



Experiences and Perceived Preventive Measures of Sexual Harassment Among Female Students at Tribhuvan University

Kalpana Gyawali^{1*}; Ram Krishna Maharjan²; Shyam Krishna Maharjan³

¹Lecturer, Health Education, Central Department of Education, Tribhuvan University

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8085-7482>

²Professor, Physical Education, Central Department of Education, Tribhuvan University

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8248-2370>

³Professor, Health Education, Central Department of Education, Tribhuvan University

*Corresponding Author: gpkalpana81@gmail.com

Keywords

Preventive measures, sexual harassment, university girls

Abstract

This study examines the experiences of sexual harassment among female students at higher educations in Kathmandu valley under Tribhuvan University, Nepal. The study employs a focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with female students across various higher educational institutes. Findings reveal that sexual harassment is pervasive, occurring both on and off-campus situation, and manifests in physical, verbal, and non-verbal forms. Participants emphasized the need for strict laws, effective enforcement, and increased societal awareness will be effective to mitigate these issues. The research finding elaborated the importance of female empowerment and systemic change to combat sexual harassment in academic and public spaces in Nepal.

Introduction

Before the mid-1970s, the concept of "sexual harassment" was not widely recognized or understood. The term sexual harassment was firstly used by MacKinnon, who defined it as the "unwanted imposition of sexual demands within a relationship of unequal power," thereby emphasizing the exploitation of power from one social context to gain advantages or inflict harm in another (MacKinnon, 1979, p. 245). This definition was the intersection of sexual harassment with power dynamics, making it clear that harassment was not merely about sexual advances but also about

power and control. Following the 1970s, the term rapidly gained traction within formal organizations in developed countries, including the United Nations. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission guidelines define sexual harassment as the following (USEEOC n.d.a.):

Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's

work performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment.

The Australian Sex Discrimination Act 1984 perceived sexual harassment including those behaviors such as unwelcome touching, staring, following, sexually explicit communications (whether in-person or via technologies), as well as nude or sexual images taken or shared with others without permission (Nisbet et al., 2022). There is no universal definition of sexual harassment but it has getting crucial issues throughout the world.

The prevalence of sexual harassment in academic institutions is also a global issue and has reported across different countries. For instance, Tora (2013) highlights that the prevalence rates of sexual harassment in universities vary widely: 31% in Australia (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017), 65% in Egypt (Ibrahim et al.,2023), and over 50% in the United Kingdom (Oppenheim, 2021). In another study in Norway, 31.3% women were found suffered from different types of sexual harassment and most common type of sexual harassment were ‘sexual expressions, suggestions or comments about body’ and ‘unwanted touching, hugging or kissing’ (Sivertsen et al, 2019). Similarly Sendo and Meleku (2015) reported the various types of sexual harassment on university female student in Africa and among them 2% victims were experienced forced sex at that region.

These statistics underscore the pervasive nature of sexual harassment across different cultural and educational contexts. Sexual harassment is not only a socially and culturally rooted crime but is also associated with severe negative impacts on victims, including physical, psychological, and academic repercussions and victims of sexual

harassment often experience a decline in academic performance, increased stress and anxiety, and a loss of interest in their studies, which can have long-term implications for their educational and career trajectories (Hill & Silva, 2005; Okeke, 2011). In this context significant amount of researches and studies has been done globally to explore its prevalence, impact and to development policies aimed to reduce its prevalence, mitigate its impact on the victim and society. (Farley, 1978; MacKinnon, 1978; Row, 1973).

In the context of Nepal, a deeply patriarchal society, traditional gender roles are strongly enforced the systemic subordination and contributes to the high prevalence of sexual harassment and violence against women (Ghimire, Kafle & Karki, 2024). Despite significant cultural and social barriers, Nepal has made strides in improving its legal framework concerning sexual harassment and violence. Notably, the Sexual Harassment at Workplace Prevention Act (2015) and the Criminal Code Act (2017) were enacted to provide legal protections against sexual harassment and assault (Sharma, Aryal, Pokhrel& Shrestha, 2024). However, the effectiveness of these legal frameworks is often undermined by societal attitudes that tolerate or trivialize sexual harassment, as well as by insufficient resources allocated for enforcement. Challenges in implementation are further compounded by a lack of awareness among the general population, reluctance to report incidents due to fear of retaliation or stigma, and inadequate support services for victims (Gyawali, 2012; Mishra & Lamichhane, 2018). In Nepal, severe cases of sexual harassment have been documented in both workplaces and public spaces, revealing the widespread nature of the problem (Gyawali, 2012; Gyawali, 2020; Gautam et al., 2019; International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2007; Thapa & Rana, 1994). There are

frequent reports of sexual harassment at the university level highlighted by various online and print media outlets shown its severity (Rai, 2019). Despite the gravity of the issue, there has been a noticeable lack of systematic research focusing on sexual harassment among female students at the university level in Nepal (Gyawali et al., 2012; Gyawali, 2020).

In light of these considerations, the present study aims to investigate the experiences of sexual harassment among university female students and the preventive measures that they have adopted in current conditions. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights on the general situation and the preventive measure and expectation form victim to mitigate and that can useful to develop more effective policies and interventions to combat sexual harassment in Nepal's higher education institutions.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative research design, specifically using thematic analysis to examine the experiences of female students at Tribhuvan University. Data were gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs) based on the pre-prepared and tested research question. The In-depth interviews were conducted to those participant who were found suffered from moderate to severe form of sexual harassment. The study focused on female students of Kathmandu valley from various departments and campuses of Tribhuvan University. The target population was Bachelor and Master Degree's female students. Seven focus group discussions and five in-depth interviews were conducted based on the principle of saturation. Written ethical approval was received from the participants and interviews were conducted as qualitative data collection norms. Thematic analysis was

applied throughout the research, from the initial stages to development, refinement, and completion (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016).

Result and Discussion

Experiences of Sexual Harassment and Violence

From the study, findings revealed that sexual harassment is a pervasive issue in the daily lives of female students, manifesting in various forms both on and off campus. Participants reported experiencing physical, verbal, and non-verbal harassment, including instances of sexual assault. Common incidents included unwanted touching of body parts such as breasts, buttocks, and genitalia in crowded areas, receiving inappropriate messages, proposals for romantic relationships, teasing, and even bargaining for academic grades. The experiences described ranged from mild to moderately severe harassment, with a few participants reporting more severe cases. The following are verbatim accounts from participants, illustrating the nature and extent of the harassment they encountered:

A female participant from Dolakha, shared,
"Unwanted pushing, brushing against body parts, and uncomfortable gazing are common occurrences in daily life, especially in public transport and crowded areas. I often feel afraid when traveling on public buses because anything could happen at any time. The harassment increases when we wear loosely fitted or slightly more revealing clothing. Men try to touch us seemingly by accident and continuously stare at certain body parts. This behaviour is not just directed at me; I've noticed it happening to other girls as well" (FGD 1)

This statement underscores the routine nature of physical and non-verbal harassment that

female students endure, particularly in public spaces like transportation. Verbal Harassment and Unwanted Advances was also reported during FGD. A student from Bhojpur described her experience with a faculty member, stating,

"There is one teacher who frequently sends messages to girls, asking them to have snacks together, requesting dates, and expressing romantic interest in some of them, some time he requested to go movie too.(FGD 2).

This account highlights the abuse of power and authority in academic settings, where students may feel compelled to comply with such advances due to the hierarchical nature of the student-teacher relationship.

A student from Nuwakot recounted a harrowing experience,

"A senior from my village once offered me a good job and asked me to meet him at a hotel to discuss it. When I arrived, he attempted to sexually assault me. I started crying, and he eventually left me alone" (FGD 2).

This incident exemplifies how sexual harassment can escalate into sexual assault, with significant psychological trauma for the victim.

Another participant, an unmarried Janajati student from Bhaktapur, reported,

"Around the near of my room, while I go to shop to buy foods and variables , Shopkeepers often try to touch or grab my hand, breast and chick when I'm taking goods from them or paying for my

purchases" So, I have stoped to go that shop.(FGD 3).

This account points to the widespread nature of harassment, which occurs in everyday interactions.

In an in-depth interview, a student from Terathum shared,

"At the office, the head of my department proposed to me for love, dating, and marriage. He would often come close, trying to hug and kiss me, and he pinched my cheek daily. Later we heard that he had behaved that way toward other staff members as well. When we finally shared our experiences in a group, this misconduct was exposed, and other colleagues revealed they were also subjected to similar behavior from him" (IDI 1).

This testimony reveals the persistence of harassment within professional settings, where power dynamics further complicate the ability of victims to report and seek redress.

"Sounding our hostel area is not also safe, at evening many boys and man are walking, bicycle are riding at our campus and hostel areas, while we are returning from market boys and men start to gaging and gesturing to us, and they fallow to us. At that time, we feel scare and unsafe. Many my friends and me have that kinds of experiences at our campus areas.(FGD 2).

Above verbatim represents the situation where Campus field, ways, hostel areas are not also safe to female students where they have to move freely.

These accounts highlight that female students experience various forms of sexual harassment, regardless of their marital status, caste, or geographical location. Harassment occurs in multiple settings, including public transport, educational institutions, workplaces, and public spaces. The study identified public transport, schools, colleges, and streets as particularly vulnerable locations for sexual harassment. The findings of this study align with existing research that underscores the pervasive nature of sexual harassment. For instance, Gyawali et al. (2012) reported that 85% of school-going adolescent girls in Kathmandu Valley had suffered from various forms of sexual harassment. Similarly, Gyawali (2020) found that the prevalence of sexual harassment among female students was 90%. Mishra and Lamichhane (2018) also documented that 79% of students had experienced sexual harassment on public transport in Kathmandu Valley. Furthermore, Thapalia et al. (2019) reported that approximately 76% of female students in Tokha, Kathmandu Valley, had experienced some form of sexual harassment in their lives.

Perceived Preventive Measures Against Sexual Harassment, Exploitation and Violence on Campuses

When participants were asked about potential measures to prevent sexual harassment, a consensus emerged around the necessity for strict laws and their effective enforcement. This was seen as a critical step toward reducing such incidents. In addition to legal frameworks, participants suggested a variety of preventive measures, including mass awareness campaigns, the creation of accessible complaint mechanisms, and fostering societal respect for victims. These suggestions highlight the multifaceted

approach needed to combat sexual harassment on campuses and beyond. The following are verbatim statements from female students on how sexual harassment can be mitigated:

Establishment and enforcement of strict laws was highlighted in FGD. A student from Ramechhap stressed the importance of legal measures, stating,

"There needs to be the establishment of strict and robust laws against sexual harassment, and existing laws should be properly enforced" (FGD 1).

This view reflects a widespread belief that without stringent legal provisions and their rigorous application, efforts to curb harassment will be ineffective.

Another participant, from Makawanpur, emphasized the need for better regulation of public spaces, particularly in transportation. She remarked,

"The number of passengers on public buses should be regulated to prevent overcrowding, as these are the most vulnerable places for sexual harassment. Police surveillance should also be increased on streets and in other public areas" (FGD 4).

This suggestion underscores the importance of environmental and situational factors in preventing harassment. A girl student from Sarlahi highlighted the need for accountability in professional settings, stating,

"If a person in a public office commits sexual harassment, there should be a law in place to ensure they are fired from their job" (FGD 5).

This perspective points to the critical role of workplace policies and the enforcement of consequences for misconduct. Addressing the procedural aspects, girl student from Dhading called for a supportive environment for victims:

"There should be a victim-friendly environment to ensure justice. The complaint and legal processes should be straightforward, free of charge, confidential, and without unnecessary complications. Society should support victims and ostracize the perpetrators" (FGD 4).

This highlights the need for a justice system that is accessible, sensitive to victims' needs, and supportive of those who come forward. Another girl from Dhading emphasized the need for easy and accessible complaint systems within academic institutions and workplaces. She suggested,

"There should be an easy and victim-friendly complaint system, including complaint boxes and a designated focal person at academic institutions and workplaces" (FGD 4).

This underscores the importance of having clear, straightforward channels for reporting harassment. These representative quotes reveal a clear demand for comprehensive measures to combat sexual harassment. The emphasis on legal enforcement, public awareness, victim support, and the regulation of public spaces and workplaces reflects the complexity of addressing this issue. Similarly, Nisbet et al.,(2022) reported that students encouraged universities to create better support programs for these communities more broadly, rather than just those who have experienced sexual harassment and/

or sexual assault in a university context and to increased transparency of reporting processes that have an emphasis on believing victim/survivors' experiences, as well as awareness campaigns about the avenues available to students who wish to report an incident. The participants' insights align with critical theory perspectives, which suggest that sexual harassment often stems from power imbalances (Dekker & Barling, 1998; Gruber, 1992; Tangri, Burt, & Johnson, 1982). To address these power imbalances, it is essential to focus on empowering female students through education, physical fitness, mental health support, and career counseling. Empowering women and girls within educational institutions can help to create a more balanced power dynamic, reducing the incidence of sexual harassment and fostering a safer, more supportive environment. Similarly, strong law and rules and their thorough implementation are essential to combat sexual harassment (Gyawali, 2021, Mishraand & Lamichane , 2018)

Conclusion

The qualitative study conducted at Tribhuvan University reveals that sexual harassment is a pervasive issue affecting female students in various forms, including physical, verbal, and non-verbal harassment. These incidents occur across multiple settings such as public transportation, educational institutions, workplaces, and public spaces. The findings emphasize the need for comprehensive measures to prevent sexual harassment. Participants strongly advocate for the establishment and enforcement of strict laws, better regulation of public spaces, and the creation of victim-friendly reporting mechanisms. They also stress the importance of societal support for victims and increased public awareness. Empowering female students through education, mental

health support, and career counseling might be crucial for addressing these power dynamics and creating safer, more equitable environments. Overall, the study highlights the urgent need for a multifaceted approach to combat sexual harassment, combining legal enforcement, public awareness, and systemic change within institutions.

Acknowledgement

This study was carried out with the partial support of the University Grant Commission, Nepal. The authors gratefully acknowledge the Commission for their financial assistance, which played a crucial role in the successful completion of this research.

Declaration:

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this research article.

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