



Psychological Fallout of Sexual Harassment on Women across Various Social Contexts

Tribhuwon Sharma¹, Mahesh Pokhrel², Roselini Shrestha³, Hricha KC Pandey⁴,
Bhagwan Aryal⁵

¹Graduate School of Education, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal
ORCID: 0009-0000-9466-5510

²Graduate School of Education, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal
ORCID: 0009-0002-4624-3457

³Manmohan Memorial Institute of Health Sciences, Kathmandu, Nepal
ORCID: 0009-0002-1518-7050

⁴Nobel College, Kathmandu, Nepal
ORCID: 0009-0007-3172-8095

⁵Central Department of Education, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal
ORCID: 0000-0002-9215-3551

Corresponding Author: *Bhagwan Aryal*; **Email:** bhagwan.aryal@cded.tu.edu.np

Abstract

Sexual harassment (SH) poses a significant threat to mental health, causing profound emotional distress, particularly among women. Despite legal frameworks, the psychological consequences of SH are inadequately addressed. This study examines the prevalence, manifestations and effects of SH through a structured literature review, using sources such as Google Scholar, PsycINFO and PubMed for articles published after 2018 on the psychological effects of SH. The review process included initial screening based on relevance and quality, methodological evaluation and narrative synthesis. The findings reveal SH's severe psychological impact across various settings, including workplaces, educational institutions and intimate relationships, with consequences like fear, anxiety, shame, depression and confidence erosion. Reluctance to report SH further exacerbates the psychological toll. The study highlights the need for comprehensive strategies, recommending accessible mental health services, educational

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campaigns and stronger policies. Fostering a culture of respect, equality and inclusion can enhance survivors' well-being and create a supportive environment.

Keywords: Effect of sexual harassment, effect on women, mental health, confidence erosion

Introduction

Freedom from harassment is a fundamental human right and a prerequisite for physical, mental and social well-being (Boyer, 2021). Sexual harassment (SH), a relatively new concept, is intricately linked with unwelcome behaviour within both men and women concerning matters of sex. However, sexually suggestive remarks are more likely to be seen as sexual harassment by women (Hehman et al., 2022). Various forms that SH can take are elucidated including verbal, non-verbal, indirect and physical manifestations, each contributing to the multifaceted nature of the psychological fallout (Bendixen et al., 2018). SH survivors go through a wide spectrum of intricate psychological emotions, including anger, despair, remorse, worry and vulnerability (Noopura, 2023).

The experience of psychological fallout due to SH is a complex and pervasive issue that leaves lasting scars on the well-being of its victims. As highlighted by Burn (2019), unwanted comments, gestures, or actions based on gender, gender expression, or sexual orientation result in profound emotional distress, including fear, anxiety, shame, and depression. This psychological toll extends to the erosion of self-esteem and a sense of control, giving rise to trust issues in relationships and broader social interactions.

Sharma et al. (2023) provide valuable insights into the specific context of Tribhuvan University, highlighting how SH, spanning verbal, physical, and cyber realms, amplifies the distressing environment for female students. The normalization of inappropriate behaviours intensifies the impact, leaving victims grappling not only with fear and anxiety but also with compromised self-confidence and overall well-being. This cooperative analysis of referenced information emphasizes the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address the intricate psychological fallout of SH, ensuring a secure and respectful environment in diverse settings.

In the Nepali context, limited studies on SH of female students reveal severe results, such as Mishra and Lamichane (2018) and Gautam et al. (2019), who found around 80% of girls experiencing SH on public transport in the Kathmandu Valley. This collective evidence emphasizes the critical need to address the psychological fallout resulting from SH and implement effective preventive measures in diverse settings. This study highlights the need for further exploration into the psychological impacts of SH on girls and women. Authors provide alarming statistics on global violence against children, indicating that 1 billion children experience some form

of physical, sexual, or emotional violence each year (Devries et al., 2022). Much of this violence occurs in and around schools, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address such issues.

The psychological fallout resulting from SH is a profound and multifaceted issue that significantly impacts the well-being of its victims. As evidenced by research, unwanted behaviors based on gender, gender expression, or sexual orientation can lead to fear, anxiety, shame, and depression, while also eroding self-esteem and trust (Konlan & Dangah, 2023). The normalization of such behaviors exacerbates the distress experienced by victims.

This study delves into the nuanced experiences of individuals who have faced SH, aiming to contribute to a cooperative analysis of the psychological consequences. By shedding light on the intricate dynamics of the emotional aftermath, the article advocates for comprehensive approaches that prioritize both the legal and psychological dimensions, fostering a culture of respect and inclusion. Therefore, this study aims to explore the psychological effects of SH on women by reviewing the literature, analyzing the current understanding of these effects, and elucidating the prevalence, manifestations and effects of SH in various social settings and contexts. Understanding how widespread these effects are is crucial to creating support networks and preventative strategies that work.

Methods and Procedures

We conducted a literature review, in line with a scoping review, using primary sources like Google Scholar, PsycINFO, and PubMed to gather published original studies, systematic reviews, narrative reviews and informative studies. Scoping reviews are crucial for assessing literature scope, determining the need for a systematic review and guiding future research by synthesizing evidence (Smith & Duncan, 2022). Being based on the aim of the research, our search strategy targeted articles published after 2018 and emphasized the psychological effects of SH. Using keywords like “effects of sexual harassment,” “psychological fallouts of SH,” “SH in various settings,” “the impact of harassment on mental health,” and “the psychological effects of SH on women,” several literature searches were conducted. To make sure that the results represent the most recent studies and developments in our understanding of the psychological effects of SH, the review concentrated on literature released after 2018.

Recurring themes and subjects on the psychological effects of SH were identified through the extraction of data. Studies were contrasted to show where findings, approaches and settings were similar and different. To provide a

comprehensive knowledge of the psychological consequences of SH, the synthesized results were interpreted within the larger social, cultural and policy ramifications.

Using keywords, titles, abstracts and headings, the study concentrated on the psychological effects of sexual harassment in a range of social contexts. Citation maps and 'cited by' search tools were used, with unpublished works excluded. Study selection was guided by the researcher's inclusion criteria of only including articles that were peer-reviewed and published after 2018. The study selection was guided by the researcher's inclusion criteria, with initial screening based on title and abstract, followed by a detailed assessment of methodological quality and alignment with the research focus. A desk review approach, employing narrative review methods, facilitated the synthesis of information, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the psychological ramifications of SH. This review started by describing the development of the review question, setting inclusion and exclusion criteria, search strategy, data screening, quality assessment and critically appraising the included studies.

Results

Psychological well-being varied in the case of SH experiences, with depression, anxiety and stress levels ranging from normal to severe. It also differs in intensity and coping according to the type and place of SH.

Intimate Relationships

SH is most prominent within intimate relationships, leading to severe psychological consequences. Tarzia (2021) highlights the complex emotional labor survivors undertake, using coping strategies like self-blame, protective behaviors, and emotional detachment to navigate the trauma of intimate partner sexual violence (IPSV).

Public Transportation

SH in public transportation is a global threat to women's safety. In Bharatpur, Nepal, 82.1% of female students reported experiencing SH, including verbal, physical, and non-verbal forms, with fear of repercussions preventing most from reporting these incidents (Wagle et al., 2022). Similarly, Noopura (2023) found significant SH incidents among college students in Kerala, India, leading to anger and depression. The pervasive SH in public transport in megacities like Karachi and London restricts women's freedom and mobility (Hoor-Ul-Ain, 2020).

Workplaces

SH is prevalent in workplaces, with significant mental health impacts. A systematic review found that 40.8% of female nurses experienced psychological

harassment due to SH, leading to mental and emotional issues (Kahsay et al., 2020). Gale et al. (2019) also reported high rates of workplace abuse among female customer-facing employees, linked to adverse health outcomes. Occupational stressors profoundly affect professionals working with sexual violence survivors, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions (Bozga et al., 2021; Lathan et al., 2021). Not only this, a study reveals that female sex workers in Nepal face a range of forms of violence, including verbal aggression, physical violence, sexual harassment and assault leading to stress and depression (Saud et al., 2024). Whatever the workplace or occupation, the females have to face harassment and psychological stress.

Educational Institutions

SH is a recurrent issue in educational settings. The UNESCO report highlights global SH among students, affecting over 10% in 96 countries (UNESCO, 2019). Faculty and staff reluctance to report SH further complicates the issue (Kirkner et al., 2022). Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020) emphasized the high prevalence of SH among female students and the need for effective preventive measures. Klein and Martin (2021) and Orfan et al. (2022) further illustrate the severity and diverse experiences of SH in higher education.

Virtual Platforms

SH is increasingly prevalent on virtual platforms. George (2024) discusses the severe psychological impact of virtual SH, comparable to real-world trauma, and the need for updated legal frameworks. Virtual reality (VR) simulations show VR's potential as an effective SH training tool (Sadeh-Sharvit et al., 2021). Online SH is normalized within broader gendered power dynamics, emphasizing the need for institutional accountability and educational programs (Rangaswami et al., 2021).

The collective findings from these studies highlight the pervasive nature of sexual violence and harassment among students globally. Faculty and staff reluctance to report instances of harassment further complicates efforts to address this serious issue in higher education. Systematic reviews and surveys reveal a high prevalence of SH among female students, with significant individual impacts and limited effective preventive measures. These findings emphasize the urgent need for more diverse and comprehensive research approaches to combat SH on college campuses. The literature also exposes disparities in experiences based on race, gender, and sexual orientation, with women of color disproportionately affected by severe impacts. Efforts to revise harassment policies and impose sanctions against perpetrators are crucial steps toward effectively addressing this pervasive issue.

On the other hand, SH is increasingly prevalent on virtual platforms, social sites, and the internet as emerging sources and sites for such behavior. George's (2024) research features the profound impact of virtual SH on individuals, highlighting how even in digital environments, the psychological fallout can be severe. Despite the absence of physical contact, victims report experiencing genuine emotional distress comparable to real-world trauma. This suggests that virtual experiences are not devoid of consequences and calls for a reevaluation of therapeutic interventions to support victims of virtual SH effectively. Moreover, the study sheds light on global legal inadequacies in addressing such forms of assault, emphasizing the need for updated legal frameworks to protect individuals in virtual spaces.

In the context of online dating, Filice et al. (2022) explore the potential for technology-facilitated sexual violence, stressing the importance of longitudinal research and qualitative analyses to understand its psychological and social impacts. A study by Sadeh-Sharvit et al. (2021) investigates the use of virtual reality (VR) simulations with virtual agents for SH training. Women participated in a VR job interview scenario where a virtual agent engaged in SH. The findings show that VR induced feelings similar to real-world harassment experiences, evoking fear and uncertainty among participants. VR was seen as an effective training tool for SH prevention, empowering women to practice effective responses to future incidents.

Another research by Rangaswami et al. (2021) reveals that women at universities experience various forms of online SH, which vary across different social media platforms. The study highlights how online harassment is normalized within broader gendered power dynamics and a culture of toxic masculinity on campuses. Respondents emphasize the importance of institutional accountability, educational programmes and community conversations to effectively address this issue (Rangaswami et al., 2021).

These studies highlight the profound psychological impact of virtual SH, demonstrating that virtual experiences can induce emotional distress comparable to real-world trauma. VR simulations for SH training reveal the realistic fear and uncertainty induced by virtual scenarios, underscoring VR's potential as a training tool. Moreover, studies on online SH emphasize the normalization of this behavior within broader gendered power dynamics, highlighting the need for institutional accountability and educational initiatives to address this pervasive issue effectively.

In examining the nuanced experiences of individuals facing SH, the researchers reveal a spectrum of psychological responses and coping mechanisms influenced by the type and context of SH. The studies shed light on the emotional intricacies of IPSV, the intertwining dynamics of power and intimacy facilitating

harassment in various settings and the normalization of online harassment within broader gender dynamics. This body of work underscores the urgent need for multifaceted interventions, institutional accountability, and educational programs to combat SH effectively across diverse environments and platforms. The results underscore the necessity for robust prevention mechanisms, targeted interventions, and support systems to address the diverse needs of SH survivors. Policies should prioritize survivors' voices, challenge prevailing discourses and advocate for structural changes.

Discussion

The comprehensive reviews by Gordon (2018) and Grow (2018) emphasize the pervasive nature of SH, transcending traditional boundaries and affecting individuals across various sectors of society. From intimate relationships to educational institutions, workplaces, transportation, and beyond, the reality of SH permeates multiple facets of daily life. This multidimensional understanding challenges simplistic narratives, as highlighted by Gordon's Foucauldian-Feminist framework, which emphasizes the nuanced experiences of victims and survivors beyond conventional conflict zones. Moreover, Grow's exploration of the ethical and moral dimensions of sex illuminates the complex interplay between physical acts and psychological repercussions. Victims and survivors often confront dissonance between their lived experiences and prevailing societal narratives, exacerbating psychological trauma.

Institutional responses, as noted by Atkinson (2020), frequently perpetuate power dynamics that further undermine survivors' credibility and agency. In this context, it becomes evident that every form of SH, regardless of setting or affiliation, inflicts psychological fallout on its victims, as corroborated by various scholarly perspectives. Therefore, addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by SH necessitates challenging prevailing discourses and advocating for structural changes that prioritize survivors' voices and safety.

The pervasive nature of SH transcends boundaries of place and occupation, necessitating robust prevention mechanisms. Research has illuminated the specific impacts of sexual violence on various populations, shedding light on the unique challenges faced by women veterans and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) individuals (Atkinson, 2020). For instance, studies by Dichter et al. (2018) uncovered significant effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual assault on women veterans' military careers and decision-making processes, underscoring the need for comprehensive prevention and support programs tailored to this population. Similarly, Campbell (2021) delves into the impact of sexual violence on relationship satisfaction within the LGBTQ community,

offering valuable insights into coping strategies and relational processes with direct implications for clinical practice. These findings underscore the urgency of addressing SH across diverse contexts and populations, highlighting the imperative for targeted interventions to mitigate its profound impact.

Several studies have investigated the psychological fallout resulting from various forms of SH and violence, emphasizing the critical need for tailored support mechanisms and interventions to address the diverse needs of survivors. Despite Nepal's commendable legal framework against SH, as acknowledged by Sharma et al. (2024), the persistent concern regarding the psychological fallout on survivors underscores the importance of moving beyond legal measures.

Specialist sexual violence services, notably Independent Sexual Violence Advisers, play a crucial role in supporting victims through the complexities of the criminal justice system (Hester & Lilley, 2018). These services provide adaptive, empowering, and healing approaches, which stand in contrast to the limitations often encountered in non-specialist agencies. However, the continued existence of these vital services is threatened by current local service commissioning practices. Understanding the psychological fallout from SH within intimate relationships, particularly in the context of IPSV, is paramount (Tarzia, 2021). By acknowledging the specific challenges faced by victims in intimate settings, and the unique dynamics of IPSV, interventions, and support services can be tailored effectively to address the psychological impact and promote healing and empowerment.

Adolescent schoolgirls in Nepal face frequent harassment from male peers, teachers, neighbors, and strangers, especially on public transport. This bullying poses a threat to their physical and mental health, affecting their daily lifestyle and performance (Dangal & Singh, 2020). To combat sexual harassment and protect girls, awareness programs, strong legal measures, and victim-friendly judicial processes are needed. Emotional work and power dynamics contribute to perpetuating harassment, necessitating urgent action for safer environments.

SH is a pervasive problem that affects many facets of society, such as personal relationships, employment, education, and transportation. It harms victims psychologically, thus specific interventions are needed to promote safety and empowerment. These interventions should prioritize the voices of survivors, question dominant narratives, and push for systemic changes. The thorough evaluations emphasize the need for systemic change, a sophisticated understanding of SH, strong preventative strategies, and focused support interventions. They also stress the psychological impact on a variety of populations. However, the study's limitations

include possible biases in the literature selection, the review's scope and its geographic focus may have an impact on how broadly the findings may be applied, highlighting the necessity of more research in a variety of settings.

Conclusion

A synthesis of the literature emphasizes the profound and varied psychological consequences experienced by victims of SH. It is evident even without a systematic review that women suffer psychological fallout from sexual harassment in all social situations. From disturbing statistics highlighting high prevalence rates among vulnerable populations such as nurses, students, and female veterans to nuanced explorations of coping mechanisms in intimate relationships, the impact of harassment on mental health is undeniable. Additionally, reluctance to report incidents of harassment further compounds the psychological toll. Addressing the psychological consequences of SH is as important as implementing legal remedies. Therefore, urgent steps are needed to develop comprehensive support systems and prevention programs that prioritize the voice, safety, and agency of survivors. By fostering a culture of respect, equality, and inclusion, society can create an environment that prioritizes the mental health and well-being of survivors, ultimately contributing to a more supportive and empathetic community.

Particular gaps found in this study should be addressed in future research. To comprehend the long-term psychological effects of SH and the efficacy of therapies over time, longitudinal studies are required. To investigate how SH impacts people differently depending on their race, sexual orientation, and other intersecting identities, intersectional analysis is crucial. An important way to assess the success of interventions is to look at how well different prevention programs and support networks work in diverse social circumstances. It's also critical to look into the obstacles to reporting SH and create plans to motivate victims to come forward. By filling in these gaps, researchers may offer a more thorough understanding of the psychological effects of SH and contribute to the creation of efficient, empirically supported solutions and policies.

Authors' Contributions

TS initiated and led the conceptualization and drafting of the article. Collaboratively, MP, RS, HKP, BA, and TS conducted an extensive literature review and engaged in critical discourse. Additionally, BA supervised the review process, provided substantial support in the editing phase, and managed correspondence related to publication procedures. The ultimate version for publication is approved by all authors.

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