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Three types of sexual harassment of females in public places in Pakistan

Pakistan'da halka açık yerlerde kadınların maruz kaldığı üç tip cinsel taciz

Farida Anwar, Karin Österman, Kaj Björkqvist

Peace and Conflict Research & Developmental Psychology, Åbo Akademi University, Finland

Abstract

Introduction: The study was aimed at investigating three types of sexual harassment in public places in Pakistan.

Methods: A questionnaire was completed by 543 female students in Pakistan (M=22.3 years, SD 4.3). The questionnaire included scales for measuring physical, verbal, and nonverbal sexual harassment, and four scales measuring reactions to sexual harassment.

Results: Sexual harassment was found to be most common in market places, and the perpetrator was typically a stranger. Nonverbal sexual harassment was the most frequent type. Only 2.8% of the respondents had never been victimised from any of the three types of sexual harassment. The most common reaction of the victims was to run away. Respondents highly victimised from physical, verbal or nonverbal harassment scored higher than others on defensive reactions, immediate distress, and long-term negative concomitants. Educational level was not associated with the amount of victimisation from any type of sexual harassment, but respondents with a high education scored significantly higher on negative reactions to sexual harassment.

Discussion and Conclusion: Sexual harassment was associated with negative psychological concomitants for the victims. It can be concluded that sexual harassment in public places in Pakistan is a huge social problem that needs to be addressed.

Keywords: Education; concomitants; public places; Pakistan; sexual harassment.

Özet

Amaç: Çalışma Pakistan'da halka açık yerlerde üç tür cinsel tacizi araştırmayı amaçladı.

Gereç ve Yöntem: Pakistan'da 543 kız öğrenci tarafından anket yanıtlandı (E=22.3, SD 4.3). Anket, fiziksel, sözel ve sözel olmayan cinsel tacizi ölçmek için ölçekler ve cinsel tacize tepkileri ölçen dört ölçek içermektedir.

Bulgular: Cinsel tacizin en yaygın pazar yerlerinde olduğu tespit edildi ve fail, genellikle yabancı biriydi. Sözsüz cinsel taciz en sık görülen türdü. Ankete katılanların yalnızca %2,8'i, bu üç tacizi türünden herhangi biri ile hiç bir zaman mağdur olmamıştır. Kurbanların en yaygın tepkisi kaçmak oldu. Fiziksel, sözel veya sözel olmayan tacizden yüksek oranda mağdur edilen katılımcılar, savunma reaksiyonları, acil sıkıntı ve uzun vadeli olumsuz sonuçlar ilgili olarak diğerlerinden daha yüksek puan aldı. Eğitim düzeyi, herhangi bir cinsel tacizden kaynaklanan mağduriyet miktarı ile ilişkili değildi, ancak yüksek eğitimli katılımcılar cinsel tacize olumsuz tepkiler konusunda önemli ölçüde daha yüksek puan aldı.

Sonuç: Cinsel taciz, mağdurlar için olumsuz psikolojik doğal sonuşlar ile ilişkiliydi. Pakistan'da halka açık yerlerde cinsel tacizin ele alınması gereken çok büyük bir sosyal sorun olduğu sonucuna varılabilir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Eğitim; doğal sonuç; halka açık yerler; Pakistan; cinsel taciz.

Sexual harassment in public places is a common yet understudied form of gender-based aggression directed against females.[1–4] The aim of the present study was to investigate three different forms of sexual harassment in public places against women in Pakistan, as well as reactions to the harassment.

Any physical, verbal, or nonverbal behaviour of a sexual nature that is not welcomed by the victim falls under the definition of sexual harassment.[1,5,6] Sexual harassment should be differentiated from flirting; sexual harassment is unwelcomed and unreciprocated, whereas flirting is based on mutual attraction.[5,7,8] Flirting, however, turns into sexual harassment if the act is

Corresponding *(İletişim)*: Farida Anwar, Peace and Conflict Research & Developmental Psychology, Åbo Akademi University, Finland
E-mail *(E-posta)*: fanwar@abo.fi
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persistently carried out without the other person's consent.[9]

Sexual harassment is sometimes classified into three categories, as gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion. Gender harassment encompasses all behaviours that are degrading and hostile in nature towards one sex, at a group level[1,10,11] it may be regarded as a type of structural violence. Unwanted sexual attention refers to degrading behaviour at an individual level,[1] and it may include acts like staring, whistling, winks, catcalls, sexual jokes or comments, and unwanted body touch.[2,6,12] Sexual coercion involves direct or indirect requests or threats in order to get sexual benefits.[1,10]

In different cultures, victims of sexual harassment have reported experiencing a wide range of behaviours of sexual character. For example, catcalling, whistling, and staring, have been reported by American female students from diverse ethnic backgrounds.[1] In Iran, staring, shoving, eyeing women's bodies, and sexual comments on women's appearance were experienced by victims in public places.[2] Similarly, in Egypt, offensive acts like staring and touching by local males have been reported by female tourists.[13]

The perpetrator

In most studies, the perpetrators of sexual harassment against females have been found to be males.[14] In a variety of countries such as the US,[1] Canada,[3] Iran,[2] and India,[15] the perpetrators of sexual harassment in public places were usually strangers to the victims. Similarly, in Pakistan, sexual harassment by strangers, like fellow passengers, and bus conductors or drivers in public transports, has been reported.[16]

Concomitants of sexual harassment

A variety of negative psychological concomitants has been reported. Embarrassment, humiliation, and fear were experienced by young Nepalese females,[6] and American female students reported feeling intimidated, afraid, distressed, and threatened when targeted.[17] Feelings of being anxious, humiliated, depressed, confused, or fearful were expressed by female victims of harassment in Australia.[18] Frequent sexual harassment has also been shown to result in loss of self-confidence, interruption of studies, and substance abuse.[18,19]

Prevalence of sexual harassment in public places worldwide

Sexual harassment is a widespread form of aggression against women.[3,15,17,20–24] It is prevalent in many countries, both in workplaces and outside the occupational domain. In a study carried out in Iran, around 90 percent of the respondent reported that they had experienced sexual harassment in crowded public places.[2] In a study conducted in Nepal, 97 percent of the respondents reported sexual harassment in public transports.[6] Results of a study made in Delhi, India, showed that women were harassed between 50 to 100 percent of the times they visited public places.[15] Studies in developed countries like the US,[17] Australia,[18] and Canada[3] also show that women in these nations are not spared from every day sexual harassment.

Cultural aspects of sexual harassment

It has been argued that sexual harassment can be perceived differently based on the victims cultural background.[25,26] This can be seen in the light of Hofstede's categorisation of cultural dimensions, which makes distinctions between countries according to prevailing norms and values.[27] Some researchers have applied the cultural dimensions of (a) individualism-collectivism, (b) power distance, (c) uncertainty avoidance, and (d) masculinity-femininity, to shed light on the phenomenon of sexual harassment in various cultural contexts.[23,28]

Sexual harassment has also been seen as a tool to sustain gender hierarchies[17,20,29–31] in which women are the oppressed victims.[17,22,29,32,33] If acting against social roles attributed to them in a specific culture, females face social stigmatisation, derogatory remarks, and discrimination.[34,35] Additionally, powerlessness and sex role socialisation influence the reactions of females victimised from sexual harassment.[31] Thus, females from high power distance countries tend to restrain themselves from disobeying traditional norms, and accordingly they tend to tolerate acts of sexual harassment in order to maintain their status as respectable women. This, in turn, strengthens the acts of sexual harassment as an acceptable social custom.[36,37] In some collectivistic cultures, like Pakistan,[20] India,[15] and Bangladesh,[34] women hide their victimisation from sexual harassment and try to accept it as a part of their lives. It has also been argued that in order to avoid scenes in public, women prefer to ignore and accept sexually harassing behaviours rather to confront them.[28]

Research in the US has shown that young women mostly used passive strategies to cope with exposure to sexual harassment, while older women used more active strategies to confront the harasser, and some older women even questioned perpetrators who use sexist remarks.[1,38] However, around 60 percent of the American respondents from different ethnic groups used non-assertive strategies or did not respond at all.[12] Similarly, Nepalese young females mostly avoided situations where they were likely to be harassed, whereas married women with "sindoor", visible married identity markers, responded by scolding or staring at the perpetrators.[6] Women in India who could afford personal vehicles were found to avoid using public transportation due to sexual harassment.[15] They also reported that the most effective strategy to cope with sexual harassment in public places was to be accompanied by a male family member, or avoiding going out after nightfall. Similar behaviours were reported by female tourists in Egypt, who also asked to be accompanied by a male in order to avoid sexual harassment.[13]

The Pakistani context

In Pakistan, sexual harassment has been found to be a rampant form of gender-based aggression.[39] Many Pakistanis believe that women deserve to be harassed if they break the stereotype of staying within the premises of their homes and join the male dominated public domain.[40] Pakistani women face a

variety of different forms of sexual harassment while moving about in public places, especially when not accompanied by a man.[16,41] The perception of not being safe in public places has been shown to be based on fear of being sexually victimised or raped.[1,3,42] Stereotypes and attitudes towards women accentuate the subordinate role of women in the Pakistani society.[43] Moreover, the fear of being sexually harassed restrains females from progress, to get an education, to work, or to take part in politics,[42,44] which limits overall gender equality.

An increased awareness and acceptance of the concept of gender equality has made laws against sexual harassment possible also in Pakistan,[45] which is one of the 125 countries that have passed laws against sexual harassment.[46] In 2010, an amendment was made in section 509 of the Pakistan Penal Code of 1860, to declare sexual harassment a crime.[40] Still women in Pakistan are unacquainted with the procedure of workplace sexual harassment redress.[20] This is also reflected by the fact that sexual harassment has been the least reported crime in the province of Punjab.[47]

In research on interpersonal aggression, aggressive behaviour is often categorised into three types; physical, verbal, and nonverbal. Since sexual harassment is a form of aggressive behaviour, the same categories can be expected to be present. One aim of this study was therefore to apply these three categories in Pakistan, a country where sexual harassment of women in public places is common. A second aim was to investigate whether educational level of the victims was connected with the amount of victimisation they had been exposed to. The study also includes measurements of women's immediate reactions to sexual harassment as well as long-term negative consequences.

Method

Sample

A questionnaire was completed by 543 female university and college students from Islamabad, Lahore, and Rawalpindi in Pakistan. The mean age was 22.3 years (SD=4.3), and 65.6% were between 19 and 23 years old. Of the respondents, 481 were single and 55 married; 417 had a Bachelor's degree or less, and 125 had Master's degree or higher.

Instrument

A questionnaire including scales for measuring three types of sexual harassment, physical, verbal, and nonverbal, was used. The questionnaire consisted of a modified selection of items from the Sexual Harassment Experience Questionnaire for Workplaces (SHEQ) in Pakistan.[48] However, the authors of the SHEQ did not categorise the items into physical, verbal, and nonverbal forms of sexual harassment. Single items and reliabilities of the scales are presented in Table 1. Please note that nonverbal vocalisations (whistling and humming of filthy songs) fall into the category of nonverbal sexual harassment. Responses to all items were given on a five-point-scale (never=0, seldom=1, sometimes=2, often=3, very often=4).

The questionnaire also included four scales for measuring different reactions to sexual harassment: immediate distress, defensive reactions, sharing the experience with someone, and long-term negative consequences. For single items and Cronbach's alphas, see Table 2. Two items measuring imme-

Table 1. Single items and Cronbach's reliability coefficients of three scales measuring sexual harassment (n=543)

Has someone ...
Physical sexual harassment (6 items, α=.78)
Touched your hand while giving you something.
Stood close to you in a crowded place.
Collided with you while passing by.
Tried to have body touch with you while sitting.
Tried to kiss you against your will.
Tried to rape you.
Verbal sexual harassment (5 items, α=.72)
Passed unwanted comments on your appearance.
Said unwanted sexually oriented things to you.
Offered you an unwanted lift in a vehicle.
Threatened to spread rumours about you if you did not fulfill his sexual demands.
Threatened to harm you physically if you did not fulfil his sexual demands.
Nonverbal sexual harassment (8 items, α=.81)
Stared at you with dirty looks.
Not let you pass by.
Followed you in the street.
Whistled while looking at you.
Hummed filthy songs in your presence.
Tried to give you an unwanted card or gift.
Tried to give you a love letter you did not want.
Tried to undress himself in front of you.

Table 2. Single items and Cronbach's reliability coefficients of four scales measuring reactions to sexual harassment (n=543)

Reactions to sexual harassment
Immediate distress (6 items, α=.90)
How did it make you feel?
Angry, humiliated, embarrassed, scared, afraid of what others might think of me, sad.
Defensive reactions (3 items, α=.77)
What was your immediate reaction?
I shouted or yelled at that person; I slapped that person; I complained.
Long-term negative consequences (5 items, α=.85)
How did it affect you afterwards?
I lost self-confidence; It affected my studies negatively; It affected my work negatively; I thought of quitting my job or studies; I started feeling uncomfortable with men.
Sharing the experience (7 items, α=.73)
Have you told anyone about it?
A friend, mother, father, sister, brother, relative, co-worker.

diate reactions, running away, and showing no reaction, were not included in the scale since they did not contribute to the alpha value.

Six questions measured the identity of the perpetrator (a stranger, a relative, a colleague, a friend, a student, an acquaintance). The location where the sexual harassment took place was measured with 12 questions (while waiting for a transportation, inside a public transportation, in the street, in a market place or shop, in a park, in a hospital, in a workplace, at the university, in an eating place, at a gathering, in someone else's home, in your own home). Responses to these questions were given on a five-point-scale (never=0, seldom=1, sometimes=2, often=3, very often=4).

Procedure

Data were collected between April and December 2016, using an online questionnaire that was sent to university and college students in Islamabad, Lahore, and Rawalpindi through university emails, Facebook, and WhatsApp. An online questionnaire was selected for collecting the data, since for sensitive issues, like sexual harassment, online questionnaires have proven suitable for obtaining reliable data.[49]

Ethical considerations

The study was anonymous and was carried out in accordance with the principles concerning human research ethics of the Declaration of Helsinki,[50] and guidelines for the responsible conduct of research of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity.[51]

Results

A within-subject analysis of variance (WSMANOVA) revealed that the significantly most common perpetrator of sexual harassment was a stranger (1.61), followed by a student from one's university (.75), an acquaintance (.74), a friend (.71), a colleague at work (.56) and a relative (.51) ($F(5,507)=57.76$, $p<.001$, $\eta 2p=.363$). Sexual harassment was found to be significantly most common in market places or shops (1.50), followed by in the streets (1.09) ($F(11,532)=37.29$, $p<.001$, $\eta 2p=.435$). The most common immediate reactions were running away (1.32) and showing no reaction (1.41) [$F(4, 539)=49.86$, $p<.001$, $\eta p2=.270$).

Three types of sexual harassment

The three scales measuring sexual harassment all correlated with each other at a $p<.001$-level, and the correlational coefficients were all above .70. Age did not correlate with any of the three scales, neither was any difference found between how often married and unmarried women had been sexually harassed on any of the three scales. A within-subject multivariate analysis of variance (WSMANOVA) showed that nonverbal sexual harassment was the most common type (1.36) followed by physical (1.28) and verbal harassment (1.03) [$F(2, 541)=124.74$, $p<.001$, $\eta p2=.316$]. Of the respondents, only 3.7% reported that they had never been victimised from nonverbal sexual harassment, 8.3% were never victimised from verbal sexual harassment, 5.3% were never victimised from physical sexual harassment, and 2.8% (n=15) of the respondents were never victimised from any of the tree types of sexual harassment.

Victimisation from sexual harassment, single items

A within-subjects multivariate analysis of variance (WSMANOVA) revealed that standing close in a crowded place, colliding while passing by, and touching the hand while giving something were the most common types of physical sexual harassment ($F(6, 537)=174.63$, $p<.001$, $\eta p2=.661$). Mean values for the six single items of physical sexual harassment are presented in Fig. 1.

Passing unwanted comments on one's appearance was the most common form of verbal sexual harassment, followed by being exposed to sexually oriented statements and getting unwanted offers of a lift in a vehicle ($F(5, 538)=197.68$, $p<.001$, $\eta p2=.648$) (Fig. 2). Being stared at with dirty looks was the most common form of victimisation from nonverbal sexual harassment, followed by the humming of filthy songs, whistling, and being followed in the street ($F(7, 536)=137.96$, $p<.001$, $\eta p2=.643$) (Fig. 3).

Correlations between the sexual harassment scales and four concomitants

The correlations between the three scales measuring sexual

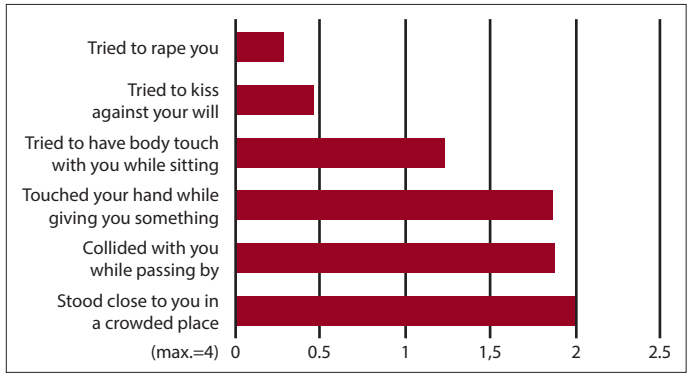

Figure 1. Mean values of six single items measuring victimisation from physical sexual harassment (n=543).

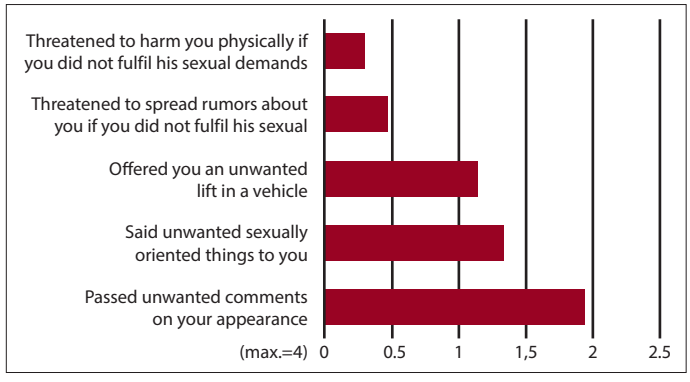

Figure 2. Mean values of five single items measuring victimisation from verbal sexual harassment (n=543).

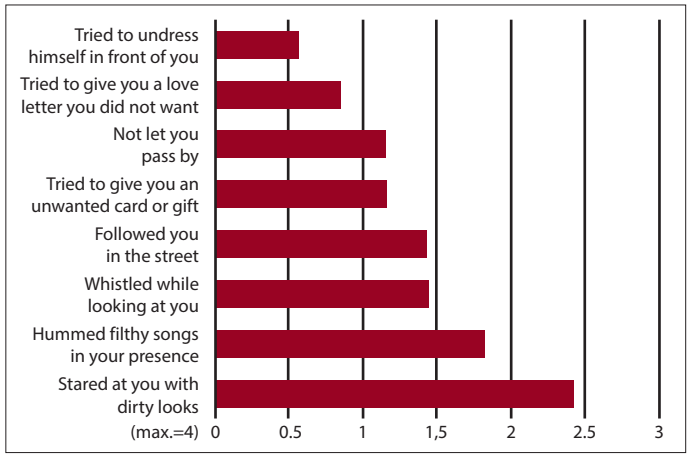

Figure 3. Mean values of six single items measuring victimisation from sexual harassment (n=543).

Table 3. Correlations between victimisation from three types of sexual harassment and four concomitants (n=543)

	Victimisation from physical	Sexual verbal	Harassment nonverbal
Immediate defensive reactions	.12**.	.17***	.14***
Immediate distress	.29***	.25***	.31***
Long-term negative consequences	.19***	.20***	.22***
Sharing	.22***	.20***	.27***

p≤.001***; p<.01**.

harassment and the four scales measuring concomitants are presented in Table 3. All the harassment scales were significantly correlated with all the concomitants, with all correlations except one being at the p<.001-level.

Concomitants of victimisation from sexual harassment

Scores for physical sexual harassment were converted to z-scores. Respondents with scores equal to or higher than zero were assigned to the high physical sexual harassment group, and respondents with scores lower than zero were assigned to the low physical harassment group. The same procedure was applied for verbal and nonverbal sexual harassment. Three multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were conducted with belonging to a) physical sexual harassment group, b) verbal sexual harassment group, and c) nonverbal sexual harassment group respectively as independent variables, and immediate distress, immediate defensive reactions, long-term negative consequences, and sharing as dependent variables. The multivariate analysis was significant for belonging to the physical sexual harassment group (Table 4). The univariate analyses showed that respondents in the high physical harassment group scored significantly higher on all four variables. The multivariate analysis was significant for belonging to the verbal sexual harassment group (Table 5). The univariate analyses showed that respondents in the high verbal sexual harassment group scored significantly higher on immediate distress, long-term negative consequences and sharing, but not on immediate defensive reactions. The multivariate analysis was significant for belonging to the nonverbal sexual harassment group (Table 6). The univariate analyses were significant for immediate distress, long-term negative consequences, and sharing, and a tendency was also found for immediate defensive reactions. Respondents from the high nonverbal harassment group scored higher on all variables.

Educational level and sexual harassment

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with educational level (Bachelor's or less vs. Master's or more) as independent variable, and victimisation from physical, verbal, and nonverbal sexual harassment as dependent variables. The multivariate analysis was not significant for educational level [F(3, 538)=1.69, ns, ηp2=.009] (mean values are presented in Fig. 4).

Another multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with educational level (Bachelor's or less vs. Master's or more) as independent variable, immediate distress, imme-

Table 4. Results for physical sexual harassment (high vs. low) in a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) with four concomitants as dependent variables (n=543)

					Low SH		High SH	
	F	df	p≤	η_p^2	M	SD	M	SD
Effect of physical sexual harassment								
Multivariate analysis	10.69	4, 538	.001	.074				
Univariate analyses								
Immediate defensive reactions	4.38	1, 541	.037	.008	0.45	0.92	0.83	0.97
Immediate distress	40.03	"	.001	.069	0.42	0.79	1.80	1.16
Long-term negative consequences	15.70	"	.001	.028	0.32	0.45	0.86	0.72
Sharing	13.53	"	.001	.024	0.36	0.60	0.87	0.72

SH: Sexual harassment; df: Degrees of freedom; M: Mean; SD: Standard deviation.

Table 5. Results for verbal sexual harassment (high vs. low) in a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) with four concomitants as dependent variables (n=543)

					Low SH		High SH	
	F	df	p≤	η_p^2	M	SD	M	SD
Effect of verbal sexual harassment								
Multivariate analysis	5.49	4, 538	.001	.039				
Univariate analyses								
Immediate defensive reactions	.002	1, 541	ns		0.81	1.29	0.81	0.94
Immediate distress	15.59	"	.001		1.07	1.40	1.79	1.15
Long-term negative consequences	7.14	"	.008		0.56	0.75	0.86	0.71
Sharing	9.73	"	.002		0.52	0.68	0.87	0.72

SH: Sexual harassment; df: Degrees of freedom; M: Mean; SD: Standard deviation.

Table 6. Results for nonverbal sexual harassment (high vs. low) in a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) with four concomitants as dependent variables (n=543)

					High SH		Low SH	
	F	df	p≤	η_p^2	M	SD	M	SD
Effect of nonverbal sexual harassment								
Multivariate analysis	8.62	4, 538	.001	.060				
Univariate analyses								
Immediate defensive reactions	3.69	1, 541	.055	.007	0.73	1.03	0.90	0.90
Immediate distress	23.02	"	.001	.041	1.49	1.22	1.97	1.11
Long-term negative consequences	6.09	"	.014	.011	0.76	0.73	0.91	0.70
Sharing	23.16	"	.001	.041	0.70	0.64	0.99	0.78

SH: Sexual harassment; df: Degrees of freedom; M: Mean; SD: Standard deviation.

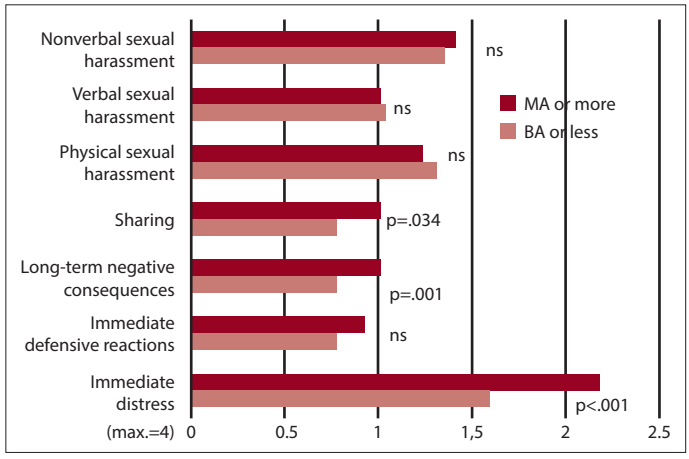

Figure 4. Mean values of three types of sexual harassment and four reactions for respondents on two educational levels (n=543) (c.f. Table 7 and the text).

diate defensive reactions, long-term negative consequences, and sharing as dependent variables, and total amount of victimisation from sexual harassment (the three types of sexual harassment added together) as covariate (Table 7, Fig. 4). The multivariate analysis was significant for level of education. The univariate analyses were significant for immediate distress, long-term negative consequences, and sharing; respondents with a high level of education scored significantly higher on these three. There was no significant difference between the groups regarding immediate defensive reactions (Table 7, Fig. 4).

Discussion

The study investigated female victimisation from three types of sexual harassment in public places in Pakistan as well as reported consequences for the victims. The results showed that a stranger was the significantly most common perpetrator of sexual harassment. The result is consistent with previous studies from the US[1,14] and Nepal.[6] Sexual harassment was found to occur most frequently in market places, shops, and in the streets. A previous study has shown that market places and shops are common places for sexual harassment in Pakistan.[41] In the present study, the most common immediate reactions by the respondents were to run away or show no reaction. This is in line with the results from the US, where victims tried not to confront the unknown perpetrator due to the possible danger of humiliation and emotional distress.[12,14]

Table 7. Results from a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) with level of education (BA or less/MA or higher) as independent variable, four concomitants as dependent variables, and total amount of victimisation from sexual harassment as covariate (n=542)

					BA or less		MA or higher	
	F	df	p≤	η_p^2	M	SD	M	SD
Covariant: Victimisation from sexual harassment	19.94	4, 536	.001	.130				
Effect of level of education								
Multivariate analysis	7.34	4, 536	.001	.052				
Univariate analyses								
Immediate defensive reactions	2.28	1, 539	ns	.004	0.78	0.98	0.93	0.93
Immediate distress	28.14	"	.001	.050	1.59	1.17	2.18	1.14
Long-term negative consequences	11.35	"	.001	.021	0.78	0.69	1.01	0.78
Sharing	4.54	"	.034	.008	0.80	0.73	0.96	0.71

BA: Bachelor's degree; MA: Master's degree; df: Degrees of freedom; M: Mean; SD: Standard deviation.

Three types ofsSexual harassment

The most common type of sexual harassment in public places was nonverbal. Being stared at with dirty looks was, in turn, the most common form of nonverbal sexual harassment, followed by the humming of filthy songs, whistling, and being followed in the street. In a study from Iran[2] and in one from Egypt,[13] being stared at was also reported to be the most common form. This finding might be explained by the fact that social interaction between males and females in Pakistan is limited. Physical contact and sexually oriented statements to women in public is not acceptable.[41] This could be one of the reasons why perpetrators prefer to use nonverbal forms. Moreover, perpetrators can easily get away with nonverbal harassment.

Physical harassment was the second most common type. Standing close in a crowded place, colliding while passing by, and touching the hand of a woman while giving her something were the most common types of physical sexual harassment. Yet again, due to limited interaction between males and females in Pakistan, crowded areas are places where perpetrators can easily carry out offensive acts without being caught. Moreover, the crowdedness in public spaces could make their actions look like a gaffe.

Verbal sexual harassment was less common than nonverbal or physical harassment. Passing unwanted comments on a woman's appearance was the most common verbal form, followed by being exposed to sexually oriented statements and getting unwanted offers of a lift in a vehicle. In public places, verbal comments can easily be overheard by others standing close to the perpetrator, and might thus lead to negative social reactions.

The study showed that 3.7% of the respondents had never been victimised from nonverbal sexual harassment; 8.3% were never victimised from verbal, and 5.3% never victimised from physical sexual harassment. Most respondents (97%) had been victims of one or several forms. This finding reveals that sexual harassment is indeed utterly common in public places in Pakistan.

No difference was found between how often married and unmarried women had been victimised from any of the three types of sexual harassment in public places. The finding differs from results of two previous studies, where young unmarried females in Nepal[6] and in Latin America[24] were found to be more vulnerable to sexual harassment than married ones.

Concomitants of victimisation from sexual harassment

Victimisation from all three types of sexual harassment (physical, verbal, and nonverbal) were found to be highly correlated with immediate defensive reactions, immediate distress, and long term negative consequences. Sexual harassment has also in previous studies been associated with anxiety, depression, negative physical health,[52] and poor mental health.[53]

Sexual harassment and educational level of the victim

Female respondents, irrespectively of educational level (Bachelor's or less vs. Master's or more), had experienced equal amounts of physical, verbal, and nonverbal sexual harassment in public places. The finding is in line with results from a study made in Iran, where no significant relationship was found between educational level and the amount of victimisation from sexual harassment.[2] However, in contrast to these findings, a study from Latin America[28] found that females with higher levels of education reported more victimisation from sexual harassment than less educated ones.

In the present study, respondents with a higher education scored significantly higher on immediate distress and long-term negative consequences. One explanation for this might be that females with a higher level of education are more aware of their rights and are therefore better able to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. In Pakistan, women generally tend to conform with cultural norms which tell them to avoid certain situations and potential perpetrators, in order to minimise the risk of sexual harassment. Although women with a higher education are more

likely to know that sexual harassment should not be tolerated, they might still use avoidance to cope with the harassment. Knowing that they should not accept being harassed might in turn create cognitive dissonance leading to higher immediate distress and more long-term negative effects.

In a study from different cultural spheres, based on an American and a Turkish sample, it was found that women with a high education used more assertive coping strategies to deal with sexual harassment.[37] The impact of culture thus seems to be crucial.

The results further revealed that women with a higher education were more likely to share their experience with someone. This finding can be seen as a way of coping with the experience. However, the results of the present study showed that although respondents with a higher education communicated significantly more with their friends and relatives about their experience, their levels of immediate distress and long-term negative consequences were still significantly higher than those of less educated women, although the amount of victimisation was the same. Thus, it may be concluded that sharing with a close person did not help the victims in overcoming their distress, although it might have other benefits. One explanation for why sharing did not relieve stress could be that women in Pakistan, like those in India,[15] typically receive advice of non-confrontation from the people with whom they share the experience, in order to save the victim from stigmatisation and further harm.

Limitations of the study

Some limitations of the study are the small sample size and the limited age range. It is also difficult to assess the representativity of the sample. Accordingly, the findings should be generalised from with caution. Future research with a larger sample and a wider age range could explain age trends in female victimisation from sexual harassment in public places with more certainty.

Conclusions

Sexual harassment in public places in Pakistan is a huge social problem. Almost all females in the study, irrespectively of educational level or marital status, reported themselves to have been victimised from sexual harassment in public places. Lack of adequate social support and conforming with cultural norms put women into additional distress. Education plays a vital role in increasing awareness about the problem. Additional social and legal support is required to enable women to move freely and take part in the social and economic development of the country.

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