

Awareness and Perception of Sexual Harassment among Female Adolescent Students

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Abstract

Introduction: Sexual harassment is unwanted sexually determined behavior such as physical contact, making sexual comments, and sexual pressure whether by verbal or non-verbal actions. Sexual harassment among school adolescent girls is high. The objective of the study was to find out the awareness and perception of sexual harassment among female adolescent students.

Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional study design was used. Total of 139 female adolescent students were included in the study. Data were collected by using semi-structured, self-administered questionnaires. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze and interpret the findings.

Results: More than one-fourth (28.1%) of the respondents had high level of awareness, nearly two-thirds (61.9%) had an average level of awareness and only 10% had low level of awareness. All had negative perceptions regarding sexual harassment. There was a significant association between level of awareness of sexual harassment and parent's level of education ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion: Female adolescent students had an average level of awareness and negative perceptions of sexual harassment.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment refers to unwelcome or undesirable sexual behavior, requests for sexual favors, or other verbal, non-verbal, or physical acts of a sexual nature that create a hostile or distressful environment. It involves activities that seem unacceptable and one finds difficult to cope with or handle. It can occur in different settings such as schools, workplaces, public places, or even on the internet.¹ Sexual harassment against girls and women is widespread at different sectors and levels across the world.² Global reports showed that an estimated 35% of females have experienced sexual violence in their lives and a projected 120 million girls have encountered forced sexual acts at some point in their lives.³

School girls encounter various forms of sexual harassment daily. The commonness of these unwanted sexual advances leads to normalization, seeking excuses, and the enactment of harassment.⁴ Social perception of the concept varies as well. Despite legislation and increasing social awareness such as the "Me Too movement"⁵, various researches indicate a subjective perception of sexual harassment, affected by variables such as cultural background, characteristics of the harasser and harassed, and characteristics of the evaluator as well as other factors.⁶ Many studies focusing on the perception toward sexual harassment and attitudes of female adolescents have shown the need for continued research.⁷ Students

may not recognize the harassing behaviors and the harasser can take this as an advantage. Therefore, it becomes very important to understand how students perceive sexual harassment.⁸

Teenage female students are likely to be sexually harassed by different persons. Teachers, male peers, friends, and relatives were found more involved in the sexual harassment of female students in the Nepalese context.⁹ Sexual harassment has been found responsible for creating negative effects on academic, psychological, and behavioral impacts as well as the effects on students' enrollment and educational achievement along with dignity, self-esteem, and social relationship.¹⁰ It is important to recognize that sexual harassment is not the fault of the victim but the responsibility lies with the perpetrators and the broader society to address and prevent. Limited studies have been conducted on this burning issue. For taking protective actions and preventive measures also, there is a need to assess the present condition of awareness and perception regarding sexual harassment among adolescents. Hence, the present research has been conceptualized to focus on the awareness of teenage girls on this topic.

METHODS

Descriptive cross-sectional study design was used to assess the awareness and perception of sexual harassment. The study setting was Shree Gogan Secondary School situated at Lekhnath Municipality-26, Kaski, Nepal. All the adolescents girls studying in grades IX and X were enrolled. Total enumerative sampling technique was used to select the samples. Total sample size was 139. A semi-structured, self-administered questionnaire was used to collect the information. The questionnaire included three parts; part I included the statement related to socio-demographic characteristics, part II consisted of questions related to awareness of sexual harassments, there were altogether 12 questions and part III consisted a rating scale with 14 statements on perception of sexual harassment was used. The level of awareness was categories as a high level of awareness that is score above 75%, the average level score 51 - 75%, and score below 50% as a low level of awareness.¹¹ For perception, scoring ranged from 0 to 2 i.e. Agree - 2, Neutral - 1, Disagree - 0. The highest score for each statement was 2 making a total score of 28. The score of 60% and above represented negative perception whereas score less than 60% denoted positive perception.¹² Ethical approval was obtained from Institutional Review Committee (IRC) of Nepalese Army Institute of Health Sciences. Formal permission for data collection was obtained from the Principal of Shree Gogan Secondary School. Written informed consent was taken

from the parents and a written informed assent was taken from each respondent. After explaining the purpose of the research, time that would be needed to fill-up the questionnaire, instruction about the questions were given to the students. Students were assured that taking part in this study was totally voluntary and they were free to withdraw anytime at any stage if they want to discontinue. Anonymity was maintained by using the code number instead of their name. Confidentiality was maintained by ensuring them that the study findings will be used only for the study purpose. Data were collected from class IX and X on the same day to prevent from data contamination which took about one hour i.e. 30 minutes for each class. Researcher herself collected the data. Collected questionnaires were checked for the completeness and stored safely. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistical method i.e frequency, percent, mean, standard deviation and inferential statistics, chi-square was used to find out the association between awareness on sexual harassment and socio-demographic variables using SPSS software version 16.

RESULTS

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (N = 139)

Characteristics	Number	Percent
Age in completed years *		
12 - 14	58	41.7
15 - 17	81	58.3
Grade		
Class IX	79	56.8
Class X	60	43.2

*Mean age = 14.77 years, SD = \pm 0.843

Among the respondents, more than half (58.3%) were between the age group 15 - 17 years with a mean age of 14.77 and a standard deviation \pm 0.843. Regarding ethnicity, 58.3% of the respondents were Brahmin / Chhetri and 87.1% followed Hinduism. Nearly half (47.8%) of the respondents' father and 49.6% of the respondents' mother had a secondary level of education.

Table 2 : Awareness on physical, verbal, and nonverbal sexual harassment (N = 139)

Variables	Number	Percent
Physical sexual harassment*		
Touching or grabbing someone for sexual purposes#	124	89.2
Attempted rape#	97	69.8
Unnecessary attempt to kiss, hug#	87	62.6
Rubbing oneself sexually against another person#	59	42.4
Asking victims to show their private parts	96	69.1
Sending unwanted letters or materials of a sexual nature	23	16.5
Verbal sexual harassment*		
Making kissing sounds, whistling at someone#	115	82.7
Sexual comments on body parts of someone#	102	73.4
Unnecessary pressure for sexual favors#	77	55.4
Repeatedly asking for a date with the person who is not interested#	75	54.0
Standing close to the person on purpose	50	36.0
Blocking a person's path	36	25.9
Non-verbal sexual harassment*		
Staring at the body or private parts#	110	79.1
Showing off their private parts#	99	71.2
Showing sexually suggestive pictures or objectives#	82	59.0
Blowing kisses or winking#	81	58.3
Kissing or hugging someone inappropriately	50	36.0
Calling homosexual	18	12.9

*Multiple response #correct answer

Table 2 depicted that most (89.2%) of the respondents stated that touching or grabbing someone for sexual purpose as sexual harassment followed by 69.8% as attempted rape. Similarly, in verbal sexual harassment, most (82.7%) of the respondents answered that making kissing sounds or whistling at someone falls under verbal

sexual harassment followed by 73.4% as sexual comments on body parts of someone. Likewise, in non-verbal sexual harassment, most (79.1%) of the respondents answered that staring at their body or private parts fall under non-verbal sexual harassment while 71.2% stated that showing off their private parts as a non-verbal sexual harassment.

Table 3 : Perception toward sexual harassment of the respondents (N = 139)

Statements	A (2) %	N (1) %	DA (0) %
When someone makes sexual comments on me which makes me uncomfortable	92.1	6.5	1.4
When somebody makes a sexual gesture to me	86.3	12.9	0.7
Sexual harassment occurs because of girl's beauty and attractiveness*	7.9	29.5	62.6
Sexual harassment occurs due to the friendly nature of the girl*	6.5	31.7	61.9
When someone staring at me in a sexual way	84.9	11.5	3.6
If someone asks me to involve in sexual acts	86.3	6.5	7.2
Whistling at a girl is normal*	1.4	30.2	68.3
It is important to tell parents in case of sexual harassment	97.8	0.7	1.4
Even though the girl was being sexually harassed, she probably enjoyed it*	0.7	7.9	91.4
If a girl doesn't make a complaint, it probably wasn't serious enough*	4.3	18.0	77.7

Sexual harassment can be prevented by establishing an awareness program	79.9	13.7	6.5
Sexual harassment can be reduced by not allowing girls to go out*	10.1	7.9	82.0
Sexual harassment can be minimized by including a topic on the curriculum	69.8	29.5	0.7
Sexual harassment would end if the girl simply told the boy to stop*	4.3	20.9	74.8

A: Agree, N: Neutral, DA: Disagree, * Negative statement

Table 3 showed that almost all (92.1%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that they would call it sexual harassment when someone makes sexual comments about them. Most (86.3%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that they would call it sexual harassment when somebody makes a sexual gesture to them. Almost (97.8%) of the respondents agree that in case of sexual harassment, it is important to tell to their parents. Furthermore, 79.9% of the respondents agree that sexual harassment can be prevented by establishing an awareness program. More than two-third (69.8%) of the respondents agree that sexual harassment can be minimized by including topics in the curriculum.

The study showed that more than one-fourth (28.1%) of the respondents only had high level of awareness, nearly two-thirds (61.9%) had an average level of awareness and 10% had low level of awareness on sexual harassment.

Table 4 showed that all of the respondents had negative perception towards sexual harassment.

Table 5: Association between level of awareness and selected socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (N = 139)

Variables	Level of awareness				Chi-square test value	p-value
	High to average		Low			
	No.	%	No.	%		
Age (N = 139)						
12 - 14	53	42.4	5	35.7	0.231	0.630
15 - 17	72	57.6	9	64.3		
Grade						
IX	70	56.0	9	64.3	0.352	0.409
X	55	44.0	5	35.7		
Ethnicity						
Brahmin / Chhetri	73	58.4	8	57.1	0.008	0.928
Others	52	41.6	6	42.9		
Type of family						
Nuclear	84	67.2	11	78.6	0.753	0.548#
Joint	41	32.8	3	21.4		
Fathers' education						
Secondary	63	50.8	3	21.4	4.351	0.037*#
Others	61	49.2	11	78.6		

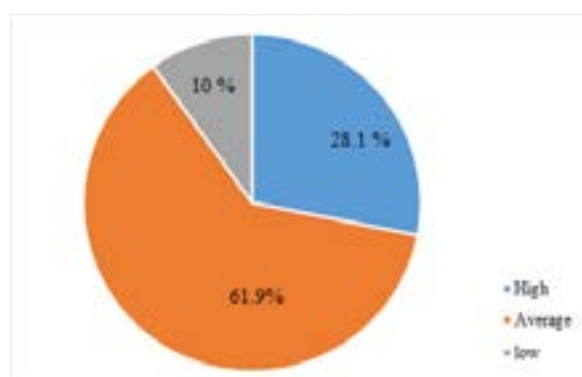


Fig 1: Level of awareness regarding sexual harassment

Table 4: Level of perception regarding sexual harassment of the respondents

Level of Perception	Number	Percent
Negative ($\geq 60\%$)	139	100
Total	139	100

Mothers' Education

Secondary	65	52.4	3	23.1	4.052	0.041*#
Others	59	47.6	10	76.9		

p- Value > 0.05 = Insignificant *p- value ≤ 0.05 = Significant association # Fisher exact test

The above table showed that there was no significant statistical association between the level of awareness and age, grade, ethnicity, and type of family of the respondents, there showed significant association between the level of awareness and fathers' ($p < 0.05$) and mothers' level of education ($p < 0.05$).

DISCUSSION

In the present study, most (89.2%) of the respondents stated that touching or grabbing someone for sexual purpose fall under physical sexual harassment followed by 69.8% as attempted rape, 62.6% as unnecessary attempt to kiss or hug, and 59% as rubbing oneself sexually against another person. This finding is similar to the study conducted by Thapalia et al in Kathmandu among female students.¹³ Furthermore, the present study showed that most (73.4%) of the respondents said sexual comments on body parts of someone falls under verbal sexual harassment which was inconsistent with the finding by Dawadi et al¹⁴ where the majority (67.3%) of respondents said making direct or indirect phone comments on body parts and clothing. This difference may be due to sample setting and sample size. Regarding non-verbal sexual harassment, most (79.1%) of the respondents answered that staring at the body or private parts falls under non-verbal sexual harassment. This study was inconsistent with the study conducted by Dawadi et al¹⁴ where more than half (54.7%) of the respondents answered staring at sexual parts as non-verbal sexual harassment.

The present study's findings showed that almost all (92.1%) of the respondents perceived sexual harassment when someone makes sexual comments to them but only 56% of the respondents perceived as sexual harassment when someone passes sexual comments on their body in the study conducted by Hill et al.¹⁵ This may be because of different study settings and population. This study showed that almost (97.8%) of the respondents agreed that in case of sexual harassment, it is important to tell their parents but contrast findings were seen in the research conducted by Alkhateeb et al¹² in Egypt which was only 35.7%. This difference may be due to the different study settings of these studies. Regarding, the perception of prevention of sexual harassment, 79.9% of the respondents agreed that sexual harassment can be prevented by establishing an

awareness program. This study was similar to the finding by Limbu et al¹¹ which showed that 65% agreed with this statement. In the present study, regarding the perception on minimization of sexual harassment by including the topic in the curriculum, more than two- third (69.8%) of the respondents agreed on it which is consistent with the study conducted by Gurung et al⁸ which showed that 73.8% agreed with this statement.

Regarding the level of awareness, more than one-fourth (28.1%) of the respondents had a high level of awareness, nearly two-thirds (61.9%) had an average level of awareness and 10% had low level of awareness on sexual harassment which is similar to the study done by William et al¹⁶ where 27% of adolescent girls had good knowledge, 62% had average knowledge and 11% had poor knowledge. This was in contradiction with the finding by Sharma et al¹⁷ where a high level of awareness was 43.9%, average in 5.2% and low-level awareness in 50.9%. This discrepancy may have resulted due to the different study settings. The present study showed that all respondents had a negative perception regarding sexual harassment. More than half of the respondents (55.7%) had a negative perception regarding sexual harassment in the study done by Alkhateeb et al.¹² Our study showed that there was a significant association between the levels of awareness with respondents' fathers' level of education ($p < 0.05$) and mothers' level of education ($p < 0.05$), which is similar to the study conducted in India by Ojha et al¹⁸ where father and mother education was ($p < 0.05$). So, educating female child and inclusion of sexual harassment course in the curriculum might play vital role in reducing the different types of sexual harassment among the female adolescent students.

This study has few limitations. The present research has been focused in a single school with limited number of students. Hence, generalisation of the present findings would not be feasible. The present findings need to be substantiated with larger studies including more schools from different areas of the country.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that students have an average level of awareness regarding sexual harassment and all students had a negative perception of sexual harassment. There is

a significant association between the level of awareness and the education level of the parents.

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