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Saurabh Arya

Department of Extension
Education and Communication
Management, Chaudhary Charan
Singh, Haryana Agricultural
University Hisar, Haryana,
India

Sushma Kaushik

Department of Extension
Education and Communication
Management, Chaudhary Charan
Singh, Haryana Agricultural
University Hisar, Haryana,
India

Arpit Arya

Department of Foods and
Nutrition, Government Home
Science College, Chandigarh,
India

Corresponding Author:

Saurabh Arya

Department of Extension
Education and Communication
Management, Chaudhary Charan
Singh, Haryana Agricultural
University Hisar, Haryana,
India

Nature, extent, causes and effects of sexual harassment faced by school girls

Saurabh Arya, Sushma Kaushik and Arpit Arya

Abstract

The present study was carried out in one urban and one rural co-educational senior secondary schools of Panchkula district of Haryana state. Twenty five girl students from classes 7, 8, 9, 10th were selected randomly from each school, making a total sample of 200 girls. Fifty mothers and 25 teachers from rural and urban areas were also selected. Well-structured interview schedules were constructed separately for girls, mothers and teachers for data collection. Result revealed that most of respondents had medium level of exposure and low.

Keywords: Sexual harassment, nature, extent, causes, effects, school girls

Introduction

Violence against women is endemic everywhere. Violence may be defined generally as the mechanism by which unequal power relations are maintained through the infliction of physical or emotional pain on one person by another. However, gender violence takes on a more specific nature that is mainly sexual and which hinges on patriarchal cultures whereby men seek to control, not just the social institutions but also, women's bodies as objects of male sexual gratification. Although both boys and girls experience violence, the sexual violence and harassment directed at girls is far more pervasive and has a more serious impact on their education, both in the short and long term. Sexual violence may include harassment, abuse or assault.

Sexual harassment may be defined as unwanted and unwelcome sexual behavior. Physical behaviors may include touching that is uncomfortable, embarrassing, and/or offensive, unwanted groping, pinching, or patting. Sexual harassment is not limited, however, to physical acts. Using crude or sexually inappropriate language can be considered sexual harassment if it creates an uncomfortable environment for someone else. Sexual harassment may also include offensive jokes, comments, greetings, verbal teasing, or inappropriate name-calling or spreading sexual rumors, writing sexual graffiti on bathroom walls, sending crude e-mails or letters, and displaying sexual drawings or pornography. Girls face comparatively greater risks of sexual abuse than boys before and after school as they commute on public service vehicles. The vehicles are overcrowded and adult commuters fail to intervene. (Teni-Atinga, 2005, chege, 2007) [3].

Sexual abuse refers to coerced or forced sexual contact or activity that may be ongoing or occurs over time, often within a trusting relationship. These behaviors may involve watching sexually explicit videos or acts, touch another's private parts, engaging or attempting to engage in sexual intercourse, or other sexual behavior. Sexual assault usually refers to forced or unwanted sexual activity that occurs as a single incident, as opposed to ongoing sexual abuse that may continue over time. Cases of assault are extreme or sensational. This form of violence tends to receive more public attention than other forms of sexual violence.

Sexual harassment is most prevalent of all and affects all women in some form or other regardless of age, race, class, caste or location. Touching, whistling, staring are part of every women's life, so much so that it is dismissed as normal. In many societies girls seem to accept violence inflicted on them through schools and on the way to schools as an extension of what they face with their families, therefore nothing to complain about. Parents' attitudes towards girls can mean that they do not believe their daughters when they make allegations. They may wrongly assume that they are to blame because of how they dressed or because of something they said or did.

Adolescence is a critical period when women's vulnerability is consolidated. Several studies

report students experiencing sexual harassment at school. Much of the harassment that girls are exposed to takes place on the way to and from the school. It is in particular targeting the adolescent girls and the main perpetrators are older boys (in-school as well as out-of school) as well as adult men from the community. Toilets have been identified repeatedly as particularly dangerous areas for girls and also for female teachers. In such cases schools may become sites of risk rather than sites of learning. Even the experience of commuting to and from school, may differ for girls and boys. Girls face comparatively greater risks of sexual abuse than boys before and after school as they commute on public service vehicles. The vehicles are overcrowded and adult commuters fail to intervene.

Methodology

The study was conducted in punchkula district of Haryana state. Two hundred school girls (class 7-10th) each from rural and urban areas were selected as per availability, thus comprising a sample of two hundred girls. The data was collected personally on individual basis with the help of self-prepared interview schedule. A list of common. The collected data were quantified and presented in frequency and percentages.

Results and Discussion

Distribution of respondent according to their outing pattern

Outing pattern generally used by respondents has been presented in table. Regarding frequency of outing, majority of rural students went less frequently for trip/picnic (99%) lunch/parties (89%) movie (84%) tuition (72%) and shopping (55%). However rural girls went frequently for shopping (38%) and visit friend/relatives (45%). Almost similar trend was observed in urban respondents also, although they went for more frequent outing as compared to rural respondents for tuition very frequently (41%) and shopping frequently (56%). As regards the person with whom outing was done, majority of rural (67%) as well as urban (69%) respondents went for outing with friends followed by with family members (43% and 42% respectively).

The weighted mean scores indicate that rural respondents had low outing for shopping, movie, lunch/ parties, trip/ picnic and tuition. However they had medium outing to visit friends & relatives. As regards urban respondents, medium outing was observed for shopping, tuition and visit friends and relatives. None of the respondents had high score on outing frequency.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents according to their outing pattern

Sr. No.	Frequency	Frequency of outing *							
		Rural (percentage) n=100				Urban (percentage) n=100			
A.	Purpose of outing	Very frequently	Frequently	Less frequently	Weighted Mean Score	Very frequently	Frequently	Less frequently	Weighted Mean Score
1.	Shopping	7.0	38.0	55.0	1.52	27.0	56.0	17.0	2.10
2.	Movie	3.0	13.0	84.0	1.19	9.0	30.0	61.0	1.48
3.	Lunch/parties	0.0	11.0	89.0	1.11	2.0	13.0	85.0	1.17
4.	Trip/picnic	0.0	1.0	99.0	1.01	3.0	9.0	88.0	1.15
5.	Tuition	17.0	13.0	70.0	1.47	41.0	28.0	31.0	2.08
6.	Visit friends/relatives	31.0	45.0	24.0	2.07	24.0	18.0	58.0	1.66
B.	With whom outing is done								
1.	Alone	14.0	20.0	66.0	1.48	15.0	26.0	59.0	1.56
2.	With friends	67.0	29.0	4.0	2.63	69.0	27.0	4.0	2.65
3.	With family member	43.0	23.0	34.0	2.09	42.0	55.0	3.0	2.36

W.M.S. Low (1-1.66), Medium (1.67-2.33), High (2.34-3.00)

Nature, extent, causes and effects of sexual harassment faced by school girls

In aggregate a large majority of rural (92%), urban (81%) and total (86.5%) respondents revealed about prevalence of sexual harassment and it was experienced by students from all the classes. Andrew *et al.* (2003) ^[1] supported the result that in schools of Goa, one-third of 811 students studying in grade 11 reported having experienced some form of sexual harassment in the past 12 months, most commonly from another student. Report of Ministry of Women and Child Development (2007) ^[4] also found the pervasiveness of abuse among children and young people with 53 percent in the age group 5-18 reported having faced some form of sexual abuse in 13 states of India. Anonymous (2008) ^[2] also revealed that ninety percent of girls reported experiencing sexual harassment at least once. Thus sexual harassment is endemic, all pervasive and need to be controlled.

Regarding usual place of harassment, results revealed that public transport, road side, park, market place and school/nearby school were the most harassment prone places, however, many respondents felt that harassment could take place anywhere. It was surprising to know that 42 per cent of rural and 15 per cent of urban respondents perceived home as

a potential place of harassment. World Health Organization (2005) showed that adolescent girls are at high risk of sexual violence. Much sexual violence against girls happens in the homes of parents or relatives, but girls are also at risk of sexual harassment in schools

Apart from driver/servant, friends, boyfriend, teacher/coach other staff members and relatives, strangers and elderly men were the most perceived perpetrator of sexual harassment. Report of Ministry of Women and Child Development (2007) ^[4] also revealed that among the reported cases, 54 percent were boys and 46 percent were girls and majority of them were assaulted by relatives (uncle/cousins).

As far as incidences of weird feeling/unusual behaviour experienced by girls at home/ outside were concerned, mild harassments such as staring from head to toe, sexual comments/jokes/gestures, unwelcome touching, grabbing, hugging and pinching from strangers as well as cousin/relatives were common. Strangers were mostly responsible for harassment followed by driver/servant, neighbour/visitors and relatives and cousins. Majority of rural and urban girls did not experience extreme harassment such as pulling clothes, public humiliation, spreading sexual rumours, putting wrong profile on face book and sexual

assault etc. in both rural and urban areas, and it may be because even if they had experienced, they were hesitant to reveal such incidents.

Regarding harassment in school, 60 per cent of rural and 52 per cent of urban girls faced harassment in school at any given time and school gate was the most common place of harassment. In about one fourth to one fifth cases, peon/staff, class, senior boys and teachers were accused for watching from head to toe with bad intentions. 18 to 20 per cent respondents also blamed peon/staff for following the path. Unwelcome touching, grabbing, hugging and pinching were reported by senior boys and class fellows. It was astonishing to note that in 21 per cent of cases unwelcome touching grabbing by teachers was also reported and the most common place of harassment was school gate and canteen. Young (2004) [6] supported the result that almost 80% of students in secondary schools reported experiencing sexual harassment at

school. Chege (2007) [3] revealed that girls more than boys, are raped, sexually assaulted, abused, and sexually harassed by their classmates and even by their teachers. Leech and Sitaram (2007) [7] also reported that adolescent girls experienced sexual harassment and abuse while attending secondary school in Karnataka State, South India and were vulnerable both within the school grounds (mostly by male pupils). Mansaray and Johnson (2012) [8] examined that 50% harassment was from age mates; 24.9% was made up of teachers; followed by 19.9% which included other adults in the community and the least group, 5.1% was from members of the girls' households. It was distressing to note that 24.9% of the girls pointed out that male teachers were a part of the problem. This is very shameful as teachers who have reputation of being the nation builder and builders of children' character are themselves involved in such crimes.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents according to their outing pattern

Sr. N.	Frequency	Frequency of outing *							
		Rural (percentage) n=100				Urban (percentage) n=100			
A.	Purpose of outing	Very frequently	Frequently	Less frequently	Weighted Mean Score	Very frequently	Frequently	Less frequently	Weighted Mean Score
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4.	Trip/picnic	0.0	1.0	99.0	1.01	3.0	9.0	88.0	1.15
5.	Tuition	17.0	13.0	70.0	1.47	41.0	28.0	31.0	2.08
6.	Visit friends/relatives	31.0	45.0	24.0	2.07	24.0	18.0	58.0	1.66
B.		With whom outing is done							
1.	Alone	14.0	20.0	66.0	1.48	15.0	26.0	59.0	1.56
2.	With friends	67.0	29.0	4.0	2.63	69.0	27.0	4.0	2.65
3.	With family member	43.0	23.0	34.0	2.09	42.0	55.0	3.0	2.36

W.M.S. Low (1-1.66) Medium (1.67-2.33) High (2.34-3.00)

Causes of sexual harassment as perceived by girl students

In urban areas the most serious cause of sexual harassment perceived by girls was 'to display sense of power' followed by 'wrong moral values/socialization of boys' while the most frequent cause perceived by rural girls was 'to display sense of power' followed by 'women have been socialized to suffer in silence'. Sometimes girls were blamed by their parents for sexual harassment on account of wearing inappropriate clothes or initiating the behaviour. Regarding the relationship of dress with harassment, although majority of girls both rural (79%) and urban (88%) felt that harassment could take place with any dress and there was no relationship between dress and harassment, yet it was surprising to note that girls themselves perceived that the harassment takes place while wearing short exposing clothes. Many rural and urban girls believed that girls themselves sometime invite such behaviour and wrong dress, lifestyle and behaviour of girls also invite sexual harassment. By analysing the social and cultural values and norms that lie behind the harassment, it can be seen that home is the place where gender-based inequalities are first experienced by children, and where future power-imbalanced relationships are modelled, or challenged. Girls are trained to be passive and compliant caregivers. These gender-based

stereotypes support the use of violence and coercion that perpetuates gender inequalities. Most school environments also reflect the patriarchal society and demonstrate discrimination against girls. Beiner (2007) [9] also suggested that people believe that girl's dress is a factor in offenses (such as sexual assault), while other studies suggest that dress is not a factor in determining who is victimized. Results also revealed that about 1/3 girls did not tell anybody about sexual harassment. The main person to whom it was disclosed was friends and elders. Very few girls complained about sexual harassment to their parents (38.3%) and teachers (28.2%) and nobody ever complained to police. Regarding the reason for not complaining, the most important reason was "feel uncomfortable, ashamed, embarrassed or scared of the risk of becoming a laughing stock (85.93%) followed by "fear of repercussions (60.93%) and fear of being blamed (46.87%). Andrew *et al.* (2003) [11] also pointed out that the victims did not take any action against the perpetrator. Rao (2012) [10] tweeted that in Bombay almost every single girl of the 6,000 surveyed by students of a south Mumbai college claimed that she had been a victim of sexual harassment at some point in life. Worse still, three out of four girls chose not to react and did nothing about it.

Table 3: Causes of sexual harassment as perceived by girl students

Sr. No.	Causes	Percentage							
		Rural n=100				Urban n=100			
		Never	Sometime	Mostly	W.M.S	Never	Sometime	Mostly	W.M.S.
1.	To display sense of power	7.0	20.0	73.0	2.71	6.0	17.0	77.0	2.66
2.	Just for pleasure / amusement	25.0	25.0	50.0	2.44	12.0	32.0	56.0	2.25
3.	Wrong moral values/socialization of boys	14.0	44.0	42.0	2.61	3.0	33.0	64.0	2.28

4.	Emotional distress/distorted mentality	24.0	35.0	41.0	2.33	21.0	25.0	54.0	2.17
5.	Macho beliefs that women take their harassment as a compliment	36.0	32.0	32.0	2.02	26.0	46.0	28.0	1.96
6.	Men in group often behave differently called "gang harassment"	16.0	35.0	44.0	2.32	8.0	52.0	40.0	2.18
7.	Women see themselves as dependent of lesser value than men	13.0	51.0	36.0	2.11	13.0	63.0	24.0	2.23
8.	Women have been socialized to suffer in silence	13.0	20.0	67.0	1.90	37.0	36.0	27.0	2.54
9.	Women often don't complain which encourage harasser	13.0	20.0	67.0	2.18	20.0	42.0	38.0	2.54
10.	Generally victims end up being blamed, which encourages harassment	16.0	33.0	51.0	2.02	26.0	46.0	28.0	2.35
11.	Girls often invite the unwanted behavior	17.0	63.0	20.0	1.70	46.0	38.0	16.0	2.03
12.	Wrong dress, lifestyle and behaviour of girls	36.0	38.0	26.0	2.32	22.0	24.0	54.0	1.90

W.M.S. Low (1.01-1.60) Medium (1.61-2.20) High (2.21-2.71)

Effects of sexual harassment as perceived by respondents

The effects of sexual harassment as perceived by respondents. It can be seen from the table that among the physical effects majority of rural girls reported sleep disturbance (69%) followed by stress/ anxiety (45%) and fatigue (43%).

Among urban respondents, most important perceived physical effect was depression and headache (49%each) followed by stress/ anxiety (48%) and fatigue (40%). Regarding the study related effects, decrease of performances was reported by most of rural respondents (42%) while poor results (51%) and decreased performance (45%) were reported by urban

respondents. As far as psychological effects were concerned, feeling of embarrassment was perceived by majority of rural (44%) and urban (45%) respondents followed by self-conscious (37%). Leech and Sitaram (2007) [7] also reported that for some girls, sexual harassment reduced their desire to continue their schooling, for others it increased their fear of being withdrawn if parents came to hear of any incident. Too often, these negative emotional effects take a toll on students' and especially girls' education, resulting in decreased productivity and increased absenteeism from school (AAUW, 2011) [11].

Table 4: Effects of sexual harassment as perceived by respondents

Sr. No.	Effects	Frequency (%)		
		Rural n=100	Urban n=100	Total n=100
A	Physical effects *			
1.	Fatigue	43(43.0)	40(40.0)	83(41.5)
2.	Depression	29(29.0)	49(49.0)	78(39.0)
3.	Weight loss/gain	14(14.0)	28(28.0)	42(21.0)
4.	Sleep disturbance	69(69.0)	38(38.0)	107(53.5)
5.	Headache	28(28.0)	49(49.0)	77(38.5)
6.	Stress/ anxiety	45(45.0)	48(48.0)	93(46.5)
B	Study related effects *			
1.	Decreased performance	42(42.0)	45(45.0)	87(43.5)
2.	Poor results	33(33.0)	51(51.0)	84(42.0)
3.	Increased absenteeism	17(17.0)	43(43.0)	60(30.0)
4.	Leave school	8(8.0)	29(29.0)	37(18.5)
C	Psychological effects *			
1.	Feeling of embarrassment	44(44.0)	45(45.0)	89(44.5)
2.	Less confident	24(24.0)	31(31.0)	55(27.5)
3.	Self-conscious	37(37.0)	37(37.0)	74(37.0)
D	Social effects *			
1.	Less socialization	53(53.0)	62(62.0)	115(57.5)
2.	Retaliation from the harasser	24(24.0)	28(28.0)	52(26.0)
3.	Objectified and humiliated by scrutiny and gossip	33(33.0)	45(45.0)	78(39.0)
4.	Defamation of character and reputation	13(13.0)	57(57.0)	70(35.0)
5.	Loss of trust in environments and people	23(23.0)	66(66.0)	89(44.5)
6.	Stressed relationships with similar others, peers, colleagues	43(43.0)	55(55.0)	98(49.0)
7.	Weakening of support network	37(37.0)	55(55.0)	92(46.0)

Thus, although both girls and boys can encounter sexual harassment at school, it is still a highly "gendered phenomenon that is directly and negatively associated with outcomes for girls". National Women's Law Centre (2007) report revealed that the consequences of harassment are severe. Students who experience sexual harassment are likely to react by talking less in class, not wanting to go to school, and finding it hard to pay attention in school. Research has also demonstrated that targets of sexual bullying and harassment experience anxiety, distress, confusion, loss of self-esteem, and depression.

Conclusion

Prevalence of the sexual harassment in majority of students from all the classes, though it was more in rural area as compared to urban area. Public transport, road side, park,

market place and school/ nearby school were most harassment prone places. Although majority of rural and urban girls did not experience extreme harassment, yet strangers were mostly responsible for harassment. Majority of the respondents faced harassment in school and school gate was the most common place of harassment. Sleep disturbance and stress/anxiety were the major physical effects, decreased performance and poor results were major study related effects, feeling of embarrassment was most important psychological effect and less socialization and stressed relationship were major social effects perceived by total respondents caused by sexual harassment.

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