

Research Paper

Experiences of Harassment Among Female Students in Higher Education: A University-Based Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Women have experienced a wide array of circumstances, from being revered and respected during the Vedic period to facing marginalization and subjugation in the post-Vedic era, and now continuing their pursuit of equality, recognition, and survival in modern society. Despite these historical shifts, women have consistently found themselves in a disadvantaged position. One of the most pressing issues women face today, both in India and internationally, is sexual harassment within academic environments. This harassment takes many forms, including physical, verbal, and non-verbal abuse. Effectively addressing and preventing sexual harassment in colleges and universities remains a significant challenge. Nevertheless, there is hope that academic institutions, through strong commitment and action, can make meaningful progress in tackling this issue. This study employs a quantitative approach, utilizing a sample of 200 students who completed a modified version of the Sexual Experience Questionnaire (SEQ). The findings reveal a notable prevalence of gender-based harassment, including unwanted sexual advances and verbal abuse, within university settings. Additionally, some students reported instances of physical harassment.

Keywords: *Harassment, Female Students, Higher Education, University-Based Analysis*

Sexual harassment in academia is a multifaceted and complex issue that affects all members of the academic community, presenting significant challenges, particularly in terms of addressing it. The European Directive 2002/73/EC (also known as the EU Gender Directive) defines sexual harassment as “any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature, which has the purpose or results in violating the dignity of an individual, especially when it creates a threatening, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment” (Hoel & Vartia, 2018). These behaviours can occur in both physical spaces (within various social contexts) and cyberspace, and they subsidize to harassment not only for those directly experiencing them but also for those witnessing them (Johnson et al., 2018)

The consequences of sexual harassment and violence are profound. Studies highlight that university students, particularly women, suffer significant negative effects on their well-being, including increased vulnerability to psychological distress, substance abuse,

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Experiences of Harassment Among Female Students in Higher Education: A University-Based Analysis

depression, anger, poor life satisfaction, and physical illnesses (Rospenda et al., 2000; Buchanan et al., 2009; Cantor et al., 2015; McGinley et al., 2016; Wolff et al., 2017; Jirek & Saunders, 2018). Additionally, students who have experienced sexual abuse often report diminished academic engagement, lower academic performance, and a generalized sense of insecurity within the university environment (Cipriano et al., 2022).

FORMS OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment is generally recognized to encompass two main types of behaviour. The first is commonly referred to as “quid pro quo,” which involves a person, typically in a position of authority, making explicit or implicit sexual advances or requests. In return, the individual may offer something of value, such as a promotion or other desired benefits. The second type is known as "hostile environment" sexual harassment, which refers to sex-related behaviors that create an uncomfortable or intimidating environment for the person being harassed, making the workplace or academic setting hostile or unwelcoming (Smolensky & Kleiner, 2003).

Rutter (1996) identified the seven most common forms of sexual harassment, ranked by frequency:

1. Sexual teasing, jokes, remarks, or questions
2. Pressure for dates
3. Sexual materials, such as letters, phone calls, or content shared over the internet
4. Sexual looks or gestures
5. Deliberate physical contact, such as touching, leaning over, cornering, or pinching
6. Pressure for sexual favoritisms
7. Actual or attempted rape or sexual assault

EFFECTS OF HARASSMENT ON FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Lee et al. (1996) and Hand & Sanchez (2000) argue that sexual harassment in academic settings leads to a range of negative academic, psychological, and behavioral consequences. Further research conducted by Erulkar (2004), Mbassa (2001), and Ruto and Chege (2006) supports this view, emphasizing that sexual harassment disproportionately affects women and girls in terms of both prevalence and impact, compared to men and boys (Edwin, 2009). These studies have also highlighted that the primary victims of sexual harassment within educational institutions are female students, particularly those targeted by their peers of the same age, followed by harassment perpetrated by adults. In fact, educational institutions are often perceived as sexually unsafe environments, with this risk only being secondary to that of the home.

The impact of sexual harassment on female students is profound and multifaceted. Many victims of harassment lose interest in continuing their studies and may ultimately drop out of universities due to the negative emotional and psychological effects of the harassment. Additionally, psychological trauma resulting from sexual harassment often manifests in various forms of distress, including anxiety, headaches, low self-esteem, sleep disturbances, weight fluctuations, and sexual dysfunction (McGinley et al., 2016). These conditions further exacerbate the students' sense of insecurity, leading to a diminished sense of well-being and academic engagement.

Experiences of Harassment Among Female Students in Higher Education: A University-Based Analysis

Need and Significance of the Study

From a research angle, the requirement of the study titled "Experiences of Harassment Among Female Students in Higher Education: A University-Based Analysis" stems from the ongoing lack of inclusive empirical data on the prevalence and impact of harassment on female students within academic settings. Although awareness of harassment has grown, it remains underreported, and current studies often do not fully address the complex nature of harassment within universities. This study seeks to fill this gap by concentrating specifically on female students, who may encounter distinct forms of harassment that impede their academic, social, and personal development. The need and significance of this research lies in its ability to provide appreciated, evidence-driven insights into the types, frequency, and consequences of harassment, which could serve as a foundation for developing more effective policies and support mechanisms. By examining these experiences within a university environment, the study also contributes to the broader discussion on gender equality, offering essential data that could influence institutional practices and promote safer, more inclusive educational spaces. Additionally, the findings hold the potential to extend beyond academia, supportive broader societal efforts to combat gender-based violence and discrimination.

Research Questions

- What is the prevalence of verbal harassment incidents within a university setting?
- How frequently do physical harassment incidents occur within a university environment?
- What is the occurrence rate of sexual coercion harassment in a university context?
- How often does unwanted sexual attention occur within a university environment?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted at Sri Guru Granth Sahib World University in Fatehgarh Sahib, focusing on female students from various courses. A descriptive study design was employed, with a sample size of 200 female students. The study was limited to a single university to facilitate easier consent acquisition. Purposive sampling was used as the sampling technique. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, as the term "sexual harassment" is not commonly discussed among the traditional female population, utmost importance was placed on ensuring the confidentiality of the respondents.

Delimitations

- The Present study is delimited to district Fatehgarh sahib only
- The present study is delimited to female students of Sri Guru granth Sahib World University only

Instrumentation

Data collection was done with the help of the Sexual Experience Questionnaire, as developed in 1985 by Fitzgerald, Shullman, et.al; 1988 Fitzgerald, Drasgrow & Gelfand, 1993. The revised instrument consists of 20 items, 18 of which form the following subscales:

- Gender Harassment
- Unwanted Sexual Attention
- Sexual coercion

ANALYSIS OF DATA AND RESULTS

The study results indicate that the predominant age group among women participants was 18-25 years, comprising 85% of the total. Among the respondents, 39% held graduate degrees, while 59% had undergraduate degrees. Additionally, the study found that 20 to 30% of participants reported encountering vulgar language, and 50% reported being addressed with the unwelcome term 'darling'.

Table 1. Expresses the frequency and proportion of respondents who have faced verbal harassment.

Respondents who faced verbal harassment such as offensive jokes, discussion about sexual matters, sexual remarks (publicly and privately)		
Verbal Harassment	Frequency	Proportion
Never	40	20
Often or twice	53	26.5
Sometimes	44	22
Often	31	15.5
Most of the time	32	16
Total	200	100

According to the study, 16% of participants frequently encountered intrusive inquiries about their personal sexual lives. Approximately 15.5% of respondents reported being subjected to repeated exposure to lewd and obscene jokes. Additionally, the study found that 22% of participants occasionally heard sexual remarks and offensive jokes. Furthermore, 26% of respondents experienced verbal harassment.

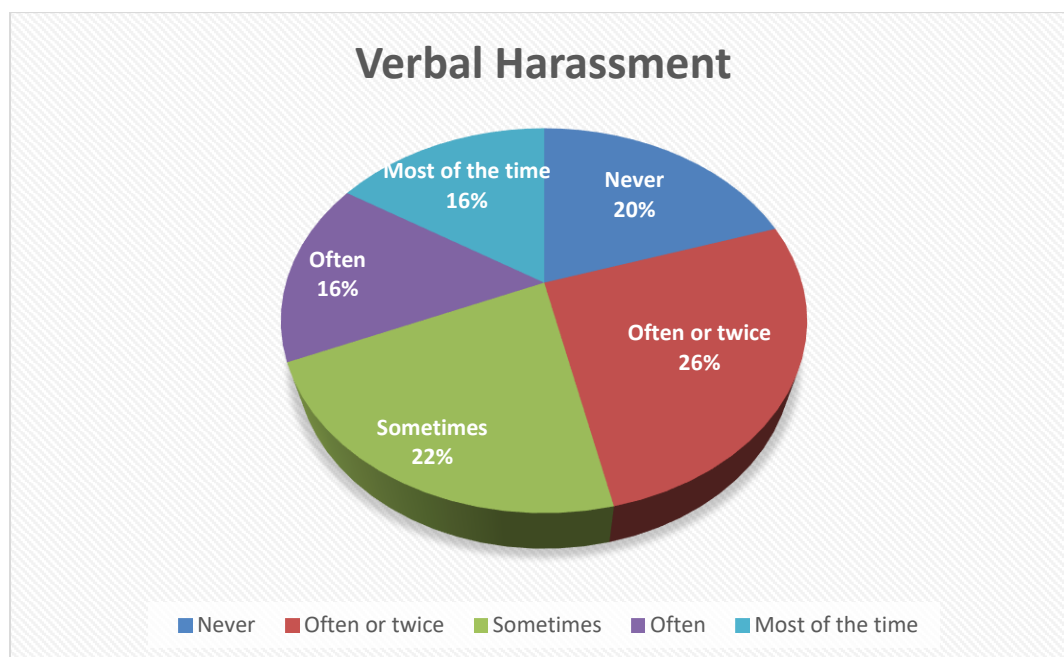


Figure 1. Expresses the frequency and proportion of respondents who have faced verbal harassment.

The above pie diagram represents that 80 % female students have faced verbal harassment and only 20 % students who said ‘NO’ to such type of questions.

Experiences of Harassment Among Female Students in Higher Education: A University-Based Analysis

Table 2. Provide the frequency and proportion of participants who have experienced Physical Harassment.

Respondents who faced physical harassment		
Physical Harassment	Frequency	Proportion
Never	22	10
Often or twice	50	25
Sometimes	58	29
Often	34	17
Most of the time	36	18
Total	200	100

Out of 200 girls surveyed at the university, 178 reported experiencing physical harassment, while 22 stated they had not encountered any such flirtatious encounters.

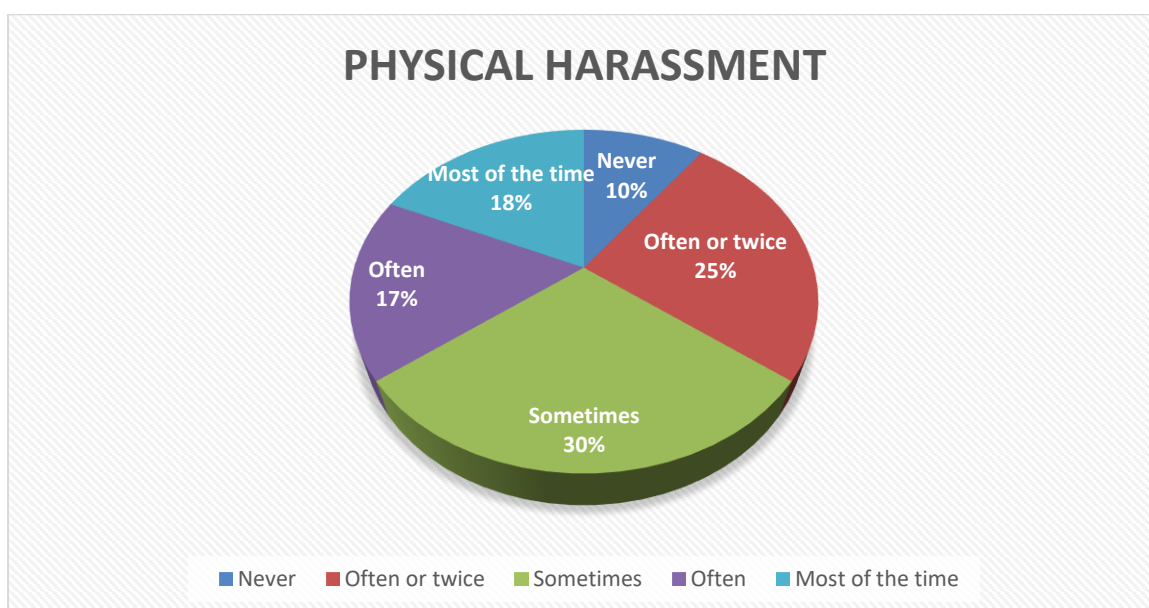


Figure 2. Provide the frequency and proportion of participants who have experienced Physical Harassment.

The pie chart above illustrates that 90% of female students have encountered physical harassment, while only 10% of students responded negatively to such inquiries.

Table 3. Indicate the occurrence rate and percentage of individuals who have encountered Sexual Coercion.

Respondents who faced Sexual Coercion such as threats, intimidation, manipulation, or blackmail.		
Sexual Coercion	Frequency	Proportion
Never	20	10
Often or twice	52	25
Sometimes	55	29
Often	46	17
Most of the time	27	18
Total	200	100

Experiences of Harassment Among Female Students in Higher Education: A University-Based Analysis

As per Table 3, a quarter of students have encountered sexual coercion either frequently or twice in their lifetime. Additionally, nearly a third of students have been subjected to threats and intimidation. Among female students, manipulation and blackmail have been reported by 18%.

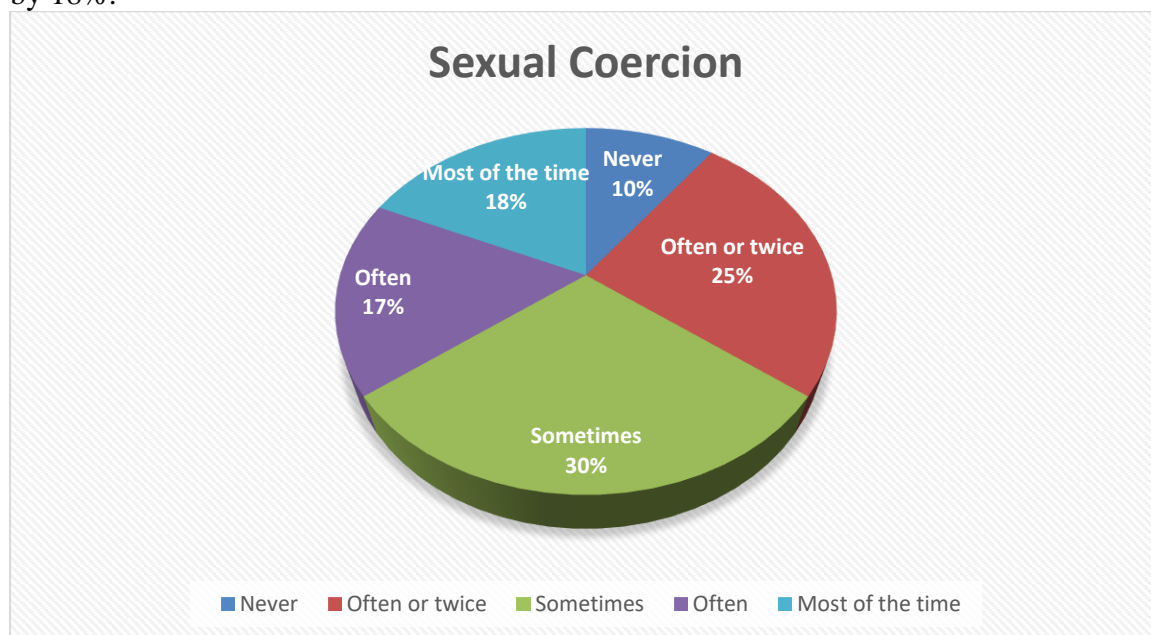


Figure 3. Indicate the occurrence rate and percentage of individuals who have encountered Sexual Coercion.

The pie chart depicted above shows that 90% of female students have experienced physical harassment, whereas only 10% of students provided negative responses to such inquiries.

Table 4 displays the frequency and proportion of individuals who have experienced Unwanted Sexual Attention.

Respondents who faced Unwanted Sexual Attention		
Unwanted Sexual Attention	Frequency	Proportion
Never	15	7.5
Often or twice	53	26.5
Sometimes	46	23
Often	48	24
Most of the time	38	19
Total	200	100

According to the Table 4, among the 200 girls surveyed at the university, 185 disclosed experiencing unwanted sexual attention harassment, while 15 indicated they had not encountered any such experiences.

Experiences of Harassment Among Female Students in Higher Education: A University-Based Analysis

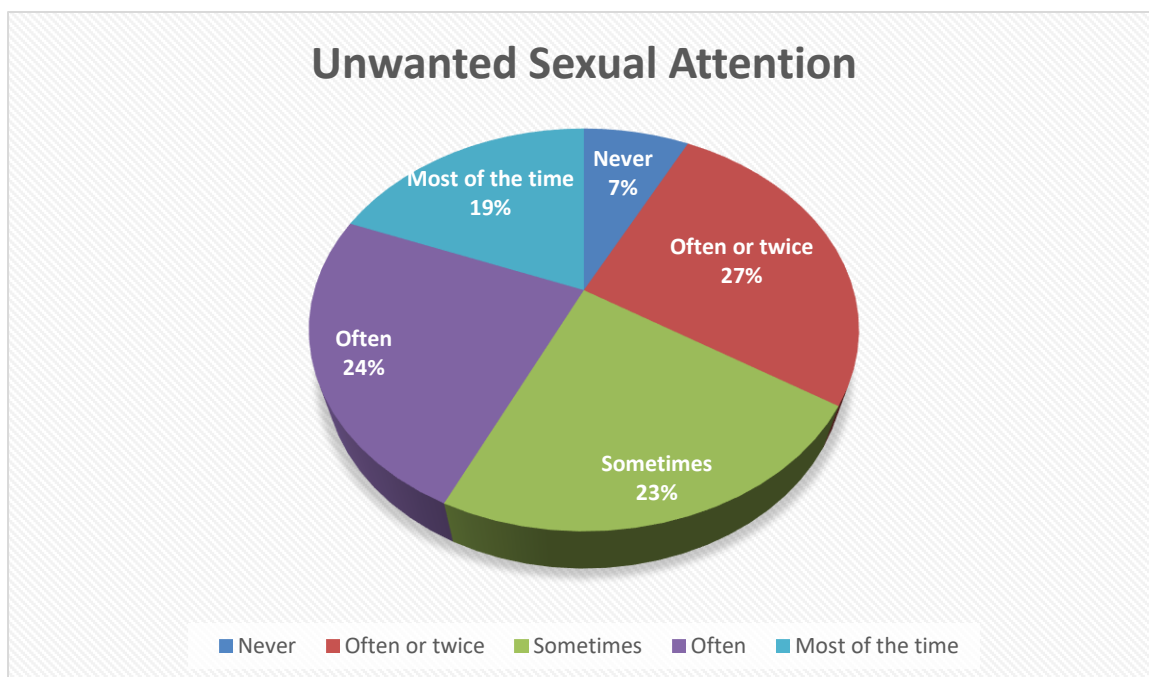


Figure 4: displays the frequency and proportion of individuals who have experienced Unwanted Sexual Attention.

The figure indicates that only 93% of students perceived that they were treated differently due to their gender.

DISCUSSION

Sexual harassment involves both physical and psychological dimensions, causing considerable stress and frustration for the victims. As a result, many female students may choose to abandon their studies, and in extreme cases, some may even contemplate suicide.

The findings of the study reveal the following:

- Among the 200 female students surveyed, 160 reported experiencing verbal harassment, such as offensive jokes, discussions about sexual topics, and sexual comments made both publicly and privately. Only 40 students stated that they had not been subjected to such language. The result were supported by Sang, Kemboi and Omenge (2016) that half of the interviewed female students had experienced various forms of sexual harassment e.g. sexual jokes, behaviour and attitude.
- Furthermore, it is profoundly concerning that 78 female students reported encountering physical harassment, including inappropriate touching, while 22 students indicated that they had not experienced such incidents. To support the results Klein and Martin (2019) indicated that being woman, or a sexual minority increased a student's likelihood of experiencing SH while at a college/university as well as Student rarely filed official reports but often faced a variety of mental and physical health consequences.
- The study also highlights that 180 female students faced threats and coercion to engage in physical relationships, whereas 20 students claimed they had not been subjected to such pressures. Additionally, 185 female students disclosed having experienced unwanted sexual attention.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research paper emphasizes the widespread prevalence of sexual harassment among female students in academic environments. The findings reveal that a substantial number of respondents have encountered various forms of harassment, including verbal, physical, and coercive behaviors. These results highlight not only the pervasive nature of such misconduct but also its severe consequences, which contribute to significant stress, frustration, and, in some cases, lead to potential dropout or even thoughts of self-harm. It is imperative that immediate attention and decisive action be taken to address and prevent sexual harassment in educational institutions, ensuring that all students can learn in a safe and supportive environment.

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Experiences of Harassment Among Female Students in Higher Education: A University-Based Analysis

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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