

Effects of Sexual Harassment on Learning Activities and Coping Strategies among University Girl Students

Kalpana Gyawali

Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Tribhuvan University

Orchid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8085-7482>

E-mail: gpkalpana81@gmail.com

Saraswati Karki

Thesis Student, Sanothimi Campus, Bhaktapur

E-mail: araswatikarki47@gmail.com

Abstract

The aim of this research was to explore the impact of sexual harassment on the academic activities of female students at Tribhuvan University and their strategies for dealing with harassers. The study employed a qualitative approach, using focus group discussions and in-depth interviews to gather data. The researchers organised the students' narratives to analyse the findings. The study revealed that various learning activities were negatively affected by sexual harassment among female students. These included difficulties in memorization, incomplete assignments, problems with presentations, a reluctance to ask questions or participate in group discussions, a sense of disorientation, disturbances, fear, and a loss of motivation. The coping mechanisms employed by the victims included avoiding the harasser, reprimanding them, confiding in friends and siblings, and lodging verbal complaints with the school principal and administrative authorities. However, due to limited trust in the institution, the lengthy legal process, and the fear of being accused themselves, legal action against the harassers was not commonly pursued.

Keywords: *Sexual Harassment, Learning Activities, Coping Behaviors, Girls*

Background

Sexual harassment is a pervasive problem observed in universities worldwide. According to UN Women (2013), sexual harassment encompasses unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, verbal or physical behaviour, or gestures of a sexual nature that cause offence or humiliation, leading to a work environment that is intimidating, hostile, or offensive. The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC, n.d.) defines sexual harassment as unwanted sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other forms of verbal or physical conduct with a sexual connotation. The United Nations (UN, 2002) defines sexual harassment as any unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature, which includes verbal, non-verbal, physical, visual, or other actions that are likely to

undermine the dignity, well-being, or performance of the individual experiencing it.

Smith and Sinclair (2002) conducted a study that revealed a global prevalence rate of 37% for sexual harassment among female university students. UN Women (n.d.) further emphasises the pervasive nature of sexual harassment in universities, with female students being particularly vulnerable. In the context of Nepal, research conducted by Rimal and Karmacharya (2017) found that 58.3% of female medical students at a Nepalese university reported experiencing sexual harassment. Similarly, Shrestha and Rimal (2019) discovered that 46.8% of female undergraduate students at another Nepalese university reported facing sexual harassment. These studies indicate that sexual harassment is a prevalent issue in Nepalese universities as well. The impact of sexual harassment on an individual's learning experience is substantial. Various studies, such as Fitzgerald et al. (1995) and Berdahl and Moore (2007), have demonstrated that individuals who experience sexual harassment often suffer adverse effects on their academic performance. These consequences encompass reduced motivation and engagement in classroom activities, as well as heightened feelings of anxiety and depression. Additionally, research has found that sexual harassment can create a hostile learning environment, making it difficult for individuals to feel safe and comfortable participating in class discussions and activities (Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Berdahl & Moore, 2007). This can lead to decreased participation and engagement in class, as well as lower grades and academic achievement (Fitzgerald et al., 1995).

Sexual harassment is seen as a pervasive problem in educational settings that can have negative effects on students' learning activities. In this context, this article has presented the impact of sexual harassment on students' learning activities using Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) as a framework. Bloom's Taxonomy is a widely used framework for understanding and classifying different levels of cognitive skills and abilities. The taxonomy includes six levels, from the most basic level of remembering to the highest level of creating. Research has shown that sexual harassment can negatively impact students' ability to engage at all levels of the taxonomy—and lead to a lack of motivation and engagement, which can make it difficult for students to see the relevance of the material to their lives and for them to apply what they have learned to real-world situations (Smith & Thompson, 2019).

Sexual harassment is an unpleasant behaviour and is responsible for many negative consequences for the victim's social, psychological, and physical aspects as well as their academic aspects. Hence, victims might adopt different coping behaviours to try and deal with the emotional and psychological impact of sexual harassment and regain a sense of control over their lives. In a Nepalese context, seeking social support from family and friends, seeking professional help, and

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seeking justice were some factors positively associated with reducing the negative impact of sexual harassment on women (Shrestha, 2018). But in practise, seeking professional help and seeking justice are not common, and it was found that self-blame, social isolation, and acceptance of the harassment are normal coping practises with sexual harassment (Sharma, 2016).

Sexual harassment is a significant issue that affects many university students, particularly women. In order to effectively cope with the negative effects of sexual harassment, it is important for university girls to understand the various strategies that can be used. Sexual harassment is a burning issue in Nepal, as it is in many other countries. In this scenario, this report tried to explore the effects of sexual harassment on the learning activities of university girl students and their coping behaviours against sexual harassment.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the consequences of sexual harassment on the learning activities of female participants enrolled in various departments and institutional colleges of Tribhuvan University, located in the Kathmandu Valley, at the bachelor's and master's levels. The colleges were selected using a random sampling technique. A total of 35 female students participated in the study, divided into five focus groups. The number of focus groups was determined based on the point of theoretical saturation, which is when new data no longer provides additional insights into the research questions (Zeller, 1993, as cited in Morgan, 1996). Participants for the focus group discussions (FGDs) were selected through voluntary participation and with their written consent. Open-ended guidelines were used during the FGD. Additionally, four in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with female students who were identified as being highly affected by sexual harassment. The qualitative data from the FGDs and IDIs was transcribed and prepared using expanded field notes. The transcribed texts were read multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the nature and aspects of the qualitative data. Thematic analysis was utilised to initiate, construct, refine, and finalise the qualitative data (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). In this study, the consequences of sexual harassment on the learning activities of female students were examined in accordance with Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956).

Result and Discussion**Experience of Sexual Harassment among University Girl Students**

Girls' students frequently bore the burden of sexual harassment in their everyday lives, encountering various forms of it on campus and in other areas. These forms included physical contact, verbal abuse, inappropriate staring, suggestive gestures,

and even instances of sexual assault. Among the most prevalent experiences were unwanted touching of sensitive body parts such as the breasts, buttocks, and genitals in crowded spaces. Additionally, girls were subjected to unsolicited messages, romantic proposals, requests for dates, teasing, and even demands for sexual favours in exchange for better grades in examinations. A married student from Dolakha among the participants of FGD expressed her experience as,

“Encountering unwanted physical contact, invasive staring, and discomforting behaviour is a frequent occurrence in everyday life, particularly while using public transportation or being in public spaces. I experience anxiety and fear when travelling on public buses, as there is a constant sense of unpredictability. These instances of harassment tend to be more prevalent when wearing loosely fitted or slightly revealing clothing. Men often attempt to touch without consent and gaze persistently at various body parts, even towards people they don't appear to know. Such inappropriate behaviour is not limited to me; other girls have also reported experiencing similar situations. (Married Chhetri student from Dolakha)”.

Similarly, sexual harassment was also found severely in the academic institutes, where the teachers were using their power over the students and bargaining for sexual favours from students for good scores in the examinations and assignments. In an IDI, one of the girl students expressed her experience as

“There is a teacher at our campus who engages in unethical behaviour, using it as a means to obtain better marks in practical examinations. He manipulates us by feigning sympathy and concern, often inviting us to meet him at a restaurant under the pretence of discussing academic matters. During one such encounter, he asked me to bring my report to the restaurant. However, his behaviour quickly turned inappropriate when he commented on my appearance, attempting to pinch my cheek. He positioned himself in a way that allowed him to press his knees against my breast while asking me to look at the screen of his laptop. Additionally, he would come behind me, placing his hand on my shoulder as if he were providing assistance with the laptop. These actions left me feeling extremely uncomfortable and violated. Fortunately, during a subsequent invitation for final proofreading, I decided to bring along other friends as a precautionary measure. This seemed to deter him, as he only offered tea and provided feedback on the report without further harassment. (an unmarried Janjati girl from Panchthar).”

The experiences shared by these girl students represent a larger pattern of sexual harassment they have endured from various individuals in different settings. Regardless of the location or the identity of the perpetrators, the participants in the research consistently reported that these incidents of harassment had a detrimental

impact on multiple aspects of their lives, including their ability to engage in learning activities and their overall academic performance.

Effects of sexual harassment on learning activities

In this research, the framework of Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) was utilised to define the learning activities and examine the impact of sexual harassment on these activities across three domains. The cognitive domain, which pertains to knowledge acquisition and intellectual skills, was found to be particularly affected by sexual harassment. The participants reported experiencing challenges in their ability to focus, concentrate, and retain information due to the negative effects of harassment.

In addition to the cognitive domain, the affective domain, which involves emotional and attitudinal development, was also significantly impacted by sexual harassment. Participants reported feelings of anxiety, fear, lowered self-esteem, and a general negative emotional state that hindered their overall well-being and ability to engage fully in the learning process. On the other hand, the psychomotor domain, which encompasses physical skills and coordination, was found to be the least affected by sexual harassment, according to the research findings. Overall, the research indicates that sexual harassment has a substantial and negative impact on the cognitive and affective domains of participants' learning activities, while the psychomotor domain experiences relatively lesser effects.

An unmarried girl from Kavreplanchok district shared that she had felt difficulty concentrating on the study.

Sexual harassment has very adverse effects on studies. The examination of the third year was very near, but I could not concentrate on the study to prepare for the examination. When I used to open the books, I felt illusion and started to see the face of that perpetrator on pages of copy and felt fear. Initially, I was a very active learner and used to participate in discussions with the teacher, but this year, I became passive, which made me too disturbed in my study, and I performed very poorly in the examination (an unmarried Brahmin girl from Kavre).

Along with the concentration problem, group work and participation in other learning activities were also seen as affected by students. Problems of focusing in study, poor participation in class activities, and problems completing assignments and homework were found among victims as bad consequences of sexual harassment, which can be observed from their expression. A participant mentioned- *“Yes, madam, I felt very bad due to sexual harassment in my study. During last year, I could not carry out my studies as I could and have. When I remembered past incidents, I could not focus on studying and could not actively*

participate in learning, and I lost my creativity too” (Married Brahmin girl from Terathum). Similarly, another girl mentioned-

“I experienced anxiety as a result of the ongoing sexual harassment we encounter on a daily basis. The single instance of harassment had a lasting impact on my ability to learn and study, disrupting my educational progress for over a week. Whenever I tried to engage in assignments, class discussions, or presentations, the memory of that incident would resurface, causing sudden disruption to my various learning activities”. (Unmarried Brahmin girl from Bhojpur).

In in-depth interview, a participant reported that she had to drop out her classes and other skill learning training after facing sexual harassment badly. She shared her past experience as:

“The sexual harassment inflicted by someone I once called my brother has greatly unsettled me. It has instilled fear within me and diminished my desire to engage in conversations with anyone. Merely the sight of him, or even a glimpse of his photo on Facebook, would evoke feelings of dread and irritation. Following the incident, I secluded myself at home for an entire month, unable to venture outside. This unfortunate event occurred right after I completed my twelfth-grade exams, when I had ambitious plans to pursue computer and language studies, as well as other skill-based training. However, due to the fear instilled by the perpetrator, I couldn't bring myself to attend those training programmes, thus wasting valuable time that could have been spent acquiring vocational skills”. (IDI with Unmarried Newar girl from Khotang)

This incidence of a girl student from Khotang has shown how sexual harassment affects long-term relationships, limits learning opportunities, and blocks the future path of a career.

Numerous national and international studies have highlighted the adverse effects of sexual harassment on the academic performance of its victims. Okoke (2011) and Witnowka (2005) have documented various repercussions, such as sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, reduced class participation, avoidance of study groups, contemplation of changing schools, actual school transfers, avoidance of library facilities, switching major subjects, and reluctance to visit professors' or teaching assistants' office hours, all resulting from experiences of sexual harassment. According to MSI (2008), 16 percent of female students who encountered sexual harassment found it challenging to study or concentrate in class, while 9 percent ultimately dropped out. Fogarty (2012) revealed that approximately 80 percent of females in academic institutions experienced sexual harassment, with 40 percent of them resorting to school absenteeism or skipping classes. Likewise, Cortina et al. (1998) emphasised the various psychological and health effects on sexually harassed girls and women, including depression,

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anxiety or panic attacks, difficulty in concentration, loss of motivation, feelings of violation, frustration, irritation, and powerlessness, as well as diminished confidence and self-esteem. Furthermore, a study conducted by Fitzgerald and Richman (2019) demonstrated that women who had encountered sexual harassment struggled with problem-solving and critical thinking tasks. These difficulties are likely attributed to the negative impact of sexual harassment on mental health, leading to increased stress and anxiety, which can detrimentally affect cognitive function and processing.

Insufficient research has been conducted on the specific effects of sexual harassment on the three domains of Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956). However, the limited available findings indicate that college students who have experienced sexual harassment tend to exhibit lower academic achievement compared to their non-harassed peers. Furthermore, their abilities in remembering and understanding information, analysing, evaluating, and creating, as outlined in Bloom's Taxonomy, have been adversely affected (Koss & Gidycz, 2018).

Various international and national studies consistently support the notion that sexual harassment is linked to negative impacts on victims' academic performance, motivation, and engagement in educational activities. These studies have also highlighted the increased risk of college dropouts associated with sexual harassment (Desmarais et al., 2019; Gyawali & Maharjan, 2022; Kuhl et al., 2017; Norgard et al., 2020).

Sexual harassment is recognised as a significant issue in the Nepalese context, with detrimental effects on the learning and academic performance of female students. These students are more likely to miss classes and achieve lower grades compared to their counterparts who have not experienced sexual harassment. Furthermore, the risk of college dropout is increased for those who have faced harassment (Shrestha & Shrestha, 2019; Shakya & Khanal, 2018). Gyawali and Maharjan (2022) have also documented reduced learning motivation, decreased interaction with teachers, and hindered engagement in self-learning and class discussions among sexually harassed female students. These findings underscore the negative consequences of sexual harassment on learning activities, and the study has specifically examined the impact across three distinct domains.

The findings of this study and other national and international research clearly show the negative consequences of sexual harassment on the victim, either directly or by retarding mental health.

Strategies to Cope with Sexual Harassment

There are many ways to conceptualise responses to sexual harassment and coping strategies. When students talk about what they would do if they personally

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encountered sexual harassment, the most frequent answer is to share it with friends or complain to the principal or the manager of the office. Some of the responses of the research participants have been found as- *"I shared it with a madam of the school, then she complained about it to the head teacher. Later, he (perpetrator) was transferred to other places and we got some relief."* (Unmarried Brahmin girl from Nuwakot).

"When I was in grade 9, one of the teachers pulled my bra's strip, and I shared it with friends and complained to the principal and also with mothers. Later, the school authority said they had taken action against him, and then that teacher did not come again." (Unmarried Janajati girl from Kanchanpur). However, sometimes the complaint may not work. A participant mentioned, *"Some boys used to sit in groups inside the college compound, and they frequently harassed us. We complained to our hostel warden about it, but there was no improvement in that situation. Then we asked again to the hostel warden, and they said that they had also complained to the campus chief, but there had been no change"* (Unmarried Janajati girl from Jhapa).

Due to the fear of job termination and low marks in practical examinations, girls were afraid to complain about sexual harassment cases to other people. They have just been ignored and were found to be a common response to sexual harassment. It is shown as a common response to sexual harassment, as was shown by Fitzgerald et al. (1995). *What can we do for the teachers? Some teachers threaten and say they will make students fail to pass and pass to fail* (Unmarried Madhesi girl from Sarlahi).

I don't know, what happened after complaining? I think nothing will happen. (Unmarried Chhetri girl from Ramechhap) *There is no meaning in complaining; we cannot get justice. Against justice, we have to face blame and discard in society* (Married Chhetri girl from Jumla). During interviews, girls ignored the sexual harassment due to a lack of trust in the concerned authorities.

In an IDI, a participant said she could not oppose the harassment directly. She feared the higher power of the perpetrator, who can cause further trouble in the future, and she has no courage to face coming problems. An unmarried girl from Panchathar has shared her feelings as:

A teacher attempted to embrace and express affection by saying, "I love you very much." This teacher is authorised to assign practical marks in exams. However, because we were afraid of the impact on our grades, we refrained from taking any action. Reporting this incident could potentially harm our future prospects and exam results, so we decided not to involve the police. Even if we did file a complaint, we have little hope of receiving justice, as we have witnessed numerous instances where similar cases of

sexual harassment against other women have been dismissed or the perpetrators have gone unpunished. (Unmarried Janjati women from Panchthar)

In this study, no formal action has been taken by any victims. This might be due to the unfaithfulness of the court and our judiciary process. The following voices of victims support this situation: I don't know, what happened after complaining? I think nothing will happen (Unmarried Chhetri girl from Ramechhap). *In our system, the big issues like 'Nirmla murder' cases became diluted, and there was no action, so I don't know where to complain about it, and I think there is no reason to take legal action in court* (the unmarried Newar girl from Khotang). *There is no meaning in complaining; we cannot get justice. In spite of justice, we have to face blame and feel alienated in society* (a married Chhetri girl from Jumla).

In this study, nobody has taken legal action against the offender, and the common coping practises were to share with friends, the principal of the colleges and school, the head of the office, and family members. Other girls were just trying to avoid it due to fear of the offender and social values. This type of situation was also reported by Volhlidalova (2015) in the Czech Republic, where the victims were not taking legal action due to fear of being accused of making false accusations, a lack of trust in the management team, and a lack of an appropriate system to complain about sexual harassment at school. Similarly, in Hong Kong, 58 percent of the sexually harassed students were found to be silent, 51 percent complained, 39 percent shared with their friends, 34 percent called the police, and only 16 percent reported it to their family members (HKIE, 2013). The lower rate of legal action against perpetrators has been reported by Mishra and Lamichhane (2018) in their study, where 44.6 percent of the students used to scold harassers, 29.1 percent used to keep silent, and only 2.1 percent of them have complained to the police in Kathmandu Valley. (Vohlidalova, 2015). The participant demanded an awareness programme and campaign to reduce sexual harassment in society.

Conclusion

Sexual harassment is a prevalent issue in various educational institutions, including schools and colleges under Tribhuvan University. A study conducted on university female students revealed numerous negative impacts of sexual harassment on their learning activities. Specifically, the cognitive learning domain was found to be affected, including difficulties in content identification, memorization, recall, group discussions, debates, questioning, arguing, and justifying. Similarly, the affective domain of learning, such as asking questions, reduced attendance, communication, and participation, was also diminished among victims of sexual harassment. Furthermore, the overall academic

performance of victims suffered due to accelerated mental problems like fear, irritation, worries, and anger.

Although sexual harassment is both unpleasant and legally offensive, many victims choose not to take legal action due to the fear of job loss, potential counter-blaming, and a sense of hopelessness in obtaining justice from the relevant authorities. Common coping mechanisms for victims include sharing their problems with friends, sisters, and sometimes parents. Some victims also report incidents to principals, senior office staff, or department heads. However, the prevalence of such behaviours or a culture of silence surrounding harassment may inadvertently encourage perpetrators to repeat their actions. Given that sexual harassment hampers learning activities, it is crucial for relevant authorities to take serious measures to prevent sexual harassment in schools, colleges, workplaces, and public spaces.

During interviews, participants expressed the need for various awareness programmes against sexual harassment and the effective implementation of laws and regulations. It is important to establish a victim-friendly mechanism for reporting complaints. A short and justice-oriented legal process can motivate victims to report cases against perpetrators and encourage them to fight against such crimes, ultimately creating a harassment-free environment. A society free from sexual harassment will enhance learning activities, promote mental health, and improve the overall well-being of female students.

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