences for individual and the society.¹⁶

Participants suggested preventive strategies like being self-disciplined, wearing appropriate clothes, not being too close to someone as options to avoid being harassed rather than focusing on regulatory measures. It partly reflects that participants often consider themselves or their behavior responsible for SH which indicate unequal social status or gender norms prevalent in society.

There are a few weaknesses in this study that could be addressed in future research. This study confined to participants attending schools and had a small sample size. Further studies covering both genders with wider geographic coverage and enrolling adolescents or teenagers out of schools can be useful. Additional research could target evaluating potential interventions among potential at-risk populations on college and university in both genders could also be useful for policy making processes.

CONCLUSIONS

This study found that sexual harassment is highly prevalent among the female students in Kathmandu. SH was significantly associated with religion and paternal occupation. The majority of events of sexual harassment occurred on the way and in public vehicles. Two third of the perpetrator were strangers. More than half of victims ignored or did nothing at the time of event and one thirds felt depressed after the events. The findings indicate that raising awareness of sexual harassment and helping students to recognize violent and abusive behaviors can be an important step in minimizing sexual harassment among female students in Kathmandu.

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