

**Original Article**

# A Survey to Assess the Female Sexual Harassment in the Higher Educational Institutes of Karachi

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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** To determine the nature and frequency of the exposure of female students to sexual harassment at higher educational institutes; and 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.

**Place and Duration of Study:** This study was conducted in ten institutes which included six medical, three engineering and one general colleges/universities of Karachi from January 6 to September 30, 2009.

**Patients and Methods:** 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.

**Results:** Out of total 480 female students, 460 i.e. 96% returned the filled questionnaires. Among them, 65% reported of sexual harassment of various degrees / levels irrespective of their residential area, appearance and attire. These females were harassed by the fellow students (37%), faculty (32%), and strangers (64%) 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.

**Key Words:** Sexual harassment, females, gender discrimination, educational institutes.

## INTRODUCTION

The review of the relevant literature suggests that sexual harassment is a very serious social and psychological issue and the women from every walk of life are affected by it.<sup>1,2</sup> 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 of a woman's body, use of pornographic material, grabbing, 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; and rape, etc.<sup>3</sup>

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. The harassers are usually men, while victims or targets are usually women. This pattern reflects prevalent social power relations.<sup>4</sup>

Sexual harassment is a reality at school, and in the work place,<sup>5</sup> has consequences for psychological ill-health among adult women,<sup>6</sup> and the young girls who reported being sexually assaulted or harassed often tend to develop emotional disorder and exhibit suicidal behavior more frequently.<sup>7</sup>

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.

The cases of 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. 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.<sup>8</sup>

This survey was conducted to determine the exposure of female students to sexual harassment, and coping strategies implied by them.

## PATIENTS AND METHODS

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.<sup>8</sup> 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, libraries, class rooms, laboratories, canteens and corridors of these institutes. They were assured of the secrecy of their identity and their names were not mentioned in the proforma. The data was analyzed by using SPSS Version 16.

## 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 figure1. The respondents were of 18 to 25 years, from various socioeconomic strata, and 74 (16%) of them were married. Amongst them, 299 (65%) reported experiencing harassment in the form of sexual comments, jokes, gesture, looks and being touched, grabbed or pinched in a sexual way, invited for outing; and dire consequences for not indulging in 'friendly' relations (table No. 1) regardless of their appearance, attire and residential area. A majority (n=373, 81%) had to face this situation very frequently. 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 (37%), faculty / teachers (32%) and the staff working there (2%) as shown in table # 2. The harassers' age varied from 18 to 60 years.

Many a times they had ignored mild forms of sexual harassment (e.g., jokes or teasing of a sexual nature). They (n=193, 42%) also were afraid of powerful position of the harassers.

Surprisingly 175 (38%) of the victims blamed themselves for what had happened, with a belief that they would not have experienced sexual harassment, if they had looked or dressed differently or even behaved differently.

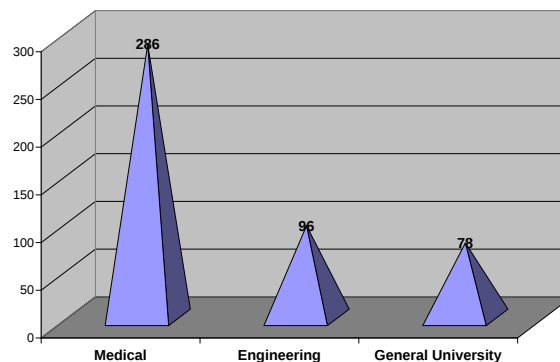
Among these victims, 28 (6%) reported the incident to the family, 51 (11%) to the head of their institution, and 188 (41%) discussed with their friends/class fellows; while the rest 193 (42%) were afraid to discuss / disclose and felt small and depressed. These victims (48%) felt very uncomfortable, 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 (26%) considered it as a norm in the male dominated society. Among the victims, 166 (36%) reported feelings of powerlessness, humiliation, disbelief, shock, anger, fear, anxiety and depression, and the studies / academic activities of 105 (23%) were badly affected; and 51 (11%) had transient suicidal tendencies.

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 nine 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.

Figure 1: The Place of Study of the Research Participants



**Table No. 1: Type of Sexual Harassment as reported by the Study Participants**

|                                                                                                                 |           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Admired figure / dress in a sexual way                                                                          | 419 (91%) |
| Told a dirty joke                                                                                               | 358 (78%) |
| Buzzed filthy songs                                                                                             | 377 (82%) |
| Made abhorrent calls on telephone                                                                               | 202 (44%) |
| Sent muddy SMS                                                                                                  | 212 (46%) |
| Offered lift in his car                                                                                         | 83 (18%)  |
| Invited for outing or going to a restaurant                                                                     | 87 (19%)  |
| Tried to show pornographic material                                                                             | 97 (21%)  |
| Tried to talk about some vulgar movie or a TV programme                                                         | 161 (35%) |
| Took interest in her personal life with the negative intention                                                  | 313 (68%) |
| Tried to talk about her or his own sexual life                                                                  | 124 (27%) |
| Tried to have body touch while passing by / sitting / working / giving something / praising her work / teaching | 414 (90%) |
| Tried to make her sit with him on some lame excuses                                                             | 166 (36%) |
| Assured promotion / grades / other benefits for his bad intentions / demands                                    | 175 (38%) |
| Threatened for dire consequences if she did not make him 'friend'                                               | 51 (11%)  |
| Tried to kiss                                                                                                   | 37 (08%)  |

**Table No. 2: The Harassers as identified by the Study Subjects**

| Harassers          | Frequency |         |
|--------------------|-----------|---------|
|                    | Number    | Percent |
| Strangers          | 294       | 64      |
| Fellow Students    | 170       | 37      |
| Faculty / Teachers | 147       | 32      |
| Staff              | 09        | 02      |

## DISCUSSION

Sexual harassment in Pakistan frequently occurs in co-education institutions, public places (e.g., bus stops, markets, stadiums, cinema halls, parks, and females' college gates, etc.). The harassers include males of all ages belonging to different socioeconomic strata of the society.<sup>9</sup>

The study results showed that 65% 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

It is a general concept that use of a particular clothing / dressing and outlook / appearance has an association with harassment issue.<sup>13</sup> This study denied any connection between harassment and attire and appearance of women. The problem of sexual harassment is not confined to any social strata. Although some women may be more vulnerable to sexual harassment than others, yet no woman seems to have immunity on the basis of her social status.

It has been found that marital status is related to the experiences of sexual harassment; with unmarried women more often experiencing harassment than married ones.<sup>14,15,16</sup> The same was reported in this study.

The facts that first or the first several harassing events are often ignored and the harassers are more powerful, physically and organizationally, than the victims, were also found in other studies.<sup>17,18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup>

As in our study the same was reported that the female students took somebody along with them if they had to see their supervisors who harassed them. This strategy is quite common among female students as well as working women.<sup>20</sup>

Generally the harassed women become mistrustful of men and thus become excessively dependent on their family members, spouses, and friends.<sup>21</sup>

Self-blame by the victims as reported in this study was found by others also. In Pakistani culture, the women are made to feel responsible for their own victimization by being told that if a man harasses them, it is because they have been doing something to provoke him.<sup>8,22</sup>

Reluctance shown by the victims to report harassment as found in this study, because they were ashamed, blamed themselves, frightened of further humiliation and they believed that they would not be taken seriously, is also evident from other studies.<sup>25</sup>

In general, harassment victims do not make complaints, as they feel that making a complaint will not accomplish anything, they are concerned about retaliation for complaining, and they fear that complaining might negatively affect them / family.<sup>26</sup>

According to many researches, victims were more willing to report harassment to their friends than to any other group; fewer victims would report to their department head or administrators.<sup>27,28</sup> The victims

recommended more assertive strategies to others than they would employ themselves.

In order to cope with the sexually harassing situations the harassed women respond in two ways i.e. "internal" or "external" in nature. The internal strategies are the attempts to manage the cognitions and emotions associated with the event (e.g., detachment, denial, relabelling, illusory control, and endurance); and the external strategies focused on the harassing situation itself (e.g., avoidance, assertion/confrontation, seeking institutional/organizational relief, social support, and appeasement.<sup>23,24</sup>

The results are same as found in other research. The victims vary in their emotional and behavioral responses to sexual harassment. Some deny its existence or importance. Others react with disbelief, shock, and/or doubt to even the most blatant acts; some feel sympathy toward their harassers. Many blame themselves and feel responsible to prevent the incident. Fear of resisting or reporting is a common response to sexual harassment; feelings of powerlessness are related to this fear. Self-esteem and confidence in both academic work and personal relationships are likely to plummet. Victims find themselves mistrustful of men in general. Additional emotional responses include anger, fear, irritability, depression, and feeling of humiliation and alienation, and a sense of helplessness and vulnerability. Any or all of these emotions may result in decreased concentration and drive and general listlessness, and also substance abuse and may result in serious mental health disorders.<sup>29,30</sup> The study participants also reported same feelings and suffered from mental agony and their performance was adversely affected. 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. Many cases go unreported. The victims are reluctant to talk against their agony because of the fear of humiliation for themselves and their families. 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.

In Pakistan, this issue is yet to be acknowledged and investigated.

**Limitation of the study:** The findings can not be generalizable because of non-representative sample, as only those female students were included who volunteered to participate. Those who refused to

respond could have suffered more severely but did not want to disclose because of further embarrassment.

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