Sexual Harassment in Female Students at Tribhuvan University: A Narrative Inquiry Research

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Abstract

Background: Higher education establishments in Nepal also disclose information on sexual harassment incidents. Sexual harassment is a detrimental encroachment onto the educational domain that extends beyond scholarly discussions. It is an undesirable, offensive, and frequently menacing behaviour that jeopardises a student's well-being.

Objectives: This study examines the experiences of female students at Tribhuvan University regarding sexual harassment in the classroom. It aims to assess the prevalence of sexual harassment and identify its various forms among female students.

Methods: Adopting a qualitative narrative inquiry research design, we included teachers and students from the Central Department of Education, with information collected from selected female students until data saturation was reached. In-depth interviews were used as the primary data collection method, and both primary and secondary sources were qualitatively and descriptively analysed.

Results: The findings reveal a disturbing reality where female students at Tribhuvan University faced sexual harassment from their classmates, teachers, and university staff. The study identifies three primary forms of sexual harassment: verbal, physical, and cyber sexual harassment. Cybersexual harassment emerges as the most prevalent form, significantly impacting the physical and mental well-being of the affected students.

Conclusion: Sexual harassment occurs in Nepalese higher education institutions, although it is less common among female students who are able to voice their concerns in an articulate and natural way. Those who feel intimidated struggle to voice their opinions or live in fear of facing a higher risk. The detrimental effect of this type of sexual harassment on the personality development of female students is emphasised.

Keywords: Girl student, Sexual harassment, Tribhuvan University, Forms of sexual harassment

Introduction

In the revered halls of Tribhuvan University (TU), where knowledge is meant to shine as a guiding light, an unsettling shadow darkens the experiences of female students. Recent revelations expose a troubling trend of sexual harassment, staining the sanctity of education within the Central Department of Education. This study embarks on a journey to unravel the complex landscape of sexual harassment, shining a light on the distressing encounters faced by female students during thesis writing and classroom interactions, specifically at TU. Sexual harassment in universities is a global issue with varying cultural perspectives. In the US, 23% of female students report harassment (Krebs et al., 2016). In India, societal norms hinder reporting (Sinha, 2019). Despite strict measures, Scandinavian countries face challenges (Sondergaard, 2018). So, on this sensitive topic, a comprehensive global approach is essential.

Sexual harassment, as defined by Burn (2019), is a harmful intrusion into the educational sphere that goes beyond academic discourse. It shows up as unwelcome, objectionable, and often threatening behaviour undermining a student's well-being. This includes lewd comments, gestures, unwanted physical proximity, or groping. Verbal activities such as whistling, making sexual remarks and other offensive behaviours fall under this categorisation. This study seeks to explore the nuances of these distressing encounters, examining the intentional, unwanted, and coercive nature of the harassment faced by female students at TU. Peer-to-peer sexual harassment emerges as the most common form in the college space, followed by faculty-to-student harassment (Hill & Silva, 2005). Harassment by peers from the same college can be especially traumatic due to the high hierarchical power they hold, adding complexity to victims' experiences and highlighting the need to address power dynamics in educational institutions.

Motivated by the urgent need to address this pervasive issue, this research aims to uncover the different forms of sexual harassment experienced by female students at TU. The driving force behind this inquiry lies in the profound impact such harassment can have on students' mental, physical, and academic well-being, as shown by past studies (Jordan et al., 2014; Kaura & Lohman, 2007). A hostile academic environment emerges as an unwelcome byproduct fueled by unsolicited propositions from peers or figures of higher authority (Konlan & Dangah, 2023). Physical actions, like approaching or holding someone closely, especially women, contribute to the spectrum of sexual harassment, which can be intentional, unwanted, or coercive (UN-Women-Harassment-Sexual-Harassment-Discrimination-and-Abuse-of-Authority-Policy-En.pdf, n.d.). Our study, like others, recognises the need to address the issue within a broader social framework. Feminism, a socio-political movement seeking to eliminate gender-based inequalities, aligns with our study by acknowledging the gendered nature of sexual harassment and the importance of dismantling patriarchal structures in educational institutions.

Our study takes a critical stance, asserting that sexual harassment is not merely a collection of isolated incidents but a systemic issue deeply embedded within the power dynamics of academia. Focusing on the experiences of female students at TU, we aim to demonstrate that sexual harassment is a pervasive challenge extending beyond personal interactions and into the very fabric of the academic environment. However, this study does not simply echo the findings of its predecessors; it stands as a unique contribution to the existing body of knowledge, offering fresh insights into the dynamics of sexual harassment within the distinctive context of Tribhuvan University. By concentrating on the Central Department of Education, our study aims to fill the gaps left by previous studies, providing a nuanced understanding of the experiences encountered by female students at TU.

Methods

The study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design to delve into the sexual harassment experiences of female students at Tribhuvan University. Focusing on fourth-semester

female students from the Central Department of Education, the research utilises purposive sampling to select four participants, considering diverse characteristics such as geographical background, university activism, and student leadership. In-depth interviews were conducted in a natural environment to gather information. The sample size was determined until information saturation was achieved, ensuring comprehensive coverage of relevant perspectives. The study period was considerable, with a well-justified duration for information collection. The narrative inquiry study design was employed to capture the nuanced experiences of sexual harassment. We followed suit as, as a rule, narrative inquiry records the experiences of an individual or small group utilising recorded interviews that reveal their lived experience or distinctive viewpoint and are then organised into a sequential story (Wells, 2011). The study methodology was appropriately constructed, timely, and relevant to the study's objectives. The study not only elucidated the types of sexual harassment experienced by female students at TU but also provided insights into the global context of this issue, highlighting its prevalence and impact worldwide.

Results and Discussion

This section provides a comprehensive understanding of sexual harassment experienced by female students at Tribhuvan University, revealing three major themes: experience of verbal, physical, and cyber sexual harassment. These real-life experiences highlight the terrifying nature of the sexual harassment that female students face at TU.

Experience of Sexual Harassment

Good relationships matter in college, but hurtful comments from friends and a professor often shook female students' confidence. Despite the struggles, many girls feel the same.

> "Poor evaluation of good relationships with my peers, I felt sexually harassed at university by comments from friends and professors that negatively questioned my personality." (A female student from an urban area)

Positive peer relationships significantly impact an individual's college adjustment, helping them to adapt to a new academic and social environment (Arnett, 2019). However, unbalanced peer dynamics can lead to negative outcomes. Unwanted advances dim the shine of growing friendships, reflecting a concerning trend of harassment among university students. Unwanted advances dim the shine of connectivity's rise, reflecting a concerning trend of online harassment among university students. Addressing the issue of sexual harassment in universities is crucial for fostering a safe and supportive environment for all students. Sexual harassment can manifest in various forms, including verbal comments that negatively impact a student's confidence and well-being. This issue is not confined to a specific region; it is a global concern affecting students worldwide. Different cultural contexts may influence the prevalence and perception of sexual harassment, but the fundamental impact on victims is universal. A girl expressed her social media use struggle as follows:

> "I have experienced sexual harassment through social media. I've encountered problems with frequent unnecessary written messages, trying to get the attention of boyfriends on specific topics rather than the required ones. This type of problem made me feel sexually harassed." (A female student from a rural area)

The booming growth of social media has significantly impacted people's use of various platforms. While it has broken communication barriers, it has also facilitated online bullying, lewd comments, and coercive behaviour, including inappropriate sexual advances (Muqoddam & Maghfiroh, 2019). The impact of social media on individuals is that it has increased the prevalence of online sexual harassment, leading to negative psychological effects and distress. The impact, which is not limited to the university, underscores the global nature of the issue, highlighting how the rapid expansion of social media has created new avenues for inappropriate behaviour, including sexual harassment.

Societies worldwide need to develop comprehensive strategies to address online harassment, ensuring the digital space remains safe and respectful for all users.

Luck favoured her with a harassment-free university journey. But in celebrating their fortune, let's not lose sight of the wider landscape. One of the female student leaders said:

> "Fortunately, I did not experience any form of sexual harassment during my university studies because if I have any problem, I can react immediately."

The student leader's comment highlights her fortunate, harassment-free university experience. Various parts of the world have diverse perspectives on this problem. Some societies actively address and condemn such behaviour, while others may downplay or ignore it, contributing to a complex global landscape of attitudes and responses to sexual harassment. According to Gyawali (2020), awareness programs, strong laws, and self-motivated and victim-friendly judicial processes were recommended to address this problem. In a positive light, cases of not having experienced any form of sexual harassment were also observed, which, if taken at face value, is a pleasant thing but overlooks the other sexual harassment cases.

Because of unwanted professorial advances, students have decided that it is time to break the silence and end harassment. One of the students shared her experience:

> "I was sexually harassed at Tribhuvan University, and the medium was social media. Because of my relationship with the university, I was sexually harassed on social media based on that relationship. Unfortunately, it was my professor who persecuted me."

Another student adds:

> "I get a lot of irrelevant proposals from my professor, such as increasing the marks of internal exams."

This response highlights instances of sexual harassment within educational institutions, specifically involving professors and students on social media. This issue is not isolated and has been observed globally. The power dynamic inherent in student-teacher relationships can lead to uncomfortable situations. Social media has been a recurring platform for sexual harassment, particularly in the context of college mentors and professors engaging in inappropriate behaviour with students (Bloom et al., 2021).

Creating a safe environment requires us to challenge abusive behaviour and empower victims to speak out against sexual harassment. One of the girls mentioned:

> "As long as you don't use abusive language and you can't create fear in a boy who is sexually abusive, sexual harassment will continue to happen to you." (A female student from an urban area).

As per Brown and Salomon (2019), many reports say that not knowing what to do or even how to interpret the interaction creates barriers to the empowerment of women and girls. Unless and until the perpetrators are silenced either through verbal or physical action, the known and unknown cases of harassment will continue to persist.

Despite the expectation that teachers serve as positive role models, the persistent issue of sexual harassment in university settings disrupts this ideal. Both in-person and online, students face inappropriate behaviours that harm their well-being and set a regrettable example, even for male peers. Unbalanced peer relationships and power dynamics with mentors contribute to uncomfortable situations, exacerbating the problem. As Aryal (2022) emphasises the influence of teachers as role models, addressing sexual harassment necessitates a global commitment to comprehensive strategies, including awareness programs and strong legal frameworks. It is imperative to foster environments where positive peer relationships prevail, ensuring students can navigate university life without compromising their well-being and self-esteem.

Verbal Sexual Harassment

The verbal sexual harassment that female students are experiencing in the university is disturbing to the mind, troubling in studies, and creating a fear of judgment.

> "I experienced difficulty making friends and communicating openly at my current college. In my earlier experiences, I used to talk, laugh, and play with friends, but others, including the teachers here, perceived these activities negatively. I am afraid to talk to boys from other sections for fear of being judged and facing gossip about me." (A female student from an urban area).

According to Rolfe (2020), the first form of sexual harassment is verbal harassment. Verbal sexual harassment, including jokes, sexual comments, and negative name-calling, is prevalent in college spaces, even among friends, and can escalate to other forms of harassment. Verbal sexual harassment refers to any unpleasant and offensive sexual comments, jokes, or negative name-calling directed at someone based on their gender or sexual orientation.

Classmates' hurtful words cut deeper than those from others, highlighting the need to challenge harmful 'jokes' and create a safer environment.

> "I have experienced more verbal sexual harassment from my classmates than from other section's friends at the university." (A female student from an urban area).

Since verbal abuse is more likely to be done by the friends due to the comfort zone shared, they are more likely to defend their act by trying to act cool and tell the individual to take the abuse as a "joke" or "silly humour" (Lichty & Campbell, 2012). Similarly, (Hill & Kearl, 2011) state that verbal harassment, such as inappropriate comments and jokes, was the most common, but physical and electronic harassment also occurred, which harmed students' sense of security. It means the tendency for friends to engage in verbal abuse is fueled by the familiarity of their comfort zone, leading them to justify their actions as mere jokes or harmless humour.

Friends' inappropriate talk made the girls feel sexually harassed, emphasising the need for respectful conversations. A girl unveiled:

> "I feel sexually harassed when my friends used to add unnecessary relationships during conversations. The names of such relationships were *sali, mayalu, maiya, priya, kali, dalli, soltini, etc.*" (A female student from a rural area).

Sexual harassment manifests in various forms, including verbal abuse, as highlighted by the girl's experience with inappropriate language. This issue is not confined to a specific region but is prevalent worldwide. Cultural norms and attitudes towards relationships can influence the perception of such behaviour, leading to confusion among teachers, as noted by Mukasa (1999). Addressing and raising awareness about respectful conversations is crucial to bridge these cultural gaps and promote a safe environment for everyone. Women's empowerment is mixed with an inspiring tale of a student:

> "During my university studies, I didn't experience verbal sexual harassment." (A female student as a student leader)

The absence of verbal sexual harassment in one student's university experience is positive but does not negate the broader issue highlighted by Evans et al. (2019). Their emphasis on institutional leadership aligns with the need for a proactive approach to address harassment and promote gender equality. The student's positive experience emphasises the importance of fostering a culture that supports women's leadership aspirations while acknowledging the persistent need for broader systemic changes to ensure a safe and empowering environment for all.

One of the girl's experiences highlights the importance of tackling harassment in education, leaving a lasting impact, as she reveals in her history:

> "I experienced verbal sexual harassment from professors rather than peers during my university studies. Professors used vague words, such as commenting on my physical fitness and making

me nervous."

The firsthand account of verbal sexual harassment from professors during university studies underscores the pervasive nature of the issue. Huang's (2021) observation aligns with this experience, emphasising that such harassment can extend to intimate relationships and manifest in inappropriate remarks from teachers. The statement also highlights a concerning pattern where harassers are often individuals known to the victim, complicating the dynamics and potentially leading to a continued association with the perpetrator. This reinforces the need for comprehensive measures to address sexual harassment within educational institutions and beyond, emphasising the importance of breaking cycles of harassment for the empowerment of women and girls.

Sexual harassment, especially verbal abuse, is a pervasive issue in universities globally, as highlighted by the distressing experiences of female students. Verbal sexual harassment can include using derogatory language, inappropriate jokes, and negative name-calling. Cultural norms further complicate the issue, influencing the perception of such behaviour. While some students may report positive experiences, the broader problem persists, with instances involving even professors. These responses stress the urgent need for a comprehensive and proactive approach to address sexual harassment in educational institutions. Fostering a culture of respect and awareness, regardless of cultural differences, is crucial, necessitating systemic changes to ensure a safe and empowering environment for all. These experiences underline that sexual harassment is a global concern, demanding a collective commitment to breaking cycles of harassment and promoting gender equality.

Physical Sexual Harassment

As we move towards exploring the situation of physical and sexual harassment, even if direct groping or sexual advances have not been observed, experiences of uncomfortable touch have been far too common, unharmed but unsettling shadows. A female student's comments on her physical discomfort were found as follows:

> "I have never experienced direct physical sexual harassment, and if they did, I would react immediately. However, there were moments when some of the boy's friends seemed to try to do inappropriate things like touching my shoulder, holding my hand, or slapping me on the back while sitting on the bench. These actions seemed normal to me because of our high social status." (A female student from an urban area).

The student's narrative sheds light on normalising inappropriate behaviours in adolescent relationships, emphasising the need to challenge such attitudes for a safe environment. Sexual harassment, spanning from subtle actions to explicit offences, is a global concern. Cultural, societal, and economic factors influence its prevalence and response strategies. Sweeting et al. (2022) argue for addressing and challenging normalised behaviours among adolescents to foster respect. The thin boundary between mutual expression of love and abuse underscores the complexity of navigating relationships during adolescence. Regarding this, a student said:

> "I think girls have as much to do with physical, sexual harassment at university as boys do. I think when a girlfriend gets closer to a boyfriend, spends a lot of time with him, then only physical, sexual harassment happens to the girl in the university" (A female student from an urban area).

Sexual harassment affects females globally, and one example of this can be seen at Tribhuvan University. It's not just about proximity or time spent together. Effectively combating this pervasive issue requires acknowledging diverse experiences and promoting respect and equality. In this context, sexual harassment is a global issue and is commonly experienced by girls and women around the world (Rai, 2017). As a result, argue that Women face unequal barriers in education. It refers to gender discrimination, which causes an assessment of education for females (Rosenthal et al., 2016).

Stuttering the horror story, one of the students expressed her suffering from her professor as follows:

> "While studying at Tribhuvan University, I was physically and mentally abused not by friends but by teachers. The teachers tried to take advantage of my marital relationship by making secret comments and tried to touch me under the pretext of teaching. He tried to touch my body, saying you are mature."

The issue of physical and sexual harassment demands urgent attention, revealing the normalisation of inappropriate behaviours, particularly among adolescents and university students. Tribhuvan University's case reflects the broader global challenge women face in education. Arya (2019) defines physical and sexual harassment as unwelcome sexual behaviour that creates discomfort for victims. Urgent action is crucial, emphasising the need for comprehensive strategies and a collaborative global approach to promote respect, challenge normalised behaviours, and ensure the well-being of all individuals.

Cyber Sexual Harassment

Cyber sexual harassment faced by University girls is growing up in different environments, in her cruel words, those tough encounters:

> "During my university studies, I did not face the problem of cyber sexual harassment from professors, perhaps because of fear of privacy. But under the pretext of helping the university staff, I felt like cyber sexual harassment, as if they offered to give me a phone number, meet, have lunch, and so on." (A female student from an urban area).

With technological advancement, the forms of sexual abuse have also transcended their boundaries from verbal and physical to cyber bullying, stalking, flirting online, hacking, and other forms of damaging communication (Kuklyte, 2018). Cyber-aggressive behaviour from male counterparts can be seen in the form of bombarding girls with a barrage of unwanted messages, resulting in social and emotional distress.

Another girl, feeling difficulties in social media-related university, says:

> "Even though I don't use social media much, I have faced sexual harassment through social media. Boyfriends (classmates) use the pretext of marriage to sexually abuse us. I have faced problems like repetitive words and negative themes. Conversations with boyfriends felt more oppressive than with close friends. Unwanted calls on social media took a mental toll. The use of vague words increased the harassment, especially from university friends, I felt very hurt." (A female student from a rural area).

Cybersexual harassment is a pervasive global issue, as defined by Raj (2019) as the use of digital mediums for sexually aggressive or harassing messages. The nature and response to this problem vary worldwide. Cybersexual harassment is unique compared to in-person experiences of sexual harassment in that offenders can more easily target victims across geographic barriers, can reach multiple victims at once, can be more difficult to regulate, and can potentially retain their anonymity.

One of the girl's stories sheds light on the distress faced by many. She recounted the moment of her rescue:

> "I received messages from my professor, like meet me; I like you, you are beautiful, etc., repeating the same thing over and over again. I had to bring my social media messages as even the normal response could not control such actions. When I remember this moment, my body still trembles with fear. As I was a little more mature than my classmates, I was able to move forward with restraint even in such a situation." (A sexually harassed female student)

Reed (2020) defines cybersexual harassment as a form of sexually aggressive or harassing content sent through digital platforms. It differs from in-person harassment as it can cross geographic boundaries, target multiple victims simultaneously, evade regulation, and allow offenders to remain anonymous.

Cybersexual harassment is a distressing and prevalent issue faced by female university students across various environments. It involves the use of digital platforms to deliver sexually aggressive or harassing content, often causing social and emotional distress.

Conclusions and Implications

The culmination of this study sheds light on the pervasive nature of sexual harassment experienced by female students at Tribhuvan University, emphasising three major themes: verbal, physical, and cyber harassment. These experiences underscore the urgent need for comprehensive attention to address this issue effectively.

Verbal sexual harassment emerges as a significant concern, as female students report negative comments, jokes, and name-calling that substantially impact their confidence and well-being. The normalisation of inappropriate language within peer relationships and even from professors indicates a systemic issue requiring a proactive approach. Physical sexual harassment, though not necessarily involving direct groping or advances, remains distressingly common. The normalisation of inappropriate touch within adolescent relationships and the power dynamics in university settings contribute to a challenging environment for female students. Urgent action is needed to challenge normalised behaviours and ensure the safety and well-being of all individuals. The emergence of cybersexual harassment adds a new dimension to the problem, with female students facing unwanted advances, lewd comments, and coercive behaviour online. The anonymity provided by digital platforms amplifies the distress faced by victims. Addressing this issue requires comprehensive strategies to regulate online behaviour and ensure a safe digital space for all users.

These findings align with previous research on sexual harassment in educational institutions globally, supporting the existing body of knowledge on the prevalence of verbal, physical, and cyber harassment. Briefly, the significance of this study lies in its revelation of the pervasive and varied nature of sexual harassment at Tribhuvan University. The urgent need for proactive measures is evident, with a focus on addressing verbal, physical, and cyber harassment comprehensively. While the study contributes to existing knowledge, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. The complexity of these issues requires ongoing research and a commitment to fostering a safe and respectful academic environment for all. This study serves as a catalyst for change, emphasising the imperative of concerted efforts to eradicate sexual harassment from educational institutions.

Declaration

Conflicts of Interest

None.

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Authors' Contributions

TS conducted the fieldwork and conceptualised and drafted the article. BA supported the editing of the article and corresponded with the publication procedures. BA, BP, and HKP conducted additional literature reviews and supported finalising the article. All authors provide final approval of the version to be published.

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