Sexual Harassment Experiences of Undergraduate Students of Kathmandu: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Despite the extensiveness of sexual harassment in Nepal, the studies addressing the subjective experiences of the victims are relatively less. This paper reports the qualitative data from a study of sexual harassment of 100 undergraduate students (80 female) from ages 18 to 24 (M=19.5, SD=1.40) of different colleges of Kathmandu collected through convenience sampling. Data was collected through the use of semi structured interview schedule. Thematic analysis was employed to generate the themes from the responses rendered by participants to the open-ended questions. Three overarching themes emerged from the analysis: experience of the incident, effects of harassment on mental health and education, and dealing with the consequence of harassment. Three sub-themes were subsumed within the first theme, namely: i) characteristics of harassment, ii) perception of harassment and immediate reactions, and iii) contextual factors surrounding harassment. In addition, the second theme revealed the consequences of sexual harassment on the psychological well-being and academic performance of the students. Finally, participants reported employing several coping mechanisms to deal with the consequences of sexual harassment, which are broadly categorized into interpersonal and intrapersonal coping strategies and subsumed within the third theme. These findings are discussed in the light of the existing relevant literature, and their practical implications are discussed in the paper.

Keywords: Sexual harassment, undergraduate, Nepal

Sexual harassment (SH) an uninvited and sexually motivated verbal or physical behavior that may be considered invasive by the recipient (Sexual Harassment, 2020), is a common form of violence (Campbell, Raja, & Grining, 1999). SH is experienced by both women and men (Neupane & Chesney-Lind, 2013; Sivakumaran, 2007) and poses itself as a global problem (Neupane & Chesney-Lind, 2013; Parish, Das & Laumann, 2006; Lee, Song, & Kim, 2011; Timmerman & Bajema, 1999). SH is pervasive in many areas, including sports (Marks, Mountjoy, & Marcus, 2012; Fasting, Brackenridge & Sundgot-Borgen, 2004), medical training (White, 2000), nursing practice (Celik & Celik, 2007), public transport (Gekoski, Gray, Adler & Horvath, 2017), and school and colleges (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Joseph, 2015). So far, the extensiveness of SH in Nepal is not thoroughly documented. Nevertheless there are few studies that shed light on its ubiquitous nature (Action Aid, 2011; Neupane & Chesney-Lind, 2013; Thapa & Deuba, 1994). Findings report that ninety percent of the women in Kathmandu, Nepal (N=283) had experienced at least one incident of SH in public transport in Kathmandu (Neupane & Chesney-Lind, 2013), while 28.9% of nursing students experienced harassment in the clinical setting (Gaihre, Regmi & Shrestha, 2018). Also, 79.6% of female healthcare students had experienced it once, among which 17.3% were harassed more than four times in the six months (Mishra & Lamichhane, 2018).
The experience of SH has adverse effects on students' mental and physical well-being (AAUW, 1993; Duffy, Wareham & Walsh, 2004; Mishra & Lamichhane, 2018) and their education (AAUW, 1993; Duffy, Wareham & Walsh, 2004). For example, students affected by SH reported losing self-confidence, declining grades, and have thoughts about changing school and negative psychological functioning and avoidance behaviors (Duffy, Wareham & Walsh, 2004). Sexual harassment is also linked with depressive symptoms (Houle, Staff, Mortimer, Uggen & Blackstone, 2011), poor job satisfaction, a sense of safety at work, and increased turnover intentions (Vargas et al., 2020).

To combat harassment, people choose various methods including, finding psychological support, confrontation with the harasser (Vohlidalova, 2015), remaining silent (Adhikari et al., 2020), normalizing (Phillips, 2019), ignoring, and formal help-seeking (Scarduzio, Sheff, & Smith, 2017) even though reporting and complaining are pretty rare (Wasti & Cortina, 2002). Sexual harassment awareness and preventive education can positively influence the coping of sexual harassment victims (Kang, 2018).

Current literature in Nepal shows a striking paucity of qualitative studies that delve into the multifarious facets of SH of Nepali students in a nuanced manner, especially about the behaviors that constitute harassment, immediate responses to harassment, its effect on mental health and education, and common ways employed to combat its adverse impacts on psychological wellbeing and education.

Our qualitative study aims to fill this research gap and explore the multidimensional experiences of Nepali students who have faced sexual harassment.

Method

Study Design: We used a qualitative study design to explore the SH experiences of undergraduate students. We have chosen this method to understand the complex, multifaceted, and understudied issue of sexual harassment in Nepal.

Sample: Participants were chosen through a convenience sampling procedure. All participants studying in seven colleges of Kathmandu, Nepal, were requested to participate, and 100 (80 female, 20 male) students provided consent to participate. The age ranged from 18 to 24 (M=19.5, SD=1.40).

Data Collection: We devised a semi-structured interview schedule to collect descriptive information about the respondents and their experience of SH. It contained open-ended questions regarding the nature of harassment, thoughts, feelings, and reactions in the immediate aftermath, perceived long-term consequences on psychological well-being and education, and reasons for non-disclosure of harassment experience. Similarly, frequency of harassment, age of first harassment, and age and gender of harasser were also taken.

Data Analysis: We employed thematic analysis propounded by Braun and Clarke (2006) for discerning, analyzing, and deriving patterns from the participant’s words. For the authentic representation of the sample’s experience of the harassment, an inductive approach was employed so that our analysis was rooted in data rather than guided by any “pre-existing coding frame or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). We familiarized ourselves with the data by reading it three times and by taking ample notes. We developed initial codes manually by highlighting the relevant and potentially useful phrases in the dataset with colors, combined and collated the codes into themes based on their commonality, and analyzed themes until they reached the level of saturation. After integrating themes and sub-themes into a thematic map, we obtained a final version that ensured the inclusion of all the vital information. The critical realist perspective guided our analysis of the data. As researchers, we were cognizant of reflexivity in all phases during our data analysis. We recognize our tendency to empathize and sympathize with the voices of the victims and acknowledge a sense of moral outrage towards the perpetrators. However, as researchers, we have collaboratively made rigorous attempts to check and reduce its influence during data analysis and write-up.

Results

Three overarching themes emerged from the data after applying thematic analysis. These super-ordinate themes are 1) experience of the incident, 2) effect of harassment on mental health and education, and 3) dealing with the harassment. Additionally, three sub-themes are subsumed within the first theme: i) characteristics of the harassment, ii) perception of harassment and immediate reaction, and iii) contextual factors surrounding sexual harassment. Similarly, the theme ‘dealing with harassment’ branched off into two sub-themes: i) Interpersonal coping strategies and ii) intrapersonal coping strategies. Relevant verbatim quotes from the transcripts are used to enrich the analytic context and clarity.
Theme 1: Experience of the incident

The extensiveness of SH ranged from suggestive remarks to heinous acts of unsolicited groping. Ninety-five percent of participants reported experience of SH, and half of them were harassed repeatedly. The recurrent nature of SH in its myriad forms sheds light on the diverse spectrum of vulnerabilities and repercussions faced by the victims. This theme branches off into three sub-themes: characteristics of SH, perception of SH and reactions of affected persons in the immediate aftermath, and the context of the experience.

Characteristics of the Harassment

The most common form of SH reported by participants included inappropriate physical contact, obscene and suggestive gestures/remarks, leering and ogling in an unwelcome manner, and invasion of personal, physical boundaries in public places.

Bothersome and unsolicited touches included groping and grabbing in private parts. The profusion of remarks such as “It was an uneasy touch,” “I was touched in an incorrect way,” “grabbed my hands,” “He touched me on the butt,” etc., hint at the blatant contravention of human worth and fundamental morality. The incidents of unwelcome and disconcerting touches in public transport were strikingly high. Some female respondents remarked, “He was holding my hands instead of holding onto the bus, many times they groove us whenever the bus jerks, all of my friends have faced it, not just me.”

Infringement upon one’s personal space with sexual insinuations that verged on assault was frequently reported. A twenty-two-year-old female shared the experience of being molested by a relative who was standing “invasively closer” and “giving pressure for sexual relationship.” One respondent expressed the predicament: “My brother was watching video on the mobile of that person. I was watching it too and that person was behind me. He started to touch my breasts and took me closer to his body.”

Teasing, uttering obscenities, passing “bad comments” on physical appearance persistently, and other forms of verbal harassment were very common. Such behaviors were instantiated within school premise by peers as well as in the public space by the strangers. Peer harassment is usually normalized and considered as “non-issue” by some participants. Although extremely rare, verbal abuse by a teacher was reported by a participant. For example, a 21-year-old girl experienced it while asking questions in a class which bordered on harassment. Similarly, looking with “blank eyes” and staring “in a bad way” were considered extremely disturbing, but most of the victims found it difficult to confront the harasser during such situations due to the inherent ambiguity of such glances.

Perception of harassment and immediate reactions

Some respondents reported that they were unable to label the incident as sexual harassment spontaneously. Instead, they construed the ambiguous behavior as “an unintended mistake.” One said, “I thought it might be just my imagination. So, I ignored it. Again I felt very uncomfortable with his activities. That is when I knew he was a creep....”

In a similar vein, harassment at an early age engendered total incomprehension of the intention of the harasser and the severity of potential abusive behavior: “I was unknown about what he was doing to me. However, as I grew up, I understood.” Nevertheless, the majority of the harassment victims discerned the subtleties of sexual harassment immediately. Their experiences of harassment led to varying reactions that fell along with the gamut of negligible discomfort to catastrophic emotional turmoil in the incident’s immediate aftermath. The most common emotional responses include anger, fear, shock, and disgust. Fear responses ranged from “I was a bit scared” to “Afterwards, I was afraid of everybody.” Some reported being unresponsive and emotionally numb: “I was blank. I knew I should refuse.” Some of the victims confronted the perpetrator. Confrontation includes angry gestures, physical and verbal confrontation, as these remarks “I scratched on his hand.” “I threw him out of the bus,” “I shouted and scolded him.” Some of the respondents said they ignored it and “acted as if it didn’t happen.”

Contextual factors surrounding sexual harassment

The most common setting of harassment was public vehicles, followed by public parks, bus stations, night club, and cinema halls. Seventy-four percent of the victims had undergone multiple harassments, and the first harassment occurred between the ages of 9 to 20. Men perpetrated 90% of sexual harassment in both male and female victims, and the perceived age of the harasser ranged from 14 years to “approximately 45 years”. Respondents consider children and teenage girls to be the most vulnerable population, especially those belonging to low socio-economic backgrounds. The role of power and status of the harasser was not found to be particularly relevant to the harassment.
Theme 2: Effects of harassment on mental health and education

Harassment impinged on the long-term mental health of some respondents. Victims reported increased susceptibility to depressive symptoms, recurrent emotional distress, anxiety, and a pervasive sense of loneliness. Suicidal ideation was rare; one respondent remarked, "...victim is prone to feel alone, lose every hope and choose the way of suicide". Apart from a persistent fear of strangers ("I was afraid of going anywhere."), the participants revealed recurring flashbacks of the incident ("I couldn’t forget it, it was repeating in my mind again and again") and self-blame incurred by unending "Why me?" questions. Respondents also reported a feeling of inferiority and low self-esteem induced by self-blame ("I felt that I was in the wrong, maybe I presented myself sexually...this made me feel ashamed of myself for long").

Furthermore, enduring fear and a sense of disdain "towards all men" were also found, leading them to speculate imminent interpersonal problems in a future romantic relationship. Some went through a sense of disillusionment with the system and grew apathetic. One said, "After the incident, I came to think about the present condition of our country... everyone is free to do any kind of crime." Interestingly, the ones who confronted the harasser were less depleted by the incident, as evidenced in one remark "I was happy with myself. I didn’t sit and watch. I talked back and fought for my dignity." Despite the foregoing negative impacts on some victims, some of the harassed came out unscathed psychologically.

Inability to concentrate on studies (sometimes due to sensory re-experiencing during studies), loss of interest in books, a decline in studies, and flunking classes were some of the corrosive effects. For example, one respondent reported, "I could not concentrate; the whole thing would hit me through mentally." However, the majority of them stated that the incident did not affect their studies.

Theme 3: Dealing with the consequence of the harassment

The coping mechanism differed widely among the respondents. Some coping strategies mitigated the degree of psychological distress while others deteriorated the prospect of mental well-being while some had a neutral effect. This theme has been differentiated into two sub-themes:

Interpersonal coping strategies

Disclosure to friends and family was a predominant coping strategy. Our participants have reported that the sense of belonging during the "demoralized mental state" wrought by harassment had positive outcomes. The victims shared their experiences about the incident, usually with their close friends, sisters, or mothers. "I shared my experiences with my close friend and sister, and it helped me a lot." "I consulted with my mom. She consoled me." Motivating the victims to take firm actions against harassment in the future had bolstered their self-confidence and sense of self-worth.

A significant minority of the victims "did not feel understood" when they shared it with others and were further disheartened, as exemplified by this response: "Instead of condemning the victims and taking action against him, my sister-in-law suggested me to stay away from such people."

Some victims did not share about the experience due to the fear of being blamed (e.g., "I thought my mother would blame me for hanging out with boys.")., perceived lack of retribution against offenders (e.g., "I felt nobody would do anything to him, so there was no point saying..."), and normalization of the incident ("I felt it was not a big issue to be created."). Internal hindrances to sharing included shyness, fear, and the perceived awkwardness in articulating the issues surrounding sexuality in our socio-cultural milieu. "I felt awkward sharing these kinds of things with parents." Perception of unavailing response was a crucial factor in non-disclosure. "I thought they would not respond strictly, and they will not take action against him."

Only one respondent sought the help of a professional counselor.

Intrapersonal Coping

The victims employed a wide range of intrapersonal coping strategies; some facilitated their growth while others curtailed their mental well-being and exacerbated the impacts of the experience. The prominent coping strategies were mental distraction and self-motivation -best summed up in the responses such as "I tried to refresh and entertain myself" and "I watched some motivational videos and engaged in things which make me feel better." Self-defense training and meditative practices reinforced their sense of self-worth and assuaged the distress engendered by harassment. Similarly, a resolution to stand firmly against all harassment in the future helped bolster their self-confidence: "I will not let that happen again; I will speak up for myself and other
Suppression was employed in many instances, as these responses suggest: “I just ignored that as these responses suggest: “I just ignored that teacher and tried to bury the whole issue,” “I tried to think of it as a minor problem,” and “I tried to forget the situation.”

Similarly, the use of alcohol to temporarily restrict intrusive thoughts was another form of suppression. One male respondent said, “I used my time to drink and started to forget those incidents...It worked to some extent.” Avoidance of the harasser and the specific settings perceived as a source of potential harassment was observed. One respondent remarked, “I decided never to visit any male doctors.” Optimism and the refusal to harbor disdain against all men were positive strategies: “I tried to be optimistic that all men are not the same.” In some cases, rumination led to self-blame in many cases whereas reframing the issue through a new perspective helped break free of self-blame. One respondent said, “Slowly and steadily, I realized that it was not my fault...it is so liberating to realize that.”

**Discussion**

This study contributes to our understanding of the subtlety of the subjective experience of sexual harassment of the students of Nepal, characteristics of harassment, its effect, and the victims’ coping strategies.

The prevalence of sexual harassment revealed in our study is in congruence with previous studies conducted in Nepal. For example, several studies have reported a high prevalence of harassment of women in public transport (Neupane & Chesney-Lind, 2014; Mishra & Lamichhane, 2018), workplace (Kunwar et al., 2014), school area (Gyawali, 2020), and clinical setting (Gaihre, Regmi, & Shrestha, 2018).

Unsolicited physical contact, infringement on personal space, leering and ogling, and obscene gestures and remarks were the most common forms of SH reported by our participants. Rosenthal, Smith, and Freyd (2016) documented that most of the harassment is gender harassment (59.1% followed by 6.4% unwelcomed sexual attention, 4.7% unwanted touching, and 3.5% sexual coercion). Gender harassment includes sexist or sexually offensive remarks, gestures, or pictures (Fitzgerald, 1990). Our study does not concur with the finding of Rosenthal, Smith & Freyd (2016), specifically in regard to the prevalence of gender harassment, since the most prevalent form of sexual behavior found in our study was unsolicited touching, especially in public transport. This difference may be partially explained by the findings that characterization of the incident as sexual harassment was significantly low (about seven times) in case of gender harassment (Holland & Cortina, 2013) and partly by the lack of vocabulary in the Nepali language to depict the subtle harassment behaviors (Neupane & Chesney-Lind, 2014).

With regard to its preponderance in public transport, Valentina’s (1990) construal of spatial constraints imposed on women as “spatial expression of patriarchy” (as cited in Neupane & Chesney-Lind, 2014) is in part explicative of hostility displayed by men towards women in the public sphere (Bowman, 1993; Neupane & Chesney-Lind, 2014). Similarly, perpetrator’s perception of the environment as permissive/conducive to impunity has been implicated in the increased likelihood of committing sexual harassment (Pryor, LaVie, & Stoller, 1993; Moore & Mennicke, 2020). Due to lack of immediate confrontation with and punitive action against the harassers in public vehicles, they might have deemed it a permissive environment. The higher incidence in public transports can have also resulted because of “proximity and anonymity, which, in turn, results in a high level of sexual harassment with very little risk of social and legal consequences” (Gyawali, 2020, p.15).

Anger, fear, shame, and disgust were the most common immediate reactions of the victims in our study. It is consistent with the previous finding that showed anger (79.5%), humiliation (47.5%), fear (45.5%), and trauma (11%) were the most prominent emotional reactions of the victims (Lamichhane & Mishra, 2018). Studies have indicated that victims felt a sense of fatigue, discouragement, degradation, and lack of safety in the immediate aftermath of harassment (Scholcoff et al., 2020); some of our participants reported that these feelings persisted into the future, sometimes culminating into major psychological problems.

The psychological effects of harassment reported in our study ranged from negligible distress to recurrent depressive symptoms. Several studies have reported stress, anxiety, depression, psychological impairment (Eom, Restaino, Perkins, Neveln, & Harrington, 2015), and diminished emotional wellbeing as the consequences of harassment (Harned et al., 2002; Lim & Cortina 2005; Mushtaq, Sultana & IqraImtiaz, 2015; Lamichhane & Mishra, 2018). Although the severity
of stress and anxiety was different among subjects, their prevalence in the aftermath of harassment was extremely common after unwanted touch, in concordance with a previous study (Mushtaq, Sultana & IqraImtiaz, 2015). The negligible distress reported by some respondents of our study was analogous to that reported in other studies (Fastin, Brackenridge, & Walseth, 2002; Duffy, Wareham & Walsh, 2004). Lack of unequivocal knowledge of being victimized and the characterization of harassment behavior as merely a “dysfunctional habit” brings about a significantly low level of distress (Schneider & Philips, 1997).

Furthermore, specific harassment behaviors may have a differential array of consequences in different people, depending on the mediating role of the appraisal (Duffy, Wareham & Walsh, 2004). Hence, the victims in our study who did not appraise the incident as distressful were significantly less affected by the harassment, since not feeling distress despite being harassed did not engender any impairment in psychological functioning (Duffy, Wareham & Walsh, 2004). In addition, suicidal ideation, which is linked with sexual harassment (Bagley, Bolitho & Bertrand, 1997), was virtually absent in our study, although a possible link between the harassment and suicidal tendencies was hinted at by one respondent. Absence of the reports of suicidal ideations in current study may be partly explained by the stigma surrounding suicide and the fear of being tagged “suicidal” or “weak-willed” (Rimkeviiciene et al., 2015).

Educational problems reported in our study were lack of concentration resulted from sensory re-experiencing of the incident, intrusive thoughts during learning, and failing classes. Studies have reported various detrimental effects of SH like lower grades, low academic self-esteem, decreased concentration, and attention difficulty in the classroom (OSSTF, 1995; Houston & Hwang, 1996). Sexual violence had also been linked to dropout (Mengo & Black, 2016), was not reported in our study. Although we found the adverse effect of harassment on education in a few cases, we did not focus on specific harassment behaviors in academic problems.

The widely reported interpersonal coping mechanism in our study was disclosure to friends and family members. In tune with our findings, several studies have indicated the higher propensity of victims to disclose about the incident to the informal support provider (friends and family) than to the formal authorities (Filipas & Ullman, 2001; George, Winfield & Blazer, 1992). Formal reporting was non-existent partly due to the perceived procedural hassles in filing complaints and police investigations (Neupane & Chesney-Lind, 2014) and partly due to the normalization of the harassment behaviors (Neupane & Chesney-Lind, 2014; Mellgren et al., 2018). The respondents of our study who disclosed SH experience to friends and family received both positive (for example, emotional comfort and empathy) and negative responses (for example, victim-blaming and disbelieving the account); this is reflected in the previous studies (Filipas & Ullman, 2001; George, Winfield & Blazer, 1992). Lindquist and McKay (2018) reported that sharing SH experience with family members has a universally positive reaction while revealing it with colleagues had mixed outcomes. However, disclosure with family members was not an invariably positive approach in our study, primarily due to the victim’s perception of not being understood by the parents. The prevalence of socio-cultural taboos regarding sex-related activities can partly explain the conversational gap between parents and children in Nepal. Several intrapersonal coping mechanisms were used, such as distraction, self-motivation, avoidance, optimism, ruminative thinking, normalizing, and confrontation. Studies have also reported the use of passive emotion-based coping strategies such as downplaying, sense of denial, ignoring, avoiding, and self-blaming (Scarduzio, Sheff & Smith, 2018) and the active coping mechanism like self-motivation, resolve to be optimistic, advocacy seeking in dealing with the effects of sexual harassment (Scarduzio, Sheff & Smith, 2018; Wasti, & Cortina, 2002). Avoidance coping has been reported among people from patriarchal societies (Cortina & Wasti, 2005). In addition, suppression, a commonly employed coping mechanism by our respondents, is usually regarded as an unsuccessful coping mechanism for victims of sexual harassment (Feinauer, Mitchell, Harper & Dane, 1996). On the contrary, confrontation with the harasser was a helpful problem-based coping mechanism employed by some victims. Our study shows that confrontation played an instrumental role in enhancing self-dignity in some female victims. Studies suggest that confronting the harasser can be a successful coping strategy for female victims (Pape & Arias, 1995). Humor, one indirect coping mechanism (Scholcoff et al., 2020), was not reported by any of the participants in our study. This result may be partly because women usually use this strategy to evade
confrontation with the high-status perpetrator in the workplace (Lindquist & McKay, 2018).

This study has clear, practical implications in raising awareness about the most likely settings of harassment and the most vulnerable segments of society. The current study furnishes a clear and conclusive implication to the concerned authorities and policymakers about public transportation so that swift interventions would be carried to mitigate the pervasiveness of harassment in public transport. Furthermore, the interventions can be tailored in accordance with the safety concerns of women of all ages who travel by public transport.

Our study has some limitations. Inaccuracies of memory may have occurred because many respondents recollected the incident that happened in the distant past. Furthermore, males were underrepresented in the survey. In cases of multiple incidents of harassment, the study has not delved into the ways cognitive-affective reactions as well as overall impact varies with each subsequent harassment experience. Despite the ample documentation of the magnitude of online harassment (Jones, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2012), none of the respondents in our study reported online harassment.

Further research can focus on the nature of harassment on the internet. Future qualitative studies should be conducted to explore the relationship between the intensity/frequency of harassment and the coping strategies, while longitudinal studies can be conducted to discern the effectiveness of different coping strategies in dealing with sexual harassment. Similarly, further studies can also investigate whether or not the psychological distress incurred by sexual harassment meet the criteria for psychiatric diagnosis. Lastly, the nature and consequences of sexual harassment on male victims is an understudied field of research that warrants further exploration.

Conclusion

The current study explored different facets of the experience of sexual harassment in the undergraduate students of Kathmandu and uncovered three overarching themes by employing a thematic analytic approach: experience of the incident, the effect of sexual harassment on mental health, and education, and dealing with the consequence of the harassment. Unwanted physical touch, invasion of private space, suggestive remarks, and leering constituted the often-reported harassment behaviors; females were the primary victims, but a considerable number of men also reported being harassed. Notably, the setting of most frequent harassment behavior was public vehicles. Few students underwent psychological trauma, while others had psychological effects on the spectrum of mild to none. A similar pattern was revealed in academic outcomes. Interpersonal, as well as intrapersonal coping strategies, were employed to tackle the consequences of harassment. Despite the apparent limitations of qualitative research (such as lack of generalizability), the findings of this study have several implications at the individual, societal and policy level in mitigating sexual harassment and stimulating the debate concerning the issue.

References


