

SEXUAL HARASSMENT OF WOMEN: A STUDY OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to reveal the patterns of prevalence; experience and redressal of sexual harassment obtained among the female students in the campuses of degree colleges, in Silchar town located in a remote corner of India. The patterns were drawn from the data drawn from, 97 respondents of rural and urban residences in three prominent degree colleges. The results of the study revealed that women are more prone to sexual harassment in urban areas than in rural areas. The findings also revealed that rural and urban students experience sexual harassment differently. Rural students shy more to share their sexual harassment incidences as compared to urban students. The general awareness of the laws is absent in rural areas and, therefore, they do not know the formal procedures for reporting incidents of sexual harassment. Based on these results, the researcher recommends the augmentation of awareness programs in institutions of higher education. Committees must be established in all higher education institutions to monitor the environment and redress sexual harassment.

Keywords: Experience, Prevalence, Redressal, Sexual Harassment

INTRODUCTION

The higher education has the primary responsibility of equipping the citizens with the skills which empower the students to contribute to national development. For greater efficiency and accelerated development in the country, men and women should have the same power in all disciplines offered in universities, since national development requires the shared effort of citizens regardless of gender (Salman et al. 2011). Women who at present constituted 48% of the population of India (Socio-economic and Caste Census, 2011) registered a phenomenal rise in their number enrolled in higher education since Independence. The enrollment of women in higher education, which was less than 10% of the total enrollment on the eve of independence, increased to 41.5% in the 2010-11 academic years (Nairi, 2012). Overall policy objectives of the government of India is to increase women's participation in the management of higher education,

including teachers, administration and staffs to achieve a better gender balance through various government programs that recognize gender equity and try to involve women capable of becoming administrators for the qualitative development of higher education. The emphasis given to gender enrolment in higher education in India has required numerous interventions by different agencies and associations. The principle of gender equality enshrined in the preamble, fundamental rights, fundamental duties and the guiding principles of the Constitution of India has much to do with reducing the gender gap in higher education. In addition to these, India has also ratified several international conventions and human rights instruments to guarantee equal rights for women. The government has established several commissions to analyse the status of women in Indian society. There are provisions in sections 509, 294 and 354 of the Indian Penal Code to deal with obscenity, mockery and sexual harassment of women. Despite these tools, sexual harassment in educational institutions is one of the common crimes that are increasing day by day. Sexual harassment in educational institutions is a questionable form of behaviour and should not be tolerated. It is a degrading and illegal act. Sexual harassment develops a careless attitude in class and no longer took their work seriously and became undisciplined (Abuya et al. 2012). It disturbs an individual's self-confidence and can have an adverse impact on an individual's work or academic performance (Barbara 1985; Champion 2006; Quaicoe-Duco 2010). Therefore, women need to gather knowledge and move forward instead of standing in the corners and complaining about it. The issue of sexual harassment is delicate and difficult to deal with. When it occurs in an educational setup, it is less a result of the work environment, as it is an impression of traditional social behaviour between genders and social attitudes towards women (Rudman 1995; Sunder 1996). It is extremely difficult for the victims to complain about sexual harassment without aggravating things or because of the paranoia of losing their livelihood. This is because sexual harassment of women is treated as a "personal" problem among the people involved and not as a social problem. Educational institutions have presented policies to protect students from being victims of sexual harassment. However, studies (Chaudhuri 2007; Riger 1991; Joubert et al. 2011) indicate that there are still a considerable number of cases, such as having been contested in court. Educational institutions are not taking appropriate action when students' reporting sexual assault and the institution's investigation takes longer to complete or not carry out an investigation. Accusers think that the institution does not take their complaints seriously, and the accused found the process of redressal unnecessarily drawn out, causing them additional stress. In spite of strong sexual harassment policies and action plans, educational institutions are thus found at fault for lack of implementation. Sexual harassment is experienced more or less in the institutions of higher education across the regions in India. For the elimination of this problem, a thorough understanding is called for. Therefore, a question arises, 'What patterns of prevalence, experience and, redressal of sexual harassment are obtained among the female students in the campuses of higher education, in Silchar town located

in a remote corner of India'? It has been attempted with reference to the three-degree colleges; namely, Gurucharan College, Radhamadhab College and Silchar College in Silchar town.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research, basically descriptive and analytical, is based on primary data, collected from a sample of 97 female college students in Silchar town with the help of a questionnaire. The universe of the study consisted of female college students of Silchar town and each female student of the colleges constituted a unit for data collection. The town has in all five colleges. The sample of the study was selected at two stages. First, three colleges; namely, Gurucharan College, Radhamadhab College, and Silchar College were each purposively selected to represent the colleges of big, medium and small size on the basis of the number of students and streams of study. Then, the female students were divided into streams of study; namely, Arts, Science and Commerce. The streams were each divided into semesters of undergraduate study; namely, First, Third and Fifth semester in the period of the year. Finally, from each of the three semesters of each stream a random sub-sample of 5% female students was taken by drawing a lottery. From Gurucharan College sample of undergraduate female students was taken from three streams; namely, Arts, Science & Commerce while Radhamadhab and Silchar College had only Arts stream students. Radhamadhab College has Commerce stream also, but at the time of the data collection admissions of commerce students were under process and therefore, only Arts stream students could be considered to draw a sub-sample from the college. Silchar College has only Arts stream students. The sub-samples from each college drawn by using stratified random sampling were combined to ultimately get the main sample of 97 female students from the three colleges. These colleges are comparatively bigger in size and have rural-urban division.

THE RESPONDENTS

People's social economic background does not only determine their life opportunities but also provides them with a specific outlook towards life to face social reality; it also enables them to determine their attitudes and behavioural patterns. The respondents are from the age of ranging from 16 to 25 years. The most, over four-fifths (86.60%) of the respondents, are in the age group of 16-20 and the rest belong to the age group of 21-25. Most of the students belong to urban residence and an insignificant portion (5.26%), from the age group of 21-25, belongs to the rural residence. There is perceptible difference in the way students from the Arts, Science and Commerce streams engage in discussions on the issues of sexual harassment. The majority, over two fifths (56.7%) of the respondents belong to Arts stream, followed by Science stream (28.9%) and Commerce stream (14.43%). Notably, the rural respondents are less than urban respondents in Science and Commerce streams and more than urban respondents in Arts stream. Family income has an effect on student's lifestyle therefore to a certain extent it can affect students'

exposure to sexual harassment. The largest number, over one third (37.11%), belongs to the families whose monthly income is Rs. 20000-40000 rupees, and are from the urban residence. The effect of media cannot be overemphasized when it comes to information dissemination. Various acts of sexual harassment are being portrayed through these mediums however it also opens up a great opportunity for redressing same issue. Both rural and urban area has access to one form of media channel or the other – televisions, mobile, internet, magazines and newspapers. The largest number, about a half (45.36%), uses television/mobile/internet, and are from urban residence.

PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Prevalence of sexual harassment refers to the time and places of occurrences of sexual harassment and the respondent's sense of security in the college campuses. Since women are predisposed to sexual harassment, it may occur at any time and any place. Therefore, safety and security in college campuses is a big concern for students and parents across the nation.

The following are major findings:

- i. Women are more predisposed to sexual harassment in urban areas as compared to rural areas. This is due to a lack of security in places like cinema halls and shopping malls and also due to weak moral norms in the urban environment of heterogeneity and anonymity. Most of the respondents, over three fourths (76.29%), gave no response to the question on the prevalence of sexual harassment to women in different places because they seemed to have shied or lacked self-confidence to discuss the topic or were victims of sexual harassment. The rest faced it outside the college campus, in public transport, inside the college campus, near a coaching center, in a shopping mall, inside the classroom, at workplace, and in the cinema hall. This pattern is also found among the urban respondents in all the three semesters, while the respondents of rural residence are distributed over a few categories of the responses such as in public transport, outside the College campus, inside the classroom and no response.
- ii. Sexual harassment occurs at any time of the day among the urban students while among the rural students it mostly occurs in the afternoon only when they return home from their respective colleges by using public transport. It is because, in their daily life in urban area, people of both the sexes confront each other many times in public spaces like road, park, and educational institution, etc. or moving here and there. Most of the respondents, over three fourths (76.29%), gave no response on the time of occurrences of sexual harassment because they had fear, lacked self-confidence and were not conversant with the topic of sexual harassment. The rest reported afternoon, evening and morning as the time of occurrence. This pattern is also found among the urban respondents in all the

three semesters, while the respondents of rural residence are distributed over a few categories of the responses such as afternoon and no response.

- iii. Most of the rural students have no idea of the importance of security in colleges in relation to sexual harassment. This may be that the rural respondents might have a secure social environment in their setting and have not imbibed a sense of subtle harassment or security to feel its incidence or even they might have preferred to conceal it to avoid any stigma in their life. Most of the respondents, over three fourths (76.29%), gave no response on their sense of security on campus in relation to sexual harassment because they seemed to have not known the relationship between security and sexual harassment, followed by about one fifth (17.53%) of the respondents who have a sense of security in campus and less than one-tenth (6.19%) who felt that they have no security on campus. This pattern is also found among the urban respondents in all the three semesters, while the respondents of rural residence are almost equally distributed over the responses, but with an edge of the respondent with no response.

EXPERIENCE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Experience of sexual harassment includes various types of sexual harassment, emotional and behavioural reaction of the respondents to such kind of incidents, kind of relationship with the harasser/s, agency with whom the respondents shared the incidents of sexual harassment and various causes of not sharing the incidence of sexual harassment with others.

The following are major findings:

- i. The urban students comparatively suffer from more forms of harassment than the rural students, perhaps due to more freedom of spatial mobility among the urban girls. Over three fourths (76.29%), gave no response to their experience with different types of sexual harassment because they were ashamed and feared to be victimized further. The rest experienced it in the form of unwelcoming comments and unwanted touching, leering, whistling, by taking photographs without consent, staring and attempts to molest. This pattern is also found among the urban respondents in all the three semesters, while the respondents of rural residence are distributed over a few categories of the responses such as unwanted touching, taking photographs without consent, whistling and no response.
- ii. Rural and urban students react to sexual harassment differently. Ignoring the situation, crying for help and humiliation are primitive feelings which do not solve the problem. In any case, they worsen the situation in the future of the victim. These reactions may be due to lack of good relations between the victims and their families, authorities and/or friends. Over three fourths (76.29%), gave no response with regards to their reaction to

sexual harassment because they might not have experienced it in their lives. The rest ignored the situation, felt embarrassed, cried for help, afraid, protested verbally, felt confused, shocked and protested physically. This pattern is also found among the urban respondents in all the three semesters, while the respondents of rural residence are distributed over a few categories of the responses such as ignoring the situation, crying for help, humiliation and not responding.

- iii. Urban students are predisposed to sexual harassment from anyone as compared to the rural students who are significantly harassed by strangers. It is a value difference in the two settings and therefore the urban respondents face harassment from even their peers and seniors in an environment of comparatively less moral rigidity. Over three fourths (76.29%), gave no response to their relationship to the harasser because they seemed to have feared or had never experienced sexual harassment. The rest have found their harassers as strangers, peers, and seniors. This pattern is also found among the urban respondents in all the three semesters, while the respondents of rural residence are distributed over a few categories of the responses such as peers, strangers, and no response.
- iv. Rural students shy to share their sexual harassment incidences with friends as compared to urban students. This may be due to their ignorance of the situation as well as feeling of being humiliated. Over three fourths (76.29%), gave no response on the agency to which they shared about the sexual harassment because they seemed to have no experience with sexual harassment or they were embarrassed in sharing the experience. The rest shared their experience with family members, friends and none. A similar pattern is observed among urban and rural respondents. However, the only difference is that none of the rural respondents shared the experience with friends.

THE REDRESSAL OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Redressal of sexual harassment includes formal procedure for reporting the incidents of sexual harassment, they report about the incidents to whom and what was the outcome of that appeal.

The following are major findings:

- i. Rural students do not know that there are formal procedures followed to report sexual harassment incidences. This is because general awareness about laws is absent in the rural areas and so that they are not aware of formal and legal ways of addressing such a problem. Over three fourths (76.29%) of the respondents gave no response to awareness of formal procedure for reporting incidents of sexual harassment. This can be as a result of lack of information. It is subsequently followed by over one fifth (20.62%) who lacked awareness of formal procedure to report the incidents and less than one-tenth (3.09%)

who had awareness of formal procedures to report the incidences. A similar pattern is observed among urban and rural respondents. However, the only difference is that none of the rural respondents have awareness of formal procedure to report the incidents of sexual harassment.

- ii. Formal procedures in reporting sexual harassment are followed in an urban area only as rural residents lack awareness of such formal procedures to be followed. The largest number (2.06%) of the respondents reported it to the principal, and an insignificant fraction (1.03%) reported the incidence to the local NGO. A similar pattern is also found among the urban respondents in all the three semesters, while there is no respondent from rural residents who followed any formal procedure to report the incidents.
- iii. The largest number (2.06%) of the respondents said that the perpetrators were warned, and an insignificant fraction (1.03%) said that the perpetrators were punished. A similar pattern is also found among the urban respondents in all the three semesters, while no respondent from rural residence reported any outcome of the complaints. It is because respondents from rural residences did not follow any formal procedure to report the incidents and hence there arises no question of any complaint.

CONCLUSION

Sexual harassment is an offense that contains numerous intersecting issues of human rights, dignity, productivity, and gender equality. If educational institutions are not made free of discrimination for women, then, a community will not progress. The prevention of sexual harassment in Indian colleges should be seen as an educational challenge. The focus should shift from avoiding responsibility to the need to educate students about the effects of sexual harassment and the role that culture plays in the perception of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment of women becomes a rare topic of discussion for people, especially in rural areas of India, mainly due to lack of awareness about sexual harassment in rural areas compared to urban areas that seem to be more culturally open to debate in this matter. The places where sexual harassment occurs in rural areas are much lesser than in urban areas. Therefore, the dark places, crowded or having unknown people are well-identified for sexual harassment and Law enforcement agencies need to monitor well to reduce cases of sexual harassment in urban locations. It is also the responsibility of parents and college authorities to take preventive measures in the best possible way, and this can only be done through awareness.

In India, urban dwellers are much more aware of sexual harassment than rural dwellers. Apparently, the media have become an essential part of everyone's life and play an important role in the dissemination of information. In India, both rural and urban populations have access to a form of media channel or other – televisions, mobile, internet, magazines and newspapers.

Various acts of sexual harassment are being portrayed through these media and these open up a great opportunity for redressing these issues. Well planned campaigns can be launched through these channels to fight against sexual harassment. In India, most female students in higher education do not follow formal procedures to report the incidence of sexual harassment due to fear of retaliation by the offender. Therefore, there must be an adequate electronic platform for the students so that they can lodge a complaint directly to the competent authority. Taking into account the fact that it is not just a question of reporting sexual harassment cases, the competent authorities must also do justice to those in need. No perpetrator should remain unpunished. Most victims are afraid to share their experiences because of shame, which is at the core of the intense emotional wounding women experience when they are sexually abused. Here, it is necessary to provide counseling and other support to help women get rid of the traumatic past. The counseling and guidance cell will make it easier for students to discuss sexual harassment issues, as most victims are afraid to share their experiences with friends because they were not sure how their friends would react. That could possibly make the situation worse. But where there is a consultant, students will gladly choose to address them as a first choice to handle such problems. While colleges are not yet fully gender-sensitive, sustained efforts to make students aware of their rights and strengthen the redressal mechanism can create a favorable environment for women in educational institutions in particular and in society in general. The committees must be set up in all higher educational institutions to monitor the environment and should work effectively to prevent and redress sexual harassment.

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