

Research Paper

“It was just a Touch”: Perspectives of Adolescents on Sexual Harassment in India

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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment remains a pervasive global issue, varying in prevalence across countries. In India, it's particularly challenging due to cultural norms and lack of awareness, leading to high incidence of cases in public and private spaces which negatively impacts individuals' overall well-being (Gupta and Kishore, 2019). A Journal of Gender Studies research highlighted unreported cases due to fear, stigma, and inadequate support (Jones et al., 2021). Cultural norms, gender inequality, and awareness gaps deter reporting and hence creating an empowered environment is crucial to encourage survivors to speak out against harassment. This study aimed to explore the youth's perceptions on prevalence and motivations for sexual harassment. Focus group discussion (n=9) was conducted to gain insights regarding the perceived dispositional and societal antecedents to sexual aggression as well as the consequences of victim blaming. The data was analysed using thematic analysis. The emergent themes ranged from fear for the safety of self, shifting of blame to other factors and the consequences of it. In conclusion, the consequences and the broader impact of such views held on an individual level are discussed.

Keywords: *Sexual aggression, Shifting blame, Victim-blaming, Cultural Norms, Lack of Awareness, Sexual harassment, Perceptions*

Understanding the reasoning of violence critically paves the way for policy-makers, service providers, and community activists to build mechanisms and interventions to prevent such acts of violence against women. In today's society, there exists a plethora of media platforms, academic resources, scholarly investigations, and public initiatives that centre around the concept of "intimate intrusions" (Stanko, 1985). It is difficult to fathom that a mere four decades ago, instances of male-perpetrated violence against females within the confines of private spaces remained concealed and unrecognised. Gendered violence went unrecognised by family therapists, scholars, and academic publications until the feminist movement of the 1970s when sexual harassment of women by men first got widespread notice and became a topic of public discussion.

The feminist movement from the West has spread to parts of India's cities, but it has not had a significant effect on the nation's rural residents (DeKeseredy, 2011). Unrestricted servitude

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“It was just a Touch”: Perspectives of Adolescents on Sexual Harassment in India

of women to men was prescribed by the ancient Indian sage Manu in his system of laws known as the Manusmriti, and examples of this subservience may be easily found in contemporary India, particularly in the rural hinterland (Patwari & H. N., 2011). Women are not treated equally to males throughout most of the world, but in societies like India, which are dominated by tradition and illiteracy, this inequality is greater than it is in developed nations.

The prevalence of gender bias against females is found in many areas of life and endeavor, such as rape (e.g., Kanekar, Pinto, & Mazumdar, 1985; Kanekar & Vaz, 1988), dowry and wife-beating (Vaz & Kanekar, 1990), and occupational prestige and achievement (Almeida & Kanekar, 1989; Kanekar, Kolsawalla, & Nazareth, 1989).

A worldwide phenomenon (Barak, 1997), it has been thoroughly investigated in recent decades in terms of prevalence, correlates, individual and organisational outcomes, and prevention; the range of studies provides an interdisciplinary perspective covering psychological, sociological, medical, legal, and educational aspects of the phenomenon. Sexual harassment potentially associates to any human being; however, in fact, most victims are women (Gruber, 1997; Paludi & Paludi, 2003); other target populations—men, homosexuals, and children—are sexually harassed, too, although to a lesser degree.

In India, sexual harassment of women is a pervasive issue that affects all levels of society. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), in 2019, 88,767 cases of crimes against women were registered under the Indian Penal Code (IPC), of which 7,026 cases were of sexual harassment. In addition, a survey conducted by the National Commission for Women (NCW) in 2018 found that 34% of the respondents had faced sexual harassment in the workplace, and 44% had experienced harassment in public places. The problem is again not limited to a specific region or age group, as incidents have been reported from across the country and involving women of different ages. These figures, however, likely represent only a fraction of the actual incidents that occur, as many cases go unreported due to fear of retaliation or stigma.

Women in India face sexual harassment in many forms, including catcalling, groping, stalking, and rape. Such incidents can occur in public spaces, on public transportation, at the workplace, and even within the home. This widespread issue has prompted the Indian government to introduce measures such as the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013, to protect women from such abuse.

Despite the existence of laws such as the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013, many women remain unaware of their rights or hesitate to report incidents due to the absence of effective implementation mechanisms. Hence the need for greater awareness, stronger laws, and a more responsive institutional framework to tackle sexual harassment as well as changing cultural attitudes towards women and creating a safer environment for them to live and work in remains a pressing concern in India.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The first generation of research on sexual harassment concentrated mainly upon (1) evaluating interpretation/definition challenges (e.g., Cohen & Gutek, 1985; Gutek, Morasch, & Cohen, 1983; Kenig & Ryan, 1986; Pryor, 1985; Reilly, Carpenter, Dull, & Bartlett, 1982) and (2) determining the prevalence of potentially sexually harassing actions [e.g.,

“It was just a Touch”: Perspectives of Adolescents on Sexual Harassment in India

Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Gutek, 1981; Martindale, 1990; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (USMSPB), 1981, 1988].

Certain academic fields, particularly those in the social sciences that focus on human behavior, have made sexual harassment a topic of study. The idea of norms and normalising behaviour, which are concepts in Ahmed's theory, are relevant to the field of social psychology. Despite sexual harassment being an issue within the academic psychology community (Rosenthal, Smidt, & Freyd, 2016), it has also been used as a subject of investigation. Through combining perspectives on sexual harassment as a method, object, and lived experience, we provide a partial history of social psychology's masculinist scientific culture (Haraway, 1997) and its attendant consequences.

The broadly accepted tripartite model of sexual harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1997) identifies three behavioral facets: gender harassment, undesirable sexual attention, and sexual coercion. These three subtypes show stability across time, culture, and occupational sector (Holland & Cortina, 2016).

Gender harassment pertains to indecent sexual verbal or nonverbal actions that express disrespectful, hostile, or humiliating attitudes towards an individual's gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity. It encompasses various forms, such as exhibiting sexually explicit images or objects at the workplace, making obscene sexual gestures, sending sexual images through text or email to a colleague, and other related behaviours. Inappropriate or offensive comments, jokes, or language that exhibit sexism or heterosexism are also included in this category (Burn, 2018).

Unwelcome sexual attention pertains to behaviours that include making comments, both positive and negative, regarding an individual's body, engaging in leering or catcalling, spreading sexual rumors, and electronically sharing sexualized images of someone without their consent. It also encompasses unwanted sexual touching, such as grabbing, pinching, groping, or intentionally brushing up against someone in a sexual manner. Following someone in a sexual manner, blocking their path, or making unsolicited and unwelcome sexual advances like repeated requests for sex, a date, or a kiss, are all considered unwanted sexual attention. Finally, attempted or completed rape is also a form of unwanted sexual attention (Burn, 2018).

Sexual coercion, legally known as *quid pro quo* sexual harassment, refers to a situation where an individual is required to engage in sexual contact or favors in exchange for rewards or benefits, such as employment, a promotion, favorable working conditions, assistance, or a good performance evaluation or grade. While sexual coercion is the most severe and least prevalent form of sexual harassment, other forms of sexual harassment may also have a detrimental effect on an individual's well-being due to the ongoing stress and trauma they may cause, despite being less intense but more frequent (Sojo et al., 2016; Thurston et al., 2017).

When sexual harassment diminishes, dehumanizes, and disempowers its targets, emotional and physical stress and stress-related mental and physical illnesses, including post-traumatic stress disorder, may result (Buchanan, Settles, Wu, & Hayashino, 2018; Chan, Lam, Chow, & Cheung, 2008; Friborg et al., 2017; Larsen & Fitzgerald, 2011; Nielson & Einarsen, 2012; Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007). Sexual harassment is also a risk factor for weight/shape concerns, negative body image, and disordered eating (Buchanan, Bluestein, Nappa, Woods,

“It was just a Touch”: Perspectives of Adolescents on Sexual Harassment in India

& Depatie, 2013) and can reduce targets' sense of safety (Donnelly & Calogero, 2018). Concern about sexual harassment is consistent with the social justice goals of psychology, as it is often a symptom and a cause of gender and other social inequalities (McLaughlin et al., 2017).

Surveys have consistently demonstrated that the vast majority of sexual harassment perpetrators are men and that the vast majority of victims are women (Gutek, 1985; Martindale, 1990; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981, 1988).

Although it may seem contradictory, certain scholars suggest that women's fear of crime is, in fact, a fear of sexual crime (Hsu 2011), of which women are more frequently victimised by sexual crimes, which are often significantly underreported. Women's fear of crime may vary based on their ethnicity, race, and socio-economic status, with those living in socio-economically deprived areas being particularly susceptible to high levels of fear (Lynch and Atkins 1988; Johnson 2005; Yavuz and Welch 2010; Loukaitou-Sideris 2014).

Tangri, Burt, and Johnson (1982) also suggested three possible explanatory models of sexual harassment: a natural/biological model, an organizational model, and a sociocultural model.

According to the natural/biological model, sexual harassment is a result of men's innate drive to be sexually aggressive. On the other hand, the organizational model proposes that hierarchical structures within organizations provide opportunities for exploitation, including sexual harassment, of subordinates. In contemporary society, men typically hold positions of power in organisational hierarchies, while women are more likely to be in subordinate roles, making men more likely to be harassers and women more likely to be harassed. However, as more women progress to higher positions within organisations, we may see an increase in the rates of women harassing men. Finally, the sociocultural model suggests that sexual harassment is a reflection of the larger patriarchal system (Pryor, 1993).

Along with this, gender disparities in attitudes toward and perceptions of sexual harassment have been the subject of a significant amount of literature, with women perceiving a broader range of behaviors as harassing (DeJucibus & McCabe, 2001; Rotundo, Nguyen, & Sackett, 2001) than do men. Yet, there is some debate about the extent of these gender differences (Blumenthal, 1998; Gutek & O'Connor, 1995; Hurt, Wiener, Russell, & Mannen, 1999).

In a study by Reilly, Lott, and Gallogly (1986), it was discovered that younger individuals were more accepting of sexual harassment compared to older individuals. However, Ford and Donis (1996) found that younger women were the least accepting of sexual harassment, whereas younger men were the most accepting. Ford and Donis also noted that women's acceptance of sexual harassment increased gradually with age until they reached 50 years old, after which it decreased again.

Researchers have generally concluded that men are more tolerant of sexual harassment than women (e.g., Foulis & McCabe, 1997; Jones & Remland, 1992; Mazer & Percival, 1989; Menon & Kanekar, 1992; Russell & Trigg, 2004; Saperstein, Triolo, & Heinzen, 1995; Smirles, 2004; Williams, Brown, Lees-Hayley, & Price, 1995). Konrad and Gutek (1986) found that compared to women, men were four times more likely to be flattered by sexual overtures and four times less likely to be insulted.

“It was just a Touch”: Perspectives of Adolescents on Sexual Harassment in India

Following more studies, Dall’Ara and Maass (2000) as well as Pryor and colleagues (Pryor, Hesson-McInnis, Hitlan, Olson, & Hahn, 2001; Pryor & Whalen, 1997) have recently made the suggestion to interpret misogyny from a social identity perspective, thereby bridging two bodies of social psychological literature that have developed largely independently in the past: sexual harassment and social identity theory.

The social identity perspective proposes that sexual harassment should be viewed as a phenomenon that involves intergroup dynamics rather than individual interactions. Sexual harassment is not viewed as a reaction of a single male towards a specific female but rather as a general reaction against females, reflecting the status differences between the gender groups. Consistent with this notion, research has shown that sexual harassment occurs more frequently in environments where gender is an important factor for categorization. This may occur due to explicit references to gender differences, token or minority status of women, or a disproportionate numerical distribution where men significantly outnumber women. (Dall’Ara & Maass, 2000; Levorato & Savani, 2000; Rosenberg, Perlstadt, & Phillips, 1993; Pryor & Whalen, 1997; Gruber, 1998).

In their study of workers, Foulis and McCabe (1997) discovered that femininity was linked to attitudes toward sexual harassment, with those who scored high in femininity having the lowest tolerance for it. However, they did not find any gender role differences in perceptions among the workers they studied. In contrast, Powell (1986) found that men who scored high in masculinity were less likely to perceive certain behaviors as sexual harassment compared to men who scored low in masculinity. On the other hand, women who were recorded to be high in masculinity were more probable to perceive such behaviors as sexual harassment than women who scored low in masculinity.

Another important contribution of the social identity account is its emphasis on social identity threat (see Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). In conclusion, the central idea proposed by social identity theory is that males will feel compelled to uphold their social identity when faced with a threat to their collective self-esteem. In simpler terms, social identity threat plays a crucial role in instances of harassment, where the motivation to repair their wounded gender identity drives the act of harassment. These predictions serve as the primary focus of the current research.

Lastly, Pryor (1992) has proposed a Person X Situation model for predicting sexually harassing behaviour. This approach conceptualizes sexual harassment as a social behavior that certain people engage in sometimes.

This model has theoretical roots in Lewin’s (1951) analysis of behaviour as a function of the social environment and the person. Pryor and his colleagues (Pryor, 1987; Pryor, Lavite, & Stoller, 1993; Pryor & Stoller, 1994) have begun to explore the situational and person factors that give rise to sexually harassing behaviours. They have provided evidence that identifies specific situations in which sexual harassment is more prone to happen and traits associated with men who are more inclined to engage in sexual harassment.

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Instrument

A focus group discussion was conducted, with 9 participants between the age group 18-25. Purposive sampling was used to select a sample who were comfortable talking about the topic and were willing to put forth their opinions and experiences. This made sure that the

“It was just a Touch”: Perspectives of Adolescents on Sexual Harassment in India

exploratory study could produce meaningful results that would help the researchers come up with new research topics.

Ethical Protection of Participants

The confidentiality of the information provided by participants during the focus group discussion was guaranteed. The participants who participated were all adults who gave their consent to participate in the study. All participant names and identities were kept confidential during the transcript analysis process. There were no dangers related to participating in the study.

Data Collection Procedure

A focus group is a research method where researchers bring together a selected group of individuals to discuss and provide feedback on a particular topic based on their personal experiences. This technique involves guided and interactive discussions to gather "the rich details of complex experiences and the reasoning behind [an individual's] actions, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes" (Carey, 1995). This data can be utilised to pinpoint possible research fields or to explain topics that, by its nature, eludes other research instruments.

Focus groups generally have a duration of 1-2 hours and follow established procedural guidelines. A moderator facilitates the discussion, ensuring that all participants get a chance to share their perspectives. Focus groups are frequently placed between individual interviews and naturalistic observation in the field of qualitative methods. They offer the advantage of capturing spontaneous group interactions and dialogues similar to those observed in natural settings. At the same time, the use of a moderator to steer the discussion based on predetermined topics aligns with the structure of individual interviews (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1988,1997).

Commonly cited strengths of focus groups compared to quantitative surveys include their ability to obtain information from illiterate populations and their flexibility in exploring new attitudes and norms that emerge during the data collection process (Dawson et al., 1993; Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1988).

Focus group discussion usually yields both qualitative and observational data where analyses can be demanding. According to Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007, 2008), qualitative analysis techniques that can be used to analyse focus group data include grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Strauss, 1987), content analysis (Morgan, 1988) and discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Morgan (1988) recommends the use of *content* and *ethnographic analytic* techniques to analyse data from a focus group discussion since it affords the researcher an opportunity to obtain both qualitative and quantitative information through a “three-element coding framework” leading to mixed content analysis (Morgan, 1988).

This paper was analysed by the help of thematic analysis. Thematic Analysis is used to analyse classifications and present themes (patterns) that relate to the data. It illustrates the data in great detail and deals with diverse subjects via interpretations (Boyatzis 1998). It allows the researcher to associate an analysis of the frequency of a theme with one of the whole contents. This will confer accuracy and intricacy and enhance the research’s whole meaning.

Qualitative research requires understanding and collecting diverse aspects and data. Thematic Analysis gives an opportunity to understand the potential of any issue more widely (Marks and Yardley 2004). Namey et al. (2008) said,

“Thematic Moves beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focuses on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas. Codes developed for ideas or themes are then applied or linked to raw data as summary markers for later analysis, which may include comparing the relative frequencies of themes or topics within a data set, looking for code cooccurrence, or graphically displaying code relationships.” (p.138)

DISCUSSION

In a society riddled with gender-based issues, themes of fearing for personal safety, motivations for sexual aggression, shifting blame onto other factors, the consequences of such actions, and the reasons behind victims' reluctance to report incidents have emerged as crucial focal points. The pervasive fear experienced by individuals, particularly women, concerning their own safety serves as a constant reminder of the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault. This fear is intertwined with the motivations behind sexual aggression, which often stem from power imbalances, entitlement, and distorted beliefs about dominance and control.

Another prevalent theme involves shifting the blame onto external factors, such as the victim's behaviour or attire, as a means to absolve the perpetrator of responsibility. However, this practice of shifting blame has far-reaching consequences, perpetuating a culture of victim-blaming and hindering justice and support for survivors. Then understanding the consequences of this shift in blame and the emotional, psychological, and social impacts it has on victims is essential for addressing the long-lasting effects of sexual harassment. Finally, delving into the reasons why victims may choose not to report incidents, such as fear of retaliation, social stigma, and a lack of trust in the justice system, highlights the systemic barriers that hinder the resolution and prevention of these egregious acts. By examining these interconnected themes, we gain insight into the complex dynamics surrounding sexual harassment and the urgent need for comprehensive solutions to create safer and more equitable communities.

Fearing for the safety of self

A lot of circumstances fall under the category of factors that may have an individual fear for their safety. Situations which are alien or unknown to the individual, where they may not trust the people around them (i.e., being amidst a group of unknown people) or where they may feel lack of control over others actions (i.e., when the cab driver takes a different route that is not known to the passenger), will introduce fear for self because the individual will start thinking about the various possible negatives outcomes of that situation.

Participants in the focus group discussion described situations such as being with “A lot of men.” as daunting and scary if you do not know all of the people in the room. Other situations that were prominent in the discussion were public places, especially public transport, where it is always too crowded and you are not familiar with anyone.

Incidences of harassment on and around public transit are widely reported in the grey literature, particularly for women and members of marginalised groups (e.g., people of colour, migrants, gay, lesbian, transgender and intersexual individuals) (Johnson and Bennett 2015).

“It was just a Touch”: Perspectives of Adolescents on Sexual Harassment in India

Sexual harassment on public transport appears to be primarily non-confrontational, although it often may include forms of confrontational harassment in the form of subtle groping, touching or leaning (Hsu 2011; Gekoski et al. 2015). It usually occurs in closed-crowded spaces, where strangers take advantage of environmental conditions to harass (Hsu 2011; Horii and Burgess 2012; Madan and Nalla 2016). For example, Hirsch and Thompson (2011, 3) recount women's stories of standing in very crowded situations and being unsure if men were trying to take advantage of them.

Motivations for sexual aggression

While discussing the reasons someone may sexually harass, two main factors were majorly discussed. The first one being biological factors, where a participant described “Hormonal bodily pleasure” as a motivation for sexual harassment. As the younger generations grow up, the increase in curiosity and biological changes when paired with lack of sex education, not being able to express and explore properly may lead to sexual harassment.

The Developmental theory; this conceptualization assumes that people learn to communicate feelings through social interactions. Young people have special difficulty communicating strong positive and negative feelings related to sexual attraction. Inability to express such feelings in socially appropriate ways leads to (wittingly or unwittingly) engaging in harassing behaviours. As adolescent girls are more socially skilled than boys, they engage in fewer harassing behaviours. As young people mature, such behaviours diminish, though some never learn “proper” sexual behaviour. Advocates of this theory point to some success for programs that build self-awareness, empathy, and communication skills (Beauvais, 1986).

Another theory developed by Marshall and Barbaree (1990) pays particular attention to offending that develops during adolescence. During adolescence, it is predicted that as hormonal activity increases so too do aggressive impulses. While the majority of males are predicted to successfully control and suppress such impulses, psychological vulnerabilities created via numerous avenues (e.g., biological, developmental) are predicted to interact with contextual factors (e.g., intoxication, sexual arousal) and impair normal inhibition processes heightening the likelihood of sexual aggression (Marshall and Barbaree, 1990).

The second category that was most prominent were the social factors. The theme of “Normalisation of sexual harassment.” was very common amongst what most of the participants said. The normalisation of sexual harassment being very prevalent in peer groups and organisational setting, when partnered with the stigma around talking about sexual harassment may lead to more instances of sexual harassment.

Findings also support the notion of the rape culture minimizing or normalizing sexual assault; survivors often receive the message that a “real” sexual assault involves a stranger and fear (Phillips, 2000).

Along with which the general public is conditioned to think that sexually harassing behaviours are okay, or that “These things happen.” This also shows the level of denial amongst people, where people may seek justifications for these actions. A factor that influences the denial or false perception of the people may be the patriarchal thought process. The “Men are superior than women.” and associating women with stereotypical gender roles may highly affect how people view sexual harassment.

“It was just a Touch”: Perspectives of Adolescents on Sexual Harassment in India

Like one of the participants said, “If you’re sitting in a room and a woman walks in, it’s a *woman* who’s walking in. But if it’s a man who’s walking in, it’s a *person* who’s walking in.”

Individual differences related to right-wing and patriarchic worldview may play a role in promoting harsher attitudes toward women involved in sexual harassment allegations. Men (Pryor et al., 1995) and women (Cowan, 2000) who endorse hostile attitudes toward women are more likely to engage in sexual harassment and victim blaming, respectively.

For example, benevolent sexism (henceforth BS; Glick & Fiske, 1996), a set of interrelated attitudes that portray women as stereotyped and idealized figures who behave consistently with traditional female roles (e.g., wives) and need to be cherished and protected by men, may predict victim-blaming and disbelief in allegations of sexual harassment. Consistent with this possibility, participants scoring high on BS were less likely to consider a forced sexual intercourse in a married heterosexual couple to be a rape, because they justified the forced sex as a right of the man and a duty for the woman (Durán et al., 2011).

Another setting that is possible is that due to the taboo around sexual harassment, people may not realise or may have false beliefs about the prevalence of sexual harassment in their surroundings. They may not realise or even know what entails sexual harassment.

One of the participants said, “We’ve not even been allowed to react unless there is something major, like you are 10 years old and you’ve been groped on the street. That’s nothing. Move on. Everyone is going through that.”

Esther Greenglass, a social psychologist, shared her experience as a new faculty member at York University in Toronto, Canada, in 2005. She mentioned senior colleagues warning those seeking to mobilise work on the psychology of women to “stop rocking the boat [...] just do your job and shut up, be good girls” (p. 11). At the same time “they’d pat you on the bottom” and though “the term sexual harassment didn’t exist, you just expected it. You know, it was demeaning but you didn’t say anything because you’d lose your job” (Greenglass, 2005, p. 11).

Shifting of blame to other factors

The rationalisation of reasons for sexual harassment, goes hand in hand with a dangerous shift in blame from the perpetrator to other aspects. People begin seeking justifications or explanations for why the individual was harassed, focusing on external factors that are irrelevant to the perpetrator's actions. Rather than holding the perpetrator accountable, attention is redirected towards the victim and their choices or circumstances.

For instance, phrases like "Because she was wearing a short dress" or "Because she was drunk" become common justifications used to rationalise the harassment. These justifications replace the true motives and responsibility of the perpetrator, diverting attention from their inappropriate and harmful behaviour. By attributing the cause of harassment to the victim's clothing or intoxication, society shifts the blame onto the victim and effectively excuses the actions of the perpetrator.

This normalisation of victim-blaming not only perpetuates a culture of silence and injustice but also perpetuates harmful stereotypes and reinforces gender inequality. It implies that victims are somehow responsible for the harassment they experience, placing the burden of

“It was just a Touch”: Perspectives of Adolescents on Sexual Harassment in India

preventing or avoiding such incidents solely on their shoulders. This deeply flawed perspective not only absolves the perpetrators of their wrongdoing but also further marginalizes and stigmatizes the victims, adding to their trauma and discouraging them from seeking help or justice.

Attributing blame to the victim is a way of shifting the responsibility for the assault away from the perpetrator and minimising the gravity of the offence. The assignment of victim blame has been extensively examined in forensic and social psychology. Various factors, including the victim's characteristics such as physical appearance, can influence how blame is attributed. Attractive and provocatively dressed women are held more responsible for being raped than unattractive, demurely dressed women (Brems & Wagner, 1994; Edmonds & Cahoon, 1986; Tieger, 1981; Workman & Freeburg, 1999).

In determining blame, people often attribute an assault to the presence of drugs or alcohol (Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2010; Wild, Graham, & Rehm, 1998); the attractiveness of the victim (Calhoun, Selby, Cann, & Keller, 1978; Gerdes, Dammann, & Heilig, 1988) and assailant (Deitz & Byrnes, 1981); the extent to which the victim did not attempt to resist the assault (Krulewitz, 1981; Krulewitz & Nash, 1979); and the clothing worn by the victim (Cassidy & Hurrell, 1995; Loughnan, Pina, Vasquez, & Puvia, 2013; Moor, 2010; Muehlenhard & MacNaughton, 1988; Whatley, 2005; Workman & Orr, 1996).

The pervasive practice of victim-blaming significantly influences societal mindsets and attitudes. As a result, common narratives emerge suggesting that women should take specific precautions to prevent sexual harassment. Examples of these narratives include statements like "Women should carry pepper spray" or "Women should not be out late at night." These suggestions, although seemingly well-intentioned, place the responsibility on women to modify their behaviour or appearance in order to avoid harassment or assault.

Shaver's defensive idea was that male viewers should place more blame for similar acts on female victims than female observers would. According to Walster's defensive hypothesis, female respondents should hold the female sexual harassment victim in higher regard than should male respondents. In contrast to both of those hypotheses, Lerner's "just world" would imply no distinctions in the assignment of blame between male and female responders.

Another significant aspect to consider is the development of self-blame mechanisms within the victim. In the aftermath of sexual harassment or assault, victims may internalize feelings of guilt and start believing that the incident was somehow their fault. They may question their actions, choices, or behaviours, believing that they should have been more cautious or that they somehow deserved what happened to them.

Young women internalise messages from the dominant culture, encouraging them to “let go” and downplay the severity of the violence enacted on them. This is consistent with a rape culture in which the dominant discourse normalizes men’s sexual violence against women (e.g., Hlavka, 2014) and heteronormative messages that view male sexuality as aggressive, powerful, and dominant are rampant (Butler, 1999; Johnson, 2005).

A study conducted by Libow and Doty (1979) discovered a significant inverse relationship between individuals' belief in a just world and their tendency to self-derogate after experiencing sexual violence. Theoretical perspectives offer conflicting predictions

“It was just a Touch”: Perspectives of Adolescents on Sexual Harassment in India

regarding the connection between belief in a just world and adaptation to sexual violence. On one hand, it could be argued that a strong belief in a just world can hinder rather than assist victims in coping with victimisation. Experiencing the trauma of rape is not only profoundly distressing, but it can also be seen as an extremely prejudiced event. Following this line of reasoning, it can be posited that victims who strongly hold the belief that the world is fair not only have to recover from the inherent stress caused by their victimisation but also confront the profound threat to their belief in a just world. Consequently, victims may attempt to safeguard their belief in a just world by blaming themselves for their victimisation and attributing their fate as fair and justified (Detlef Fetchenhauer, 2005).

Jones and Davis (1965) also theorised that the dispositional qualities of persons (i.e., their stable characteristics) are inferred by considering the outcomes or effects of their behaviour in contrast to the effects of alternative behaviours. This means that people form judgments about others, and potentially themselves, by considering behavioural information such as social desirability, the level of choice involved, and prior patterns of behaviour. For instance, a survivor of sexual assault may blame herself if she perceives her behavior as socially undesirable, such as being excessively intoxicated, overly trusting, or displaying provocative behavior. In such cases, individuals tend to internalise blame based on their assessment of their own actions and how they align with societal norms and expectations.

This example is consistent with just-world theory again (Lerner, 1971), which like we know, predicts that persons are motivated to blame victims of misfortunes such as sexual assault in order to maintain belief in a just world (i.e., that bad things happen to bad people), as well as hindsight bias (Carli, 1999; Roese & Olson, 1996), which accounts for the misremembering of sexual assault details that leads to victim derogation.

Consequences of shifting blame

Shifting the blame from the offender to the victim in cases of sexual harassment has significant repercussions that perpetuate harm and injustice. When blame is redirected away from the perpetrator, it undermines the accountability and responsibility that should be placed on those who commit such acts. This harmful practice fosters a climate of silence and discourages victims from coming forward, as they may fear being disbelieved, ostracised, or blamed for the harassment they experienced. The victim may internalise the blame which when happens may have diverse negative psychological consequences.

When victims of sexual harassment internalize self-blame, it sets off a cascade of negative effects that impact their self-image, self-esteem, and overall emotional well-being. The process of blaming oneself for the harassment can be incredibly damaging, as it creates a sense of personal responsibility and guilt for an event that was beyond the victim's control.

As victims continuously blame themselves, their self-image takes a significant blow. They may begin to question their own worth and view themselves through a lens of shame and inadequacy. The negative self-perception stemming from self-blame can lead to feelings of unworthiness, unattractiveness, and a distorted view of their own identity. It erodes the positive aspects of self-image, leaving behind a residue of self-doubt and self-deprecation.

Moreover, the repeated negligence and invalidation of their emotions by themselves or others exacerbates the self-doubt experienced by victims. When victims' experiences and feelings are dismissed or trivialised, they may start questioning the validity of their own

“It was just a Touch”: Perspectives of Adolescents on Sexual Harassment in India

emotions. This self-doubt further chips away at their self-esteem, leaving them feeling unheard, invalidated, and isolated.

Previous studies have shown that having a strong internal locus of control can serve as a protective factor against sexual harassment (e.g., Karstoft et al., 2015; Kushner et al., 1993; Zhang et al., 2014), but this may not be the case for someone who has had a lot of victim blaming experiences and consequently feels responsible for their own victimisation. Specifically, if a victim believes that events are determined by their own actions (high internal locus of control) and they face considerable victim blaming, then they might report elevated levels of PTSD symptoms and engage in unhealthy alcohol use because of thoughts like, “I can’t keep myself safe from future assault because I am to blame for my prior assault.” In this situation, a high internal locus of control would not be protective.

The impact of this blame-shifting extends beyond the individual level, influencing societal attitudes and responses to sexual harassment. It hampers efforts to create a safe and supportive environment for survivors, undermines the pursuit of justice, and allows the cycle of harassment to persist. Moreover, it contributes to the normalization of sexual harassment, reinforcing harmful power dynamics and perpetuating inequality.

The high prevalence of objectification of women is also noticed, when the blame is shifted from the perpetrator to the victim. This objectification is again fueled by the patriarchal mindset, where the current generation primes the future generation with the same thought process. The youth of the coming generation would now associate maybe physical or situational factors as reasons for being sexually harassed.

Why a victim may not report

A variety of reasons have been identified as to why victims regularly take years to come forward with sexual harassment allegations. That is, individuals may need time to deal with traumatic events or may fear retaliation by the harasser (Balogh et al., 2003).

Again as mentioned in the above discussion, victim blame and self blame widely influence how the society and the individual perceives the crime and whether or not the victim reports it.

Furthermore, victims may expect negative outcomes when making a sexual harassment public, e.g., need to change a job, negative effects on family members or friends. Also, self-blame among sexual harassment victims—even though victims are not to blame—may prevent victims from reporting a sexual harassment (Miller et al., 2007). Furthermore, victims may be afraid of being held responsible for a sexual harassment themselves (Ahrens, 2006). Indeed, numerous studies revealed that women—despite being victims of sexual harassment—are regularly blamed and held responsible for sexual harassment themselves. In fact, victim blaming is a frequent reaction to sexual harassment victims (Balogh et al., 2003; Dawtry et al., 2019; see also Abrams et al., 2003; Ask & Landström, 2010; Grubb & Turner, 2012).

The lack of support for the victim was one of the other reasons highlighted by the participants. The victims' experiences are constantly undermined and their emotions are invalidated by implementing that they are overreacting or by saying that “It was just a touch.” Being afraid of ruining the family’s reputation (while talking about lack of support,

"It was just a Touch": Perspectives of Adolescents on Sexual Harassment in India

we include the lack of familial support) or being questioned about the details of the incident may be why victims may refrain from reporting.

Some of the other most common reasons provided for not reporting the incident to the police were because the survivors did not think the assault was serious enough to report, blamed themselves or felt guilty, were ashamed or felt embarrassed, feared retribution from the perpetrator or others, were afraid they would not be believed, lacked confidence in the criminal justice system, lacked evidence, or did not want family members or others to know what happened (Du Mont, Miller, & Myhr, 2003; Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, & Turner, 2003; Thompson, Sitterle, Clay, & Kingree, 2007).

CONCLUSION

In order to effectively prevent sexual harassment, it is imperative to implement a range of measures that address various aspects of this pervasive issue. One significant step is to initiate open conversations about sex, which is often considered a taboo topic, particularly in countries like India. The lack of comprehensive sex education contributes to a knowledge gap, leading individuals to explore their sexuality through negative and harmful means. By breaking the silence and normalising discussions about sex, we can create an environment where individuals have access to accurate information, understand healthy boundaries, and make informed choices regarding their sexual behaviour.

Furthermore, efforts should focus on destigmatizing sexual harassment and creating a culture where it is acknowledged as a real and significant problem. This entails challenging societal norms that dismiss or trivialise such incidents. By raising awareness and fostering a collective understanding that sexual harassment is a serious violation, we can empower individuals to recognize when it happens and take a stand against it. This cultural shift involves promoting empathy, respect, and accountability, ensuring that individuals understand the impact of their actions and the importance of consent and mutual respect in all interactions.

Implementing these measures will require a multifaceted approach involving educational institutions, families, communities, and the media. Schools should incorporate comprehensive sex education curricula that address consent, boundaries, and healthy relationships. Families play a crucial role in providing a safe and supportive environment where open discussions about sex and relationships can take place. Community organizations and NGOs can organize awareness campaigns, workshops, and training sessions to spread knowledge and empower individuals to combat sexual harassment.

Moreover, media outlets should play a responsible role in portraying healthy and respectful relationships, challenging harmful stereotypes, and providing accurate information on sexual harassment and its prevention. By collectively working towards these goals, we can create a society that is more informed, aware, and equipped to prevent and address sexual harassment effectively.

Another crucial measure is to spread awareness about what constitutes sexual harassment. Despite increased discourse on the subject, there remains a lack of general public awareness or a failure to recognize when harassment occurs. It is essential to educate people about the various forms of harassment, including verbal, non-verbal, and online harassment. This includes teaching individuals about personal boundaries, consent, and the concepts of "good touch" and "bad touch." By providing comprehensive education, we can help individuals

“It was just a Touch”: Perspectives of Adolescents on Sexual Harassment in India

understand and identify instances of harassment, enabling them to take appropriate action and prevent further harm.

Along with which, it is of utmost importance to educate and empower individuals to take prompt actions in response to any unfortunate circumstances. In order to achieve this, it becomes crucial for the government to establish a robust and efficient redressal mechanism. Such a mechanism would ensure that grievances are effectively addressed and justice is served.

In addition, there is a pressing need to create widespread awareness about laws that are designed to protect the rights and interests of victims. This includes disseminating information about legal provisions, rights, and resources available to those affected by crimes or wrongdoing. By increasing public knowledge about these laws, individuals can become better equipped to navigate through difficult situations and assert their rights.

It is also imperative for the general public to understand that reporting a crime is not only essential but also results in appropriate punishment for the perpetrators. By instilling this awareness, people can feel more encouraged to come forward and report incidents without fear of retaliation. This, in turn, creates a safer and more just society where accountability is upheld.

Alongside the legal aspect, it is crucial to provide adequate support to victims in various dimensions. This includes ensuring that victims have strong familial support networks to rely on during challenging times. Additionally, law enforcement agencies should offer comprehensive support to victims, including empathetic and sensitive handling of cases, provision of necessary resources, and facilitating access to legal and counselling services. Moreover, measures should be taken to ensure the safety and security of victims, protecting them from any potential harm or harassment by the perpetrator.

By addressing these multifaceted aspects—education, redressal mechanisms, legal awareness, punishment, support networks, and security—the society can work towards a more proactive and effective approach in dealing with unfortunate incidents. Ultimately, this fosters a culture of protection, justice, and support for individuals who have experienced harm or wrongdoing.

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“It was just a Touch”: Perspectives of Adolescents on Sexual Harassment in India

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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