
Silence in Transit: Women's Experiences of Sexual Harassment and Bystanders' Action in Public Transportation

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Abstract: Every day, thousands of women in Kathmandu commute by public buses to work and college. For many of them, this simple activity comes with an invisible burden of fear due to the prevalence of sexual harassment. This study explores the experiences of sexual harassment among women commuters in Kathmandu's public buses, focusing on the forms of harassment, its effects, and the critical role of bystanders. Through in-depth interviews with ten female participants who commute daily for educational and occupational purposes, this study reveals that physical harassment is the most common form, under the cover of crowded buses. As such, female travelers face anxiety, lost confidence, and a growing reluctance to use public transportation at all. The most painful part is the silence of those around them, the bystanders, leaving victims feeling invisible, and ashamed as if such harassment is normal. However, those who spoke up against such incidents were all female bystanders, indicating shared vulnerability and sisterhood among them. Even a person speaking up can diffuse the incident, boost the morale of the victims, and change the perpetrator's intention. Addressing this issue demands not just better policies and infrastructure, but a society willing to stand up for one another.

Keywords: Sexual harassment, Public transportation, Bystander, Non-response, Fear

1. Introduction

The use of public transportation services for daily commutes is pervasive in urban setting as it is accessible and affordable but sexual harassment against women traveler in public transport are high. Aryal et al. (2024) notes that at least 62% of women commuters had experienced physical harassment once during the course of the last one month. These are usually under reported cases due to fear or shame or condoned due to such actions. Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris (2021) revealed different types of harassment such as groping, catcalls, lewd glances, unjustified touching etc. on the busy vehicles. Due to such harassment, Dangwal & Bahuguna (2023) argues that women travelers switch their routes that cuts down their freedom and access to work and education even more. Gautam et al. (2019) also notes sexual harassment among females in public vehicles in the Kathmandu such as lewd remarks, staring, and entering the personal space of women without their permission. While such forms of violence are often seen as minor or negligible by their perpetrators and society at large, they actually inflict severe psychological trauma, reduced mobility, and loss of autonomy to women (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2021).

Mishra & Lamichhane (2018) found that 79.6 % of female health science students reported experiencing harassment in Kathmandu. A multi-response analysis of

harassment types revealed that 67.1% reported physical harassment, 61.2% verbal harassment, and 34.6% non-verbal harassment. This indicates high prevalence of sexual harassment in a context of increasing population and limited vehicle in Kathmandu. Similarly, a study conducted by Wagle et al. (2022) in Bharatpur revealed that 82.1% of the respondents had experienced sexual harassment in public transportation with 85.1% of them being subjected to verbal harassment, 80.1% to physical harassment and 70.8% to non-verbal harassment. Another study discovered that prevalence of sexual harassment among college students is 92 percent in Kathmandu Metropolitan City where physical form of harassment is 59 percent (Karki et al., 2021) indicating unsafe transit environments among female travelers.

2. Sexual Harassment in Public Transportation

Gender-based power relations have a real impact on individual's life. Pickup (1984) noted that urban mobility is actually moved by gendered expectations. The movement of women is closely linked to care for others or as a symbol of dependence on economic support that exposes them to insecure transit environments. Furthermore, almost all harassment incidents are associated with the physical configuration of the transit systems. Crowded, poor lighting, and the lack of surveillance were the most commonly identified contributing factors to escalate such vulnerability.

Bystander behavior is most critical in being either permissive or discouraging of sexual harassment within public transportation. While some evidence suggests passive responses are most likely, it is probably due to cultural norms, fear of getting involved, or else that people believe it is not their responsibility. Just as in several South Asian societies pointed out by Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris (2021) a person harassed in public spaces of Nepal receives a silence or avoidance from bystanders. In this context, Aryal et al. (2024) revealed that in 68% of the observed cases, no intervention was taken by bystander, and only 14% showing helpful interventions by fellow passengers. The rest of the instances were indirect reactions such as moving away, watching silently, or displaying disapproval without action. Mishra and Lamichhane (2018) replicated similar findings where many bystanders did not act because they feared reprisal or did not have strong institutional structures within which they could base their confidence. This lack of collective responsibility creates an environment in which perpetrators are secure and victims feel isolated.

Yang et al. (2007) argues that when it comes to harassment or assault, women usually experience the feeling of being humiliated; it is out of this that the sense of having a mark of shame, guilt or helplessness emerges. This is in the form of isolation and suffering. To this growing issue, there are few studies that argue about the urgency for the creation of public awareness campaigns and training programs on intervention to increase pro-social bystander behavior. Palermo et al. (2014) argue that active public response is associated with better emotional outcomes for victims and a greater deterrent effect on offenders. As such, it is important to understand bystanders' psychology

in order to frame long-term behavioral and policy changes to deal with harassment on transit.

Existing literature has mainly addressed the prevalence and statistical distribution of sexual harassment in public transport in Nepal, but most of these studies have been quantitative and because of this there is insufficient insight into the lived experiences of female commuters or the different facets of bystander behavior. To fill these gaps, this study sets following objectives.

- To explore the forms and nature of sexual harassment experienced by female commuters in public buses in Kathmandu.
- To examine the nature of bystander responses to sexual harassment in public buses in Kathmandu and their effects on victims.

3. Materials and Methods

A qualitative research design is employed to explore the experiences of female bus travelers in the Kathmandu Valley. The rationale to select this area is the densely populated urban center in Nepal, where most of the people are dependent on public transportation and incidents of gender-based harassment are frequently reported. Bus travelers were specifically selected as the study population to ensure the collection of valid, contextually grounded, and experientially rich data. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit ten female participants who travel by bus on a daily basis for educational or occupational purposes. The participants were initially screened using behavior-specific questions about unwanted physical contact, verbal comments, persistent staring, and other intrusive acts encountered during travel. Those who reported one or more such experiences were informed about the purpose and scope of the study and invited to participate in an in-depth interview. Selection of research participants continued until thematic saturation was reached, meaning no new patterns or insights were emerging from additional interviews.

Unstructured interviews were conducted to allow participants to describe their experiences, perceptions, and responses to harassment in public transport in their own words and at their own pace. This approach was chosen to avoid imposing predefined categories on participants' accounts and to remain sensitive to the complexity and diversity of their lived experiences. All interviews were conducted in a secure and confidential setting, audio-recorded with the explicit permission of each participant. Prior to each interview, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were also assured of the confidentiality of their identities and the data they provided, and were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. Efforts were made throughout the research process to minimize bias and prioritize the voices and meanings of the participants themselves. The audio recordings were transcribed, translated from Nepali into English, and entered into NVivo-10 for systematic organization and analysis. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Initial codes were generated

from the transcribed data, after which codes were grouped into broader themes that captured patterns of meaning across participants' accounts.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Sexual Harassment in Public Transportation

The sexual harassment in public transportation is prevalent in many societies. In a question about the forms of harassment, one of the research participants Nutan (Pseudonym), a 22-year-old female and a second year nursing student from Boudha replied that,

I remember an incident very clearly. A person standing at my back, rubbed part of his body against me in a sexual way. At first, I thought it was due to the bus constantly bumping on the road, but that was totally intentional. The incident was so sudden and silent that I was shocked at that moment. The bus was congested, and nobody could see what was happening. (Interview, October 26, 2025)

This demonstrates how harassers exploit such situations and the victim women cannot even complain such incidents as this could have happened due to the crowd, speed and road conditions. In many cases, victims withdraw from the scene thinking such might be an accidental but this reinforces a motivation among such harassers.

In similar vein, Hira (Pseudonym), 25-year-old female from Chabahil who works as a part time tutor highlights that, “*In public buses, I have noticed how men tend to touch female inappropriately, pretending it's an accident but such are intentional*” (Interview, October 27, 2025). Likewise, another participant Jyoti (Pseudonym), 24-year-old female from Pulchowk, a language instructor who travels via public bus, describes, “*I have seen and heard men touching them from behind on purpose. The majority of harassment is physical contact and it happens mostly when the bus is full. I believe almost every woman who travels through public vehicles has experienced such moments*” (Interview, October 27, 2025). All three statements clearly demonstrate that physical harassment is common and prevalent in public buses. According to them, such physical harassment is significant during the peak hours while everyone is rushing to their destinations.

Apart from touching the female body, verbal harassment and disgusting comments are other forms of harassment in public transport. Rosy (Pseudonym), a 22-year-old female from Tej Binayak, who commutes on a public bus to reach her music school on a daily basis also experienced vulgar whispers, creepy stares and repeated rubbing from behind. Highlighting her own experience, she said,

I was returning from my internship and I was really tired so I fell asleep on the bus but I heard something as if someone was saying something to me. When I looked on the seat by my side there was a man who was constantly staring at me. I ignored him and then he started whispering disgusting comments on my body and used very vulgar words. (Interview, October 28, 2025)

This shows how verbal harassment is used as a tool to make women feel more vulnerable without touching. All forms of harassment tend to pressure women mentally to dominate the scene. In many situations, such harassment is confusing for the victims as if it is real or accidental or unintentional. Jyoti recalled the incident where an old man pretended to help but touched a young girl inappropriately. According to her, “*an old man in the bus was helping a young girl to get down by touching her waist and back. He acted as if he was helping but it was not*” (Interview, October 27, 2025). This incident also sheds light on the fact that not all harassment is overt. It can come across in different forms, some may rely on manipulation of trust, ambiguity, and power differences, which makes it difficult to detect. Here, Jyoti occupied the position of a bystander; she observed the situation and later mentioned it as inappropriate. This also indicates the level of awareness of bystanders, yet it seems difficult to intervene because of uncertainty, fear of misjudgement, or prevailing social norms.

Sita (Pseudonym), a 28-year-old female from Boudha also shared her experience as an unfortunate and unforgettable incident that still haunts her to this day. According to her, “*When I was 19 years old and returning home on a bus, an old man, sitting next to me, was constantly smiling at me. After a few moments, he hit my upper body with his elbow pretending to take something out of his pocket. At first, I thought that was a mistake but then he hit me again*” (Interview, November 4, 2025). Continuous smiling at Sita indicates that the old person was testing the victim’s (Sita) response before escalating to physical contact with his elbow. Repeated action of the person evidently shows his intention to sexually harass the female travelers. The shift from non-verbal behavior to physical contact demonstrates a deliberate progression of harassment where the perpetrator initially accessed the victims’ reaction and subsequently engaged in physical contact.

Ekta (Pseudonym), who is already over her thirties, works in a private company and regularly commutes via public transportation and she too has a similar incident. According to her,

I was standing on a bus as the seats were full. A young man pressed against me even when there was space. I moved away and then he followed me. He then pressed his lower body on my back and kept doing that. I had to shout at him to move (Interview, October 24, 2025).

This incident demonstrates how harassment is not about circumstance alone but it’s more about power and intent, indicating that such actions are still prevalent even in open spaces. The participant had to shout at the harasser, indicating the emotional labor and assertiveness required by women to resist harassment.

Recalling the incident, Rima (Pseudonym), a 27-year-old female working in a private company shared, “*I was standing in a bus and a man standing right behind me tried to rub himself on me from the back. At first, I thought that it was a mistake but he did that repeatedly* (Interview, November 4, 2025). Hira also shared that the incident was not only mentally straining but also physically painful. She explained, “*A man standing next to me pushed my hip and made me really uncomfortable. I looked back at*

him but he was smiling. I looked away as I thought it was unintentional. But then he again pinched my waist” (Interview, October 27, 2025). This shows how the harassers take the cover of such space to intimidate female travelers. Most importantly, Sita herself faced such harassment several times in her life which indicates the prevalence of public transportation harassment. Paru (Pseudonym) a 23-year-old female student of Information Technology, residing in Mulpani also works as an intern in a private company. According to her, “A guy was sitting by me and I noticed he is touching my thighs as if he was trying to check something in his pockets repeatedly” (Interview, November 4, 2025). This also highlights that the harassment in a public bus is a deliberate act.

Similarly, Bina (Pseudonym), a 21-year-old female student of Hotel Management residing in Baneshwor, relies on public buses to travel for her academic and personal reasons. According to her, “a man tried to grab me from behind and I thought it was unintentional but he kept attempting to make me feel uncomfortable. I was trying to move away but it was very crowded so I couldn't go forward” (Interview, October 28, 2025). This experience captures the confusion of female travelers like Bina. The growing physical and sexual harassment in public buses is also due to the fear of social stigma, where the shame will be placed on the victim rather than the harasser. This experience also aligns with the previous incident, which reflected on the spatial constraints limiting the ways to prevent harassment. Sita, who is already in her late twenties, couldn't resist and shout at the harasser however Bina, a younger age might have a dilemma in reacting to such an uncomfortable situation.

Simran (Pseudonym), a 22-year-old female student from Gaushala uses a public bus to travel to her work place, recalling her encounter of harassment she describes, “A man of around 40s rubbed his genitals against my shoulder while traveling in a bus. This incident deeply shocked me and I couldn't react or understand the experience of that day” (Interview, October 26, 2025). This statement captures an extreme moment of harassment and due to anonymity, such predatory behavior leaves the victim powerless at that moment.

Passive acts create insecurity, fear, and discomfort, and harassment is multi-dimensional and deeply affects women's sense of safety. The victim was verbally abused even for taking a stand for herself by the perpetrator himself making it look as if the victim was falsely blaming the man. This case shows that forms of abuse come across over the power differences, trust, and ambiguity and make things harder for victims and how the structural inequalities in public buses silence victims and sustain harassment.

4.2 Bystanders' Non-Response Situation and its Effects

During the interviews, the participants were asked if they had ever been supported by bystanders in a situation of harassment. Most of them expressed profound disappointment and discouragement upon bystanders. According to them, the role of bystanders during such harassment was very less or none at all. Most participants experienced no help from bystanders despite their physical presence inside the bus. They

either remained silent, deliberately ignored, or didn't notice the incidents. Aligning to such behavior of a non-responsive bystander, Simran said, *"People saw the harassment, but they just ignored it. That made me feel even worse, like no one cared. Even though I couldn't take a stand for myself, why would someone else help me"* (Interview, October 26, 2025). Such unhelpful conditions could be due to two reasons. First, the threat of situation escalation and second, interfering with other issues might drag them as well. Bina

In case of not being supported, victims may as well feel that they are unable to take a stand for themselves and blame themselves for not being able to speak up. Simran further adds, *"If I had the courage to speak up for myself maybe others would've stepped into my aid"* (Interview, October 26, 2025). In these cases, repeated exposure to the absence of intervention experiences has the potential to develop victims' expectations of others, whereby they abdicate themselves from social support and become emotionally self-reliant in stressful situations.

Hira also expressed similar feelings for not being helped despite the incident. She expressed, *"No one helped me in that situation. It made me feel helpless and I wonder about the society we live in"* (Interview, October 27, 2025). If bystanders act as if they are busy or didn't notice the incident it can heighten the feeling of helplessness and isolation among the victim. She further adds, *"It made me lose faith in people. It was a kind of reality check and I have stopped expecting help"* (Interview, October 27, 2025). This indicates that in real life situations people would rather choose personal peace than get involved in the sufferings of others, ignoring the fact that their voice can ease someone else's difficult times or help them fight back. The lack of intervention is a strong message of social acceptance or the normalization of harassment, contributing to feelings of isolation and disconnection. Victims may begin to perceive public spaces as unsafe, even when surrounded by others.

Rima also expressed disappointment that bystanders didn't help her. Expressing her frustration, she said, *"The attention of the bystanders was captured when they heard my loud voice but they did nothing to support me inside the bus. This is really frustrating"* (Interview, November 4, 2025). The situation where bystanders choose to remain silent lowers self-confidence of female travelers in public spaces. This also highlights how a simple activity can be complicated after facing unpleasant experiences without any external support.

Jyoti recalled an incident where she saw another girl being harassed and touched inappropriately. She explained, *"I started shouting at the man and asked him to stop touching her. But the rest of the passengers just sat there, staring. No one else actually said anything or tried to help. It was very disappointing"* (Interview, October 27, 2025). This shows how non-response is affecting faith among people traveling in the same vehicle. When no one reacts, harassment becomes a normal activity for the harassers and on the other hand, it makes the victim feel isolated. Jyoti further shared, *"There are many people in Kathmandu who still hold the narrow mindset, so we need to take the stand on our own. I am still afraid of traveling alone in a bus"* (Interview,

October 27, 2025). This demonstrates how non-response incidents are slowly escalating fear and deescalating self-confidence and willingness to use public transportation among female travelers.

Ekta also experienced unsupportive bystanders when she experienced harassment where “*most people ignored it but a woman beside me told me to just move away and act as if nothing had happened*” (Interview, October 24, 2025). Such advice to ignore harassment rather than intervening or challenging the perpetrator’s behavior, most passengers chose to ignore the incident, while other women advised her to move away and pretend that nothing had happened. This response reflects the passive role and normalization of harassment. Although the intent is to prevent escalation, it implicitly is normalizing and reinforcing behaviors of both domination and avoidance. Moreover, deliberate avoidance highlights inaction by design and illustrates a great social-cognitive mechanism of a distancing of people to avoid involvement or conflict. For the victim, it only consolidates feelings of invisibility and underscores societal tolerance of harassment.

Rosy said, “*I don’t think the other passengers or bystanders noticed what I was going through because the bus was overcrowded and people were mostly keeping to themselves*” (Interview, October 28, 2025). Here, situational constraints of overcrowding and limited visibility explain non-intervention. This highlights that not all passive bystanders are intentionally indifferent; some are physically unable to notice, which still results in perceived social isolation for the victim. Some bystanders do not intervene to support and it does not mean they are ignoring but such incidents remain unnoticed to them due to the congested space. Rosy further adds, “*At that moment, I couldn’t even believe what was happening to me. I wished someone would see him and stop him but no one helped me. I felt really bad and mentally disturbed for many days. It makes me lose confidence and feel like I have to deal with everything alone*” (Interview, October 28, 2025). This demonstrates how a single female traveler expects help during such a situation and in no help situation, their motivation using public buses is down.

Similarly, Paru expressed how there were only seats full of people in the bus but still no one responded. According to her, “*No one reacted to it except me. Probably most of the people did not notice what was happening because everybody was busy inside the bus. People were looking straight and maintaining their balance since it was too packed*” (Interview, November 4, 2025). It reflects how the surrounding factors such as overcrowding and congestion limit the bystander from noticing such incidents. The travelers might be on their own, rushing for their destination, leading to an unnoticed incident. However, from these explanations, a clear pattern can be recognized that various factors can prevent bystanders to help resist the incidents in such a situation. Despite all the reasons that support why bystanders were unable or unwilling to intervene, the lack of support created a sense of invisibility, intensifying the feeling of isolation and helplessness for those who were harassed.

Sita experienced an intense level of emotions when they faced such a situation and had to cope alone. According to Sita, “*I felt hopeless and weak when no one helped*

and I felt so numb that I didn't think that I should ask for help or was not expecting anyone to help me" (Interview, November 4, 2025). Sita felt helpless during such harassment. The unsupportive nature of bystanders not only intensifies the emotional strain of the participants but also discourages the participants to take a stand for themselves in fear of judgment and humiliation, this reinforces a motivation

Overall, the participants revealed that the lack of support from bystanders intensifies the emotional consequences. Feelings such as loneliness, fear, disgust, helplessness and invisibility consistently emerged across the experiences shared by the participants. The commonality of emotional responses when facing vulnerable situations alone amplifies the psychological impact of harassment. Multiple participants reported long-term effects in public buses or similar public spaces beyond the immediate distress caused by harassment, which includes effects such as fear, decreased confidence and avoidance of similar activities due to fear. The repeated theme of self-blame and decreased trust among some participants shows how lack of intervention not only results trauma but also causes social isolation.

4.3 Effect of Supportive Bystander Intervention

Among ten participants, very few were directly or indirectly intervened by bystanders after witnessing the incidents. Nutan is one of them, as she shared, *"As I shared earlier, a man sitting behind me was rubbing his body on my back constantly so I shouted at him to make a little space between us. In the meantime, another adult female standing in front of me spoke to be careful"* (Interview, October 26, 2025). This incident shows the power of immediate intervention by bystanders. The immediate response diffuses the situation and encourages victims to stand strong against such people. As Nutan narrated, even one supportive voice can reduce feelings of helplessness and isolation. Hence, it seems vocal and assertive intervention on the part of the bystander reinforces the sense of agency and social support of the victim, nullifying those negative effects of harassment.

In Ekta's case as well, the bystanders intervened directly and offered help in a form of advice or limited support. Ekta explained, *"Most people ignored it but a woman beside me told me to just move away and act as if nothing has happened. She told me to ignore him and if I didn't give any attention, he won't do anything"* (Interview, October 24, 2025). This shows indirect support from a bystander providing guidance to the victim instead of confronting the harasser. This is an avoidance-based strategy to help the victim de-escalate immediate risk.

Bina described how people were prompt to ask what was happening after she grabbed their attention from shouting at the harasser. According to her, *"When there was no space to move ahead, I shouted to that person behind me and other bystanders started to look at that person. One of the female bystanders indirectly said to be aware of female and elderly travelers"* (Interview, October 28, 2025). The indirect response from an unknown female bystander is a morale support to the female travelers. Although her response is not directly targeted to that person, it can immediately dislodge

any ill intention among such people and encourage other bystanders to speak up against such an incident.

In a few cases of bystanders' support against such incidents, all the supporters were unknown female bystanders. The reason behind male bystanders not speaking might be due to possible escalation of conflict. Male bystanders might speak up if the victim is his relatives or friends. In all three supportive incidents, female bystanders were in the front line to speak against such intentional harassment indicating shared vulnerability, empathy and sisterhood among female travelers.

In a question on the importance of bystanders during such incidents, there was a shared belief among the participants that if bystanders raise their voice, it can demotivate the harasser and shift the scene in favor of the victim. For instance Hira said that, "*If bystanders raise their voices or take a stand, it can stop such attacks immediately. Their support can demotivate the harasser and give strength to the victim*" (Interview, October 27, 2025). In the similar tone, Ekta also replied that, "*A bystander's reaction can shame the harasser and protect the victim immediately*" (Interview, October 24, 2025). These statements focus on the social accountability of the bystanders. Their intervention signals social disapproval which could prevent similar incidents in the future. Rima also believes that, "*Bystanders can help people to reflect on their behavior and support victims. Their support can mean a huge role in helping someone who is suffering*" (Interview, November 4, 2025). Such interventions by bystanders provide a sense of security to victims and encourage them to take a stand for themselves.

Paru also noted that, "*If a bystander supports in such a situation the victim will feel safe enough to speak up and confront the harasser*" (Interview, November 4, 2025). If bystanders used some voice of support to defend the victim, it will make the victims feel a lot safer. Bina in the similar tone shared a common perception that "*If even one person takes a stand, these things will not escalate and would make the victim feel safer*" (Interview, October 28, 2025). Bystander intervention can help in preventing the escalation of the incident and emphasizing the importance of immediate and visible support.

Few participants strongly believe that bystanders can still play a significant role in stopping unacceptable behaviors. According to Rosy, "*I observed that a bystander's role is strong enough to make the victim feel supported and send a clear message that such actions are unacceptable*" (Interview, October 28, 2025). This focuses on the idea that bystanders can play a role in setting public norms. Social disapproval can make the harasser punished and aware that such actions are socially unacceptable. Sita's perception also relied on the common thread but she still cannot believe how she is not helped. She said, "*Bystanders can play a significant role in preventing these harassment. But most people won't react*" (Interview, November 4, 2025). This shows the cynical human nature where they tend to rely on others for help if something wrong happens to them. When there are no familiar people around or when a victim is alone, bystanders with helpful intentions are the only reliable people in such public places to protect the victim. Raising voices can be a preventive factor as well as provide safety

assurance to the victim. It draws attention to the situation, making other people aware who might help the person being harassed and it can also work to make others aware. The role of the bystanders is not just to intervene only when something wrong happens, but to remain aware of their surroundings and not ignore when something wrong is happening.

4.4. Discussion

The study's findings validate the current knowledge about the nature and extent of sexual harassment in public transportation in Nepal. The verbal abuse and physical intrusion described by participants as sexual harassment is similar to what Ceccato and Loukaitou-Sideris (2021), categorize as groping, catcalling and non-consensual touch. The high prevalence of sexual harassment to female commuters in Kathmandu aligns with the findings of Mishra & Lamichhane (2018) and Karki et al. (2021) who reported the prevalence of sexual harassment to female travelers at 79.6% and 92%, respectively in the same city. This research adds how perpetrators intentionally harass using traffic infrastructure and crowd density as opportunities, leaving the victims distrustful and reluctant to report the incident.

The overcrowding, congestion and lack of supervision are systemic risks. Beyond the specific incidents, the study adds to the claims made by Dangwal & Bahuguna (2023) that harassment constrains women's mobility and their capacity to access education and employment, with several women suffering from transport anxiety. It is thus a systemic process of limiting women's public participation. As such, the findings show harassment in Kathmandu's public buses is structurally supported by a confluence of tolerance of culture, overcrowded public transport and near-absolute impunity.

Crucially, harassment is indirectly supported by the silence of others and this finding is consistent with Aryal et al. (2024), who found that 68% of harassment cases did not attract bystanders' attention. In this study, participants such as Hira, Rima and Simran also confirmed that the silence of fellow passengers (bystanders) can be more painful than harassment itself. But the voice of one bystander can change the situation and the victim's mental state and this resonates with Palermo et al. (2014) study which concludes that active bystander intervention leads to better emotional outcomes for victims and a deterrent effect on offenders.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, sexual harassment in Kathmandu's public transportation is a prevalent issue, frequently exacerbated by systemic challenges such as severe overcrowding and gaps in regulatory accountability. The harm among victims extends beyond the incident itself such as fear to travel via public transport, limiting the freedom of movement and most importantly normalizing harassment in public space. In such, a single action of bystander support can meaningfully restore the victim's sense of safety and demoralize the harasser.

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contributed in data analysis using Nvivo-10 and Dil Bahadur Gurung, PhD is the final author who contributed in overall supervision. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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