

EXPERIENCE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT AMONG FEMALE HEALTH SCIENCE STUDENTS: A CROSS SECTIONAL STUDY OF KATHMANDU, NEPAL.

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ABSTRACT

Background: Sexual harassment on public transport is an everyday occurrence for millions of girls and women around the globe. With the skyrocketing population of Kathmandu valley public transport has been facing enormous pressure. The major victims of these harassments happens to be college going girls and working women as they tend to travel more in public transports. This study sought to determine the prevalence and factors responsible for sexual harassment in public transport among female health science students.

Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional study was carried out among 396 female health science students studying in Manmohan Memorial Institute of Health Sciences using self-administered structured questionnaire. Participants were selected through stratified random sampling method.

Results: The prevalence of sexual harassment among female health science students was found to be 79.6%. Physical harassment was the most prominent type of harassment (67.1%) followed by verbal (61.2%) and non verbal 34.6%. After the experience of sexual harassment, 44.6% scolded the harasser, 29.1% kept silent, 17.3% dropped at nearest bus station whereas remaining 9% reacted in other different ways. Overcrowding was considered as main reason for sexual harassment by 69.2% of the participants. 36.8% of female students didn't use any precautionary methods whereas 32.6% avoided going out alone at night.

Conclusion: The study reveals that the prevalence of sexual harassment is significantly high. With increasing population and limited vehicles people are left with no option rather than travelling in the overcrowded vehicles where the chances of experiencing various sorts of sexual harassments are very high. In order to address this emerging issue, prompt and appropriate intervention should be taken by government, public and especially the status of women must be raised in society.

Key words: *sexual harassment, health science student, perpetrator*

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment against women is an incidence of violation of personal space of women by individual or groups of men where they do uninvited sexual advances, unwelcomed gestures, comments, insults, slurs and other obscenities at women in public places.¹ It can exist as any

form of sexual contact or activity ranging from verbal abuse to physical assault.² The following are the behaviors which could be considered as sexual harassment when they are unwelcomed:

Verbal: Whistling or making cat calls at someone; making sexual comments about a person's clothing or body; telling sexual jokes or stories²

Non-verbal: Paying unwanted attention to someone (i.e., staring, following, blocking a person's path) displaying sexually suggestive visuals; making facial expressions such as winking, throwing kisses, or licking²

Physical: Hanging around, standing close, or brushing up against a person; touching a person's clothing, hair, or body touching or rubbing oneself sexually around another person; hugging, kissing, patting or stroking.²

With the male dominant society and traditional mindset, even today, women feel embarrassed to make police complain about the harassment they experience and only a few dare due to fear that the shame of the act would fall upon them, not the perpetrators. This persistent violence affects the survivors in many ways particularly manifestation of physical, mental and social disorders and consequently, it reduces their ability to participate in educational and professional activities and in public life.^{5,6}

Though being a very contemporary issue, very few studies on sexual harassment in public transports in Nepal have been done till date. This study therefore is out small attempt to find out the prevalence and the responsible factors for everyday occurrence of sexual harassment in public transport.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area

This study was conducted in Kathmandu. Kathmandu district is one of the three districts located in Kathmandu Valley, which itself is located in the hills of Bagmati Zone, Central Development Region, Nepal. The total population of the district is 1,744,240 out of which 913,001 are male and 831,239 female in 436,355 households. Average family size is 4.0 in 2011 (CBS, 2011).

Study Design

A descriptive cross sectional study was carried to access prevalence and responsible factors of sexual harassment among female health science students studying in Manmohan Memorial Institute of Health Sciences.

Sampling Technique

Stratified random sampling method was adopted for the selection of students. The students were first divided into various strata according to their faculty from where they were chosen randomly.

Study Population

This study was conducted among female health science students studying in Manmohan Memorial Institute of Health Sciences.

Sample Size Estimation

The sample size was determined by single population proportion formula. Based on the study conducted among women travelling in public transport in Chennai city, India in 2008, the sample size for this study 63.0% was used. Therefore at 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error along with the addition of 10% non response rate, the sample size was calculated to be 396.

Data Collection Tools and Techniques

Data was collected from the participant with the help of self administered structured questionnaire. Due to unavailability of any standard questionnaire to measure prevalence of sexual harassment in public transport, we developed a set of questionnaire after adequate literature review. The inclusion criteria were female health science students who were studying at Manmohan Memorial Institute of Health Sciences at that time.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from Institutional Review Committee of Manmohan Memorial Institute of Health Sciences (MMIHS). Written informed consent was obtained from each respondent with detail explanation of the purpose of the study to ensure their right to information. Confidentiality of the respondent was maintained with an exemption to participate in the study or refuse to answer the question which they felt awkward with.

RESULTS

A total of 396 female health science students studying in Manmohan Memorial Institute of Health Sciences were studied to determine the prevalence and factors responsible for sexual harassment in public transport.

Socio-demographic Information

Mean age of the respondents participated in this study was 19.95 years. Majority of the participants i.e. 52.3% were aged 20 or more. When sorting on the basis of ethnicity majority belonged to Brahmin / Chhetri (57.1%) followed by Janajati (34.6%), Madhesi (3.0%), Dalit (1.0%) , Muslim (0.5%) and others being 3.8%. Majority 60.4% of the participants were studying in Bachelor level while the remaining 39.6 were in Proficiency Certificate level. Nearly three quarter of participants (72.5%) had origin outside the valley. Majority (93.1%) had monthly income of NRs 60,000 or less. While exploring the marital status it was found that only 5.57% were married.(Table 1). The relation of these socio-demographic characteristics with the experience of sexual harassment has been shown further in Table 5.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age (n=396)		
< 20 years	189	47.7
≥ 20 years	207	52.3

Ethnicity (n=396)

Brahmin/Chhetri	226	57.1
Janajati	137	34.6
Madhesi	12	3
Dalit	4	1
Muslim	2	0.5
Others	15	3.8

Education level (n=396)

PCL	157	39.6
Bachelor	239	60.4

Income of family (n=396)

≤ 60,000	369	93.1
>60,000	27	6.9

Origin of family (n=396)

Inside valley	109	27.5
Outside valley	287	72.5

Marital status (n=396)

Married	22	5.57
Unmarried	374	94.83

Indicators associated with experience of sexual harassment

Among the total participants of the study, 91.7% used public transport in regular basis while the remaining used their own private vehicles. The most used type of vehicle was found to be bus (59%) followed by micro-buses (39.7%) while remaining used other means like tempo and blue gas van. Larger fraction of the sample population (92.8%) spent two hours or less in public transport on a daily basis.

363 participants who used public transport on regular basis were asked if they had experienced sexual harassment in public transport, among which 79.6% had experienced sexual harassment which is significantly very high. (Table 2)

Table 2. Indicators associated with experience of sexual harassment

Indicators	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Use of public vehicle in regular basis (n=396)		
Yes	363	91.7
No	33	8.3
Type of vehicle used (n=363)		
Bus	214	59
Micro-bus	144	39.7
Others	5	1.3
Average hours spent in vehicle (n=363)		
≤ 2 hours	255	92.8
> 2 hours	108	7.2
Ever been sexually harassed in public vehicle (n=363)		
Yes	289	79.6
No	74	20

Indicators associated with occurrence of sexual harassment

When inquired about the experience in last 6 months 17.3% had experienced harassment four times or more where as 82.7% experienced less than 4 times. Majority of participants experienced physical harassment (67.1%) followed by verbal (61.2%) and non verbal (34.6%).

Moving on to perpetrators of sexual harassment, the lion's share was held by other fellow passengers travelling in the same transport which was 92.4%. Remaining 7.6% perpetrators were found to be bus drivers and conductors.

More than half of the perpetrators (55.7%) belonged to age group 25-45 years, followed by less than 25 years (35.6%) and more than 45 years (8.7%).

Harassments were more common during the day time (87.2%) as compared to night (60.9%). Majority experienced harassment while wearing college uniform (69.9%), followed by jeans/ t-shirt (55.9%), kurtha/tops (15.7%) and sari as well as skirt 5.2%. Exploring the reactions of the victims, larger fraction scolded the harasser (44.6%), 29.1% kept silent, 17.3% dropped at nearest bus station and 9% adopted other methods. When asked about how they felt after sexual harassment, majority of them felt angry (79.5%) followed by humiliated (47.9%), scared (45.5%), helpless (38.5%), traumatized (11.5%), loss of interest in study (7.6%). 2.1% were not affected by it at all and more surprisingly 0.3% enjoyed it.(Table 3).

Table 3. Indicators associated with occurrence of sexual harassment

Indicators	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Experience of sexual harassment in past 6 months (n=289)		
<4 times	239	82.7
≥ 4 times	50	17.3
Types of sexual harassment faced* (n=289)		
Verbal	177	61.2
Non verbal	100	34.6
Physical	194	67.1
Harassed by whom (n=289)		
Other fellow passengers	267	92.4
Bus operators (Driver/conductor)	22	7.6
Estimated age of the harasser (n=289)		
Younger age group (<25 years)	103	35.6
Middle age group (25-45 years)	161	55.7
Older age group (>45 years)	25	8.7
Time of harassment* (n=289)		
Day (morning/afternoon)	252	87.2
Night (evening/night)	176	60.9

Clothes worn when harassed* (n=289)

College uniform	200	69.9
Kurtha/tops	45	15.7
Saree	15	5.2
Jeans/Tshirt	160	55.9
Skirt	15	5.2

Sexual harassment makes you feel* (n=289)

Humiliated	138	47.9
Angry	229	79.5
Helpless	111	38.5
Scared	131	45.5
Traumatized	33	11.5
Loss of interest in study	22	7.6
It doesn't affect me at all	14	4.9
I enjoy it	2	0.7

Reaction when harassed (n= 289)

Scold the harasser	129	44.6
Keep silent	84	29.1
Counterattack/beat harasser	12	4.2
Drop at nearest bus station	50	17.3
Ask others for help	9	3.1
Call relatives	1	0.3
Cry	4	1.4

Note: * mark represents multiple responses

Indicators associated with police complain, reasons and precautionary methods of sexual harassment

Only 2.1% of participants who had experienced harassment complained to police while other 97.9% didn't. Among the 6 people who complained only one was sure that perpetrator was punished while others didn't know. The major reason for not complaining was seen as being scared (32.2%) followed by lack of confidence (24%). It was found that 20.1% of them didn't complain because they didn't want others to know they were harassed and 14.1% even thought that it was common for girls to be harassed. For 9.5% of them it was not an important matter to complain.

60.7% replied crowded vehicle as a major reason for sexual harassment. When asked about other reasons 54.4% felt harassers were not punished by police anyways, 50.7% said cultural dominance of men over women, 48.5% felt it was due to weakness of women, 46.9% said that men find it fun, 36.2% thought because it was mainly for men, 33% said due to sexual frustration of men and 25.5% of the total females thought it was provoking dress which invited harassment.

Talking about precautionary methods majority didn't used any of the methods (36.8%) whereas 32.6% preferred avoiding going out at night, 21.6% preferred to stop wearing clothes that might seem provocative whereas 18.8% carried self defensive items such as safety pin and pepper spray.(Table 4).

Table 4. Indicators associated with police complain, reasons and precautionary methods of sexual harassment

Indicators	Frequency	Percentage %
Complain to police after harassment (n=289)		
Yes	6	2.1
No	283	97.9
Punishment to harasser by police (n=6)		
Yes	1	16.7
No	0	0.0
Don't know	5	83.3
Reason for not complaining (n=289)		
Scared	91	32.2
Didn't want others to know I was	57	20.1

harassed

Lack of confidence	68	24.0
Don't think it is an important matter	27	9.5
It is common for girls to be harassed	40	14.1

Crowded vehicle as main reason for sexual harassment (n=396)

Yes	241	60.7
No	155	39.3

Other reasons for sexual harassment* (n=396)

They think it is manly	135	36.2
They think it is fun	175	46.9
Provoking dress	95	25.5
Weakness of women	181	48.5
Sexual frustration of men	123	33.0
Harassers are not punished by police	203	54.4
Cultural dominance of men over women	189	50.7

Precautionary method used to avoid sexual harassment* (n=396)

Avoid going out alone	64	16.5
Avoid using certain vehicle type	49	12.6
Having someone to accompany while travelling	72	18.5
Avoid going out at night	127	32.6
Avoid wearing some clothes which may seem provocative	84	21.6
Carry items such as safety pin, pepper spray	73	18.8

I don't use any of these methods 143 36.8

*Note: * mark represents multiple responses*

Bivariate analysis of various independent variables and experience of sexual harassment

Bivariate analysis results shows that there is significant relation between overcrowding of vehicle ($p = 0.000$, $p \leq 0.05$), type of vehicle used ($p = 0.033$, $p \leq 0.05$) and average hours spent in vehicle ($p = 0.033$, $p \leq 0.05$) with the experience of sexual harassment.

Table 5. Relation between sexual harassment and independent variables.

Factors	Experience of sexual harassment		OR	95% CI	P value
	Experienced	Not experienced			
	n(289)	n(74)			
Age					
< 20 years	142	35	1.076	0.646-1.795	0.778
≥ 20 years	147	39	1		
Marital status					
Married	18	1	4.849	0.637-36.925	0.054
Unmarried	271	73	1		
Overcrowding of vehicle					
Yes	178	74	0.706	0.652-0.765	0.000**
No	111	0	1		
Type of vehicle used					
Bus	162	52	0.540	0.311-0.935	0.0024**
Others	127	22	1		
Average hours spent in public transport					
≤ 2 hours	264	73	0.145	0.019-1.086	0.011**

> 2 hours	25	1	1		
Origin of family					
Inside valley	77	21	0.917	0.519-1.619	0.765
Outside valley	212	53	1		
Education level					
PCL	120	30	1.041	0.619-1.751	0.878
Bachelor	169	44	1		

*Note: *p<0.0001 **Value of Fisher Exact's test as expected counts are less than 5*

DISCUSSION

This study revealed that 79.6% of female health science students had experienced sexual harassment. Though no any research have been conducted specifically upon the students in Nepal, a research conducted by Chockalingam K and Vijaya A conducted in India revealed the prevalence as 63.0%.² Though this study showed higher prevalence than this study it was a way too less than the prevalence found by Neupane G and Lind MC in their research Violence against women on public transport in Nepal: sexual harassment and the spatial expression of male privilege which was found to be 97%.¹⁵

The age group with highest prevalence of sexual harassment was found to be \geq 20-30 years similar to the age group revealed by The World Bank Report. However in this study people in that very age group experienced 52.3% harassment while in later 91% experienced it.³

The acts of harassments were found to be much higher in this study during both day and night time as compared to that with the study conducted in Kathmandu valley by The World Bank. The experience during day and night time were found to be 87.2% and 60.9% respectively while in the later , it was found to be 41% and 36% respectively.³

Similarly overcrowding was thought as a main reason for sexual harassment by 69.19% of the participants of this study whereas 80% reported it as main reason in the World Bank Report.³

92.4% found fellow passengers as main perpetrators involved in harassment which is quite high than the research conducted by Lucas et al for Action Aid, where it was only 42%.⁶ Similarly the same study revealed that 11% of the victims reported the case to police which is higher as compared to this study. Here only 2.07% of the participants dared to make a police complain.

Only 9.5% of the victims didn't complain to police because they thought the case of harassment was not important enough in this study whereas in the similar study by Chockalingam K and Vijaya A, 76% of the victims didn't complain due to the same reason.⁴

While exploring the reason for sexual harassment, this study revealed no good provision of punishment for perpetrators as main factor which was as high as 54.4% whereas according to

Neupane G and Lind MC the main reason was found to be male dominated society which was 46.29%.⁷ However male dominated societies was one of the prominent reasons in this study too being 50.7%. Also in the same research weakness of women was quoted as 41.71% which is quite less than this research where it is 48.5%. Seemingly provoking outfit was considered as a reason for harassment by 25.5% of participants which is quite high as compared to this study by Neupane G and Lina MC where it is only 6.86%.⁷

Exploring about the reaction after being harassed 29.1% of the participants preferred to keep silent here which is quite low as compared to study report by Lucas S, Travers K, Gauvin SM, Talvot Vin Women and the City III where 73% of the participants preferred to keep silent.¹²

Similarly 37.9% of the participants helped the one being harassed in our study which is quite higher than in the one by Chockalingam K and Vijaya A, where it was only found to be 9%.²

CONCLUSION

On the basis of this study it was found that sexual harassment in public transport has really been a burning issue these days. Physical harassment was the most prominent type of sexual harassment followed by verbal and non verbal. Majority 79.6 % have experienced sexual harassment in public transport. After being harassed highest percentage of participants chose to scold the harassed followed by keeping silent and dropping at nearest bus station. Overcrowding was considered as main reason for harassment by 60.7% of participants along with no punishment for harassers by police by 54.4% and cultural dominance of men by 36.7%. Highest percentage of participants i.e. 35.8% didn't use any precautionary methods whereas 32.6% avoided going out at night and 18.8% carried items such as safety pin and pepper spray for precaution.

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