

## Prevalence of Sexual Harassment: A Cross-Sectional Study in Uttarakhand

<sup>1</sup>Vandana Dangwal

<sup>2</sup>Uma Bahuguna

*Sexual harassment is a pervasive social issue that affects individuals' physical, physiological, and social well-being, among other aspects of their lives. Various kinds of sexual harassment, especially unwanted attention and approaches, may occur anywhere in society, such as at home, the workplace, public spaces, educational institutions, and transportation systems. Larger impacts have been observed on individuals at personal, institutional, and organizational levels. The purpose of this study is to determine the prevalence of sexual harassment among the female population and to investigate various sociodemographic variables associated with harassment. This research is part of another big research project and was carried out by employing a cross-sectional survey with 311 women who were 18 years of age or older. A sexual harassment scale and several binary questions were used to gather data. Independent sample Man Witney U and independent sample Kruskal-Wallis tests were employed to evaluate the data. The findings of the study state that the prevalence rate of sexual harassment significantly differs among different age groups, marital status, qualifications, employment status, familiarity with the harasser, locality of the harasser, and confrontation.*

**Keywords:** sexual harassment, women, cross-sectional study

### Introduction

Even though many nations have passed legislation and implemented criminal laws prohibiting sexual harassment, the issue continues to worsen on a worldwide scale. In 2017, Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano spurred the online Me-Too movement, demonstrating a global outcry against harassment (Milano, 2017). Many politicians, business executives, and celebrities were excused from harassment during the Me-Too movement (Mendes et al., 2018). The hashtag trended in 185 countries within 10 days of posting and brought the problem to the attention of the world (Strum, 2017). "Sexual harassment refers to unwelcome and inappropriate behavior of a sexual nature that creates a hostile, intimidating, or offensive environment for the victim." (Matsayi Aji et al., 2024). As sexual harassment presents itself in multiple forms, individuals may have distinct perspectives about what constitutes sexual harassment (Rothgerber et al., 2021;

<sup>1</sup>Reserach Scholar (Department of Sociology) HNB Garhwal University, Srinagar Garhwal Utrakhand,India.  
Corresponding Author: Email-dangwalv1@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor (Sociology) H N B Garhwal University Srinagar Uttarakhand, India.

Shupe, 2020), and the ambiguity over behaviors constituting harassment makes individuals think about whether what they experienced is sexual harassment (Ahmed, 2021). According to Ranganathan et al. (2021), sexual harassment can include a wide range of undesirable actions, including nonverbal (such as exhibitionism, sexual gestures, and gazing), verbal (such as sexual remarks and requests for sexual favors), and physical (such as physical contact and sexual assault). Additional issues have emerged in recent years as a byproduct of social media platforms, such as online sexual harassment and sexting (sex-based text messages) (Copp et al., 2021). This extent and the very nature of sexual harassment implies that the same sexual behavior that can please anyone constitutes harassment when done without the consent of the receiver. Girls and women are reportedly considered more prone to harassment by past literature (Grigentyte&Lesinskiene, 2018; Rosenthal et al., 2016), as it is primarily directed against women (Cortina &Areguin, 2021; Larsen et al., 2019). Sexual harassment is exercised as an attempt to retain control over them and, thus, to propagate the gender inequality that concerns women and girls across borders (Koehler, 2016).

In a recent review analysis of sexual harassment, consisting of 49 studies mostly from Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, Ranganathan et al. evaluated the prevalence of sexual harassment on two parameters. Due to unclear definitions and insufficient data quality, the prevalence of sexual harassment varied from 14.5% to 98.8% when measured using a list of behaviors and from 0.6% to 26.1% when measured using a direct question method (Ranganathan et al., 2021). A study in China by Parish et al. (2006) was the first study to use a general population sample to examine all types of harassment in an Asian country. The study found that 12.5% of all women and 15.1% of urban women were exposed to sexual harassment in the past year. In another study in the European Union, 55 percent of women reported experiencing some form of lifetime sexual harassment (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). In one study conducted among employed adults in the US, it was found that 42% of women and 15% of men reported experiencing workplace sexual harassment, indicating significant gender differences in harassment victimization (Raj et al., 2020). In a recent study by Hardies (2023), 88.5% of women experienced once or twice some form of sexual harassment at an accounting and law firm in the past two years. The most frequent form of harassment reported was verbal harassment. Women also reported sexual coercion, an attempt from someone to establish a romantic or sexual relationship despite their effort to discourage (11.5%) and play along with sexual jokes or behavior (12.2%).

Sexual harassment is generally reported in various sectors. According to responses from American graduates working in or related to the hotel industry, 39% of male respondents and 65% of female respondents believed that the majority of women in their area had experienced harassment (Poulston, 2008). In hotel settings, sexual harassment is more common among young, single front desk and food and beverage staff personnel (Mensah, 2022). Another study in hospitals in Turkey (Çelik & Çelik, 2007) reported that nurses were harassed by other nurses and physicians. The likelihood of sexual harassment was higher for single nurses, those with more years of nursing experience, and recent college graduates. Similarly, on public transportation, Bogotá is rife with sexual harassment. It is widely believed that incidents, notably physical harassment, occur more frequently on Trans Milenio buses that are overcrowded. Also, there

is a significant underreporting of sexual harassment instances, largely due to the ignorance of women about how to report such incidents or even whether they can be reported at all. In addition, the general public believes that reporting incidents of sexual harassment is pointless and that the police will either not act at all or, worse, will single out the victims of the harassment (Quinones, 2020). In a systematic review of higher education, the likelihood of suffering SH while attending a college or university was found to be higher for students who identified as white, women, or sexual minorities. (Klein & Martin, 2021) When it comes to enhancing perceptions of a negative workplace climate (i.e., a less collaborative, fair, and inclusive climate) and lowering job-related identification (i.e., believing in their ability to succeed as researchers), women experienced more harassment than men. This is partly responsible for their higher intentions to leave academia (Litzellachner et al., 2024). (Eller, 2016) and Widya Keswara et al. (2017) determined in their study that sexual harassment in higher education settings has a detrimental influence on female students' performance and participation as well as the learning environment as a whole.

Sexual harassment in the workplace is also associated with reduced job motivation, performance, and productivity, as well as higher absenteeism, employee turnover, and legal expenses (Chan et al., 2008). Harassment in the workplace has been covered by the research fraternity, but is mostly dealt with separately and limited to professional space. Sexual harassment can even happen when there is no professional tie between the harasser and the victim, as 41% of women who had never worked reported exposure to sexual harassment victimization in a study by the European Union (2015). This raises the need for a cross-sectional study that may include professionals and non-professionals (housewives and homebodies) simultaneously.

Prior research studies have extensively investigated the role of family members (Kalpana Gyawali, 2020; Mellgren et al., 2018), bosses (McDonald, 2012), teachers (DeSouza, 2003), and colleagues (McDonald, 2012) as the harassers, but left the scope for people with whom the victim may interact, often to sometimes, i.e., those who cannot be categorized as acquaintances or friends, such as shopkeepers and watchmen, fellow pedestrians at parks, bus stops, or usual public places. Further, earlier studies have focused on the neighbors

as the harassers (Pastor-Moreno et al., 2022), whereas there is a need to recognize harassers beyond immediate neighbors, i.e., those belonging to a certain locality. In this research, we considered the locality as an area that includes a distinct community area or village.

## **Method**

### **Respondents**

The present study is descriptive in nature. The primary data was collected from Srinagar Garhwal, a town in Uttarakhand, through a mixed method of stratified and simple random sampling. Data was collected from January 2022 to June 2022. The total sample size was estimated to be 371 by Taro Yamane's formula. Before filing the schedule, respondents were briefed on the context of gender-based crimes by the researcher. Some respondents withdrew from the study because of its sensitive nature, while the majority of women in the senior age group declined to respond to the schedule. Additionally, a few respondents weren't available when the researcher visited them. Time constraints, distance, and the cost of travel to the sample location also played their part. On account of all of these factors, the sample size was limited to 311.

### **Measures**

A twelve-item-based sexual harassment scale was adapted from the study of SP Philip et al., who employed the scale to analyse the prevalence of sexual harassment among Canadian medical students. While adapting the scale for this study, two items were removed from the questionnaire. One item that was specific to the medical field, "request for unnecessary physical examination of sexual organs" and "rape," were removed from the questionnaire. "Rape" was removed as some literature considers rape and sexual harassment different (Rico, 1997). The rest of the items were kept, as they were appropriate to reflect sexual harassment in different contextual and contemporary situations. The items were arranged in a range from never (1), rarely (2), occasionally (3), sometimes (4), and frequently (5) to respond. The satisfactory internal consistency of the scale was estimated with the Cronbach alpha coefficient.

Socio-demographic factors for sexual harassment were also assessed via multiple-choice and dichotomous responses. These include marital status (unmarried, married, divorced, and widowed), age (18–22 years, 23–27 years, 28–32 years, 33–37 years, and 38 years and above), highest qualification (high

school, intermediate, graduate, post-graduate, and Ph.D.), current employment status (government, non-government, business, housewife, part-time employment, and others), confronting the harasser (yes and no), sharing locality with the harasser (yes and no), and familiarity with the harasser (yes and no).

### **Statistical Analysis**

Data was analyzed using the software IBM SPSS Statistics 25. The data analysis is divided into two main sections. The first part involves a chi-square test for goodness of fit to observe the prevalence of sexual harassment, and the next part examines the hypothesis about factors influencing the prevalence of sexual harassment through statistical tests such as the Kruskal-Wallis test and independent sample Mann-Whitney test.

## **Results**

### **Prevalence of Sexual Harassment**

Out of the 371 respondents, only 311 recorded their responses against their exposure to different types and frequencies of sexual harassment. The respondents' most frequent behavior (51.1%) at  $p < .05$ ,  $\chi^2 = 264.8$  (table 1) was inappropriate social media contact. The respondents experiencing frequent prevalence of inappropriate touching (51.1%) differed significantly from those who encountered it rarely, occasionally, and sometimes, with  $p < .05$  at  $\chi^2 = 346.5$  (table 1). Around 80.1% of the respondents stated that they have never been approached with inappropriate gifts at  $p < .05$ ,  $\chi^2 = 703.8$ ; never get stalked (62.7%) at  $p < .05$ ,  $\chi^2 = 346.5$ ; never get solicited or pressurized for dates (65.9%) at  $p < .05$ ,  $\chi^2 = 422.3$  (table 1). In overall frequencies except 'never', 23.3 percent of respondents experienced "exposed body parts" by the harasser at  $p < .05$ ,  $\chi^2 = 635.1$  (table 1). Items 'grossly inappropriate touching' and 'brushing, touching, and grabbing' in total categories except 'never' have nearly the same response of 60.5% and 61.1%, respectively. The prevalence of brushing, touching, and grabbing was nearly the same for those who never experienced it (38.9%) and those who experienced it sometimes (39.5%) at  $p < .05$ ,  $\chi^2 = 198.01$  (table 1). Only 20.3 percent of respondents have never experienced suggestive looks in the past 3 years. It indicates an overall exposure of 79.7 percent, which is the highest of all the items of sexual harassment (table 1).

Table 1

Chi-square test Goodness of fit results for prevalence of sexual harassment

	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Sometimes	Frequently	N	$\chi^2$	DF	P
<b>Stalking</b>							346.572 <sup>a</sup>	4	.000 <sup>*</sup>
Observed	195	22	29	38	27	311			
Expected	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2				
Residual	132.8	-40.2	-33.2	-24.2	-35.2				
<b>Inappropriate gift</b>							703.839 <sup>a</sup>	4	.000 <sup>*</sup>
Observed	249	23	20	12	7	311			
Expected	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2				
Residual	186.8	-39.2	-42.2	-50.2	-55.2				
<b>Exposing body parts</b>							635.158 <sup>a</sup>	4	.000 <sup>*</sup>
Observed	239	30	25	14	3	311			
Expected	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2				
Residual	176.8	-32.2	-37.2	-48.2	-59.2				
<b>Grossly inappropriate touching</b>							163.775 <sup>a</sup>	4	.000 <sup>*</sup>
Observed	123	9	51	106	22	311			
Expected	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2				
Residual	60.8	-53.2	-11.2	43.8	-40.2				
<b>Inappropriate contact via social media</b>							264.836 <sup>a</sup>	4	.000 <sup>*</sup>
Observed	92	6	10	44	159	311			
Expected	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2				
Residual	29.8	-56.2	-52.2	-18.2	96.8				
<b>Soliciting or pressurizing for dates</b>							422.328 <sup>a</sup>	4	.000 <sup>*</sup>
Observed	205	16	10	44	36	311			
Expected	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2				
Residual	142.8	-46.2	-52.2	-18.2	-26.2				

Brushing, touching or grabbing										198.019 <sup>a</sup>
Observed	121	9	37	123	21	311				
Expected	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2				
Residual	58.8	-53.2	-25.2	60.8	-41.2					
Suggestive physical gesture										130.849 <sup>a</sup>
Observed	75	25	26	134	51	311				
Expected	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2				
Residual	12.8	-37.2	-36.2	71.8	-11.2					
Suggestive looks										136.251 <sup>a</sup>
Observed	63	20	27	136	65	311				
Expected	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2				
Residual	.8	-42.2	-35.2	73.8	2.8					
Suggestive remarks										143.678 <sup>a</sup>
Observed	98	6	16	104	87	311				
Expected	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2	62.2				
Residual	35.8	-56.2	-46.2	41.8	24.8					

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 62.2.

b. \*  $p < .05$

**Demographic factors related to the prevalence of sexual harassment****Table 2**  
**Demographic factors affecting the prevalence of sexual harassment**

	N	Mean rank	Kruskal Wallis H	df	p
Marital Status			29.372	3	.000*
Unmarried	216	173.43			
Married	93	116.27			
Divorcee	1	56.00			
Widow	1	185.50			
Total	311				
Age			42.287	4	.000*
18-22 years	164	176.23			
23-27 years	62	168.65			
28-32 years	47	127.16			
33-37 years	27	92.26			
38 years and above	11	62.77			
Total	311				
Highest qualification			14.915	4	.005*
High school	14	141.57			
Intermediate	152	173.27			
Graduate	80	144.32			
Post-graduate	63	129.96			
Ph.D.	2	231.75			
Total	311				
Employment			21.161	5	.001*
Government	13	143.27			
Non-government	14	119.54			
Business	11	118.23			
Housewife	71	125.23			
Part-time employment	8	150.19			
Other	194	173.13			
Total	311				

\*p&lt;.05

Difference in the prevalence of sexual harassment among the victims who were unmarried (173.43), married (116.27), divorcees (56), and widows (185.5) was found to be statistically significant at  $p < .05$  ( $H = 29.372$ ) (table 2). The difference in the prevalence of sexual harassment across categories of age 18–22 years (52.7%), 23–27 years (19.9%), 28–32 years (15.1%), 33–37 years (8.7%), and 38 years and above (3.5%) was found to be statistically significant at  $p < .05$  ( $H = 42.287$ ) (table 2). The difference in the prevalence of sexual harassment across categories of

educational qualification, high school (4.5%), intermediate (48.9%), graduate (25.7%), post-graduate (20.3%), and Ph.D. (0.6%), was found to be statistically significant at  $p < .05$  ( $H = 14.915$ ) (table 2). The difference in the prevalence of sexual harassment across categories of employment groups (government (4.2%), non-government (4.5%), business (3.5%), housewife (22.8%), part-time employment (2.6%), and others (62.4%) was found to be statistically significant at  $p < .05$  ( $H = 21.161$ ) (table 2).

## Socio-demographic factors related to the prevalence of sexual harassment

**Table 3**  
Socio-demographic factors affecting the prevalence of sexual harassment

	N	Mean Rank	Mann Witney U	Sig
<b>Confronted the harasser</b>			10074.000	.017*
<b>Yes</b>	136	169.43		
<b>No</b>	175	145.57		
<b>Total</b>	311			
<b>Same Locality</b>			8408.000	.001*
<b>Yes</b>	103	178.37		
<b>No</b>	208	144.92		
<b>Total</b>	311			
<b>Familiarity</b>			9278.500	.002*
<b>Yes</b>	123	174.57		
<b>No</b>	188	143.85		
<b>Total</b>	311			

\*p&lt;.05

Difference between the prevalence of sexual harassment among the victims who confronted the harasser (43.7%) and those who did not confront the harasser (56.3%) was found to be statistically significant at  $p < .05$  ( $U = 10074.0$ ) (table 3). The difference between the prevalence of sexual harassment among the victims who had harassers from the same locality (33.1%) and those not from the same locality (66.9%) was statistically significant at  $p < .05$  ( $U = 8408.00$ ) (table 3). The difference between the prevalence of sexual harassment among the victims familiar with the harasser (39.5%) and those not familiar with the harasser (60.5%) was statistically significant at  $p < .05$  ( $U = 9278.5$ ) (table 3).

### Discussion

Since the advent of the Me-Too movement, studies on sexual harassment have taken a surge. The present study also investigated the prevalence of sexual harassment in relation to various demographic and socio-demographic variables. The majority of respondents who reported exposure to sexual harassment victimization belonged to the age group of 18–22 years (52.73%), followed by 23–27 years (19.93%), 28–32 years (15.11%), 33–37 years (8.6%), and 38 years and older (3.5%). Similarly, a high exposure rate of 66.07% was also reported in a study by Gautam et al. (2019) in Nepal for people 20 to 23 years of age. The 18–22 females are mostly college-goers, young, and perceived as innocent and easy

targets by the harassers. Further, for peers and young males, these females are easy to contact and communicate with within educational institutions or set up outside an estimated protected environment of the homes. However, in another study by Sivertsen et al. (2019), the exposure rates were different; the younger cohort of 21–22-year-olds reported the highest prevalence of 18.1 percent, which decreased to 9.3% in 29–35-year-old cohorts. In another study by Mumford et al. (2020), it was found that, in comparison to respondents aged e"30, respondents aged 18–29 were 105% more likely to report sexual harassment. The difference in rates in different studies may be due to different methodological implications.

This study found that respondents were exposed to unwanted touching (both occasionally, sometimes, and frequently) at much higher (57.6%) rates than the previous studies. Only 15.2% of females reported receiving unwanted touches, hugs, or kisses in a study by Sivertsen et al. (2019). Also, in Australian universities, touching, hugging, and invading personal space rates were 2.9% (Nielsen et al., 2010). In another Australian university study by Heywood et al. (2022), the most common forms of sexual harassment reported in the past 12 months were: staring (5.6%), touching, hugging, or invading personal space (2.9%), following or loitering nearby (2.5%), comments or intrusive questions about their private life, body, or physical appearance (2.2%), and sexually suggestive comments, jokes, or insults (2.1%). This difference in

response is due to various experiences of sexual harassment in various settings, including educational institutions, workplaces, homes, social gatherings, public places, and public transport. Second, we have collected the response rate of the past three years, whereas other studies have collected the harassment rate of the past twelve or twenty-four months.

In our study, respondents who have completed their intermediate, graduation, and postgraduation degrees reported a high rate of exposure, i.e., 48.87%, 25.72%, and 20.25%, respectively. In a study concerned with sexual harassment in academia, it was found that sexual harassment was mostly prevalent among graduate students (24.8%), undergraduate students (15.45%), and Ph.D. students (19.25%) in this sequence (Aguilar & Baek, 2020). Similar exposition was also observed when nurses with higher academic degrees and those with lower educational levels—that is, those with vocational training and secondary education—experienced sexist remarks more frequently at work (Papantoniou, 2021). Significant negative associations were found between sexual harassment experiences, employment level, and educational attainment, suggesting that female employees who had fewer academic credentials would have experienced more sexual harassment than those who had higher qualifications (Moradeke, 2014). The difference in educational qualification in our and other studies is due to data collection in response to different setups, such as a distinct workplace or institution in other studies and a collective set-up of institutions, workplaces, public spaces, and homes in our study.

The study revealed that unmarried (69.4%) respondents were exposed to harassment more than married respondents (29.9%). Similar findings were also reported by Mensah (2022): married people reported being exposed to sexual harassment at a lower rate (52.9%) than did single people (39.3%). Harassment rates were greater among single female students (53.88%) compared to married students (46.11%) (Gautam et al., 2021). In the workplace, a post hoc test (LSD) revealed that, while divorced nurses were more likely to encounter sexually coercive behaviors, single and unmarried nurses were more likely to encounter gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention behaviors (Papantoniou, 2021).

Wasti and Cortina (2002) identify four strategies for victim response to workplace sexual harassment. One of the four strategies was confrontation. Studies have shown that people claim to confront sexual harassment, which they rarely do (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). The response rate of not confronted (56.3%) in our study reflects this. When asked adolescents for their reasons for not confronting the harassment, they indicated confusion over the proper response and didn't believe it would matter (Hill & Kearl, 2021).

A study based on meta-analysis found that perpetrators were often known to victims, such as family members, colleagues, neighbors, and playmates (Nurbayani et al., 2022). Among those identified as family members were the younger cousins, the biological father, the stepfather, the uncle, and the grandfathers. In addition to harassment by known perpetrators, harassment by strangers was also recorded. Unknown people are reportedly responsible for almost half of the harassment (Grigentytė & Sigita Lesinskienė, 2018). (Kearl, 2018) in her study found women reported sexual harassment and assault harassers as strangers and a significant proportion as family, friends, and romantic partners. The place of the incident for sexual harassment was related to the familiar person's residence (27%) or car (20%).

Our study found that 33.1 percent of respondents identified the harasser as being from the same locality. This result is consistent with the research conducted by Alifia (2021) and Hikmah (2020), which discovered that offenders were present in the same locality and neighbors' homes, respectively.

### **Concluding thoughts**

In a nutshell, our study examined for the first time the prevalence of sexual harassment in Uttarakhand, as per the researchers' knowledge. Sexual harassment was prevalent among respondents in various dimensions, ranging from physical to non-physical (social media). This study also provided accounts for various socio-demographic factors that affected the prevalence of sexual harassment. In the discussion, we found that the prevalence was more or less the same as the other findings, which ask for a dire need for a strong solution to the problem. To address this pressing problem, specific interventions and preventive measures must be designed and implemented. Therefore, we recommend a collective action plan of gender sensitization, strong surveillance, and policy formation.

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