

Indicators of sexual harassment experienced by the rural school going adolescent girls in Punjab

■ Sugandha Asgola* and Sukhminder Kaur

Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Punjab Agricultural University, LUDHIANA (PUNJAB) INDIA
(Email: sugandha.asgola28@gmail.com; sukhminder@pau.edu)

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*Author for correspondence

ABSTRACT

Women are often subjected to groping, suggestive remarks, whistling, catcalls and the like by men in public places like market, malls, streets and roads, movie halls, in buses etc. The present study to identify the indicators of sexual harassment experienced by rural school going adolescent girls was taken up in one block of Ludhiana district of Punjab state. The sample consisted of 200 respondents who were in the age range of 16-18 years and the data were collected using a self-structured questionnaire relating to various aspects of sexual harassment. Majority of the adolescent girls experienced verbal and non-verbal sexual harassment. Significant differences were observed in the physical sexual harassment experienced by the younger and older adolescents; older adolescents experienced more physical sexual harassment. The most common non-verbal indicators of sexual harassment experienced by the adolescents were whistling, winking and staring whereas receiving general comments and suggestive songs were identified as verbal indicators. Rubbing against in crowded places and pushing against in public transport were found to be the most prevalent form of physical sexual harassment.

INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse in India has been an age old, deep rooted and innate social crisis which has become a grave problem for policymakers (Carson *et al.*, 2013). It is the most dreadful of all sexual crimes that children encounter. Most of the children suffer abuse silently which results in mental and emotional scars for the rest of their lives. The few who take the initiative to protest about the abuse are not taken seriously and they are usually not trusted especially because of the social stigma and more so when the offender is a close family member or a reputed member of society (Srivastava *et al.*, 2013).

Many people think that sexual harassment is a back

seat issue which is quite different from sexual abuse. There is a conflict between the two terms, but when it comes to the continuum of harm it is causing, sexual harassment is gradually leading to sexual abuse (Lagan, 2014). Sexual harassment is described as unwanted sexual gestures or actions targeted to a person, directly or indirectly in the form of sexually coloured remarks, physical contact and advances, showing pornography, a demand or request for carnal favours, any other undesirable physical, verbal/ non-verbal behaviour sexual in nature and/or passing sexually insulting and objectionable comments (Desai, 2012).

Sexual harassment is found all over India among most of the women regardless of race, nationality, and

colour. At some point, the spread of globalization has also contributed to this disgraceful reality. Western entertainment portrays women in hysterically sexual form that has proved unfavorable in the case of Indian women. Sexual harassment could take place in any form, right from lewd glances to misrepresented touches, stares, remarks, verbal exploitation, indicative songs, lyrics typically targeted at the girl, an annoying touch which is sexual in nature, physical abuse and thrashing etc. (Devi and Jasrotia, 2013). In legal terms, sexual harassment can be termed as “any unwelcome sexual conduct that creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment which is an offensive conduct related to an individual’s gender that a reasonable woman or man should not have to endure” (Bhattacharya, 2014).

Dziech and Hawkins (1998) explain that sexual harassment is typically about “fear” and being “hemmed in on every side” by individuals whose power makes the protest dangerous. For thousands of years sexual harassment has been considered so normal, harmless, or impossible to counter that it is dismissed by society. Catherine (1986) reports that it is not shocking that woman would not complain of an experience for which there has been no name. Until 1976, sexual harassment was lacking a term to express the act that was literally unspeakable. Sexual harassment problems need intervention now and education on this issue must be an essential element in the school curriculum. There should be a healthy and polite interaction between boys and girls. Because unhealthy gender-based attitudes and behaviours that form in childhood go unchallenged and therefore if we don’t intervene them, it will turn into a misery for society (Montgomery *et al.*, 1993).

In light of the above cited facts, the present study was planned to identify the indicators of sexual harassment experienced by the adolescent girls in the age group of 16-18 years.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was conducted in one block of Ludhiana district of Punjab state on a sample comprising of 200 rural school going adolescent girls (16-18 years) selected from various Government Senior Secondary Schools, during the session 2015- 2016. The sample was selected from schools of four villages located in one block of Ludhiana district. A list of all the blocks of Ludhiana district was procured from District Revenue Officer,

Statistical Branch, Ludhiana. Out of existing 12 blocks in the district, one block (Ludhiana-1) was selected randomly by using simple random sampling technique. Further, a list of Government Senior Secondary Schools existing in this block was procured from District Education Officer. There were eight such schools in the selected block, out of which four schools in different villages *viz.*, Lalton Kalan, Pamal, Baddowal and Alamgir were randomly selected. There were 450 girls in total, in all the selected schools, out of which a final sample of 200 adolescent girls *i.e.* 50 from each school (25 girls each in the age group of 16-17 years and 17-18 years) was selected by using simple random sampling procedure.

The following tool was used in the present investigation.

Interview schedule-sexual harassment:

A self-structured Interview Schedule was used to document the incidence and to identify the indicators of sexual harassment experienced by rural school going adolescent girls. The Interview schedule consisted of 31 statements including some general and specific statements.

Data were collected by personally approaching the adolescents in schools itself. A close rapport was established with the adolescent girls and they were explained about the purpose of the study. The adolescents were requested to be honest and were assured that their identity would be kept confidential and information they shared would be used for research purpose only. The information pertaining to demographic profile of the respondents was collected in small groups, whereas the data on sexual harassment experiences encountered by them were collected by personally interviewing them.

OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

Data presented in Table 1 highlight the per cent distribution of the respondents as per the type of sexual harassment experienced by them. It is evident from the data that majority of the girls (80.23%) in the age group of 16-17 years and 85.71 per cent of the adolescents in the age group of 17-18 years experienced non-verbal sexual harassment, 79.06 per cent of the adolescents in the younger age group and 81.31 per cent of the adolescents in the older age group experienced verbal form of sexual harassment. The rarest form of sexual

harassment experienced by the adolescent girls was physical harassment. Comparatively a fewer number of the adolescents (46.51%) in younger age group and 61.53 per cent in the older age group experienced physical form of sexual harassment. The present results are in concordance with the results of Dhawan (2016) who reported that more than half of the girls are subjected to various forms of harassment like leering, pinching, groping while travelling to and from the schools. These results are also supported by Espelage *et al.* (2016) who concluded that verbal victimization was more frequent than physical victimization among the girls. Similar findings were reported by Islam (2012) who stated that usually girls face three forms of sexual harassment which were verbal teasing, non-verbal teasing and physical teasing.

Data presented in Table 2 depict the age differences among the respondents with respect to the type of sexual harassment experienced by them. Age wise differences in the type of sexual harassment experienced by the adolescent girls highlighted significant differences in the physical sexual harassment ($Z=2.00$; $P < 0.05$). A higher per cent of the respondents (61.53%) in older age group experienced physical sexual harassment as compared to less number of the respondents (46.51%) in the younger age group whereas there were statistically non-significant differences between the age of the adolescent girls and the non-verbal sexual harassment and verbal sexual harassment they experienced. The results depicted that older respondents were facing more physical sexual harassment as compared to younger respondents. Similar

findings were also observed by Gruber (2007) who reported that physical sexual harassment increases with age. There were 55.00 per cent of the adolescents from 8-9th grade and 61.00 per cent of the respondents from 10-11th grade who reported that they were being physically sexually harassed at school. Older girls experienced higher frequency of sexual harassment as compared to younger respondents. Literature also reveals that older female students reported more physical sexual harassment and victimization than their younger counterparts (Hill and Kearn, 2011).

Data presented in Table 3 illustrate the per cent distribution of the respondents as per the indicators of non-verbal sexual harassment experienced by them. The indicators of non-verbal sexual harassment include the non-verbal gestures and these were identified as staring, winking, whistling, making kissing sounds, stalking and touching/itching of their own private parts by the perpetrators. It is perceptible from the data that in the age group of 16-17 years, almost all the adolescents (98.55%) reported that whistling was the most common indicator of sexual harassment adopted by the perpetrators to harass them followed by unusual stares (95.65%), winking (94.20%), stalking (78.26%), making kissing sounds (52.17%) and touching/itching of their own private parts by the perpetrators (13.04%). Perusal of the results further shows that in the age group of 17-18 years, majority of the girls (82.05%) reported whistling as the most commonly used indicator of sexual harassment, followed by staring (79.48%), stalking and winking (74.35%), making kissing sounds (48.71%) and

Table 1 : Distribution of the respondents as per the type of sexual harassment experienced by them (n=177)

| Type of sexual harassment | Adolescent girls | | | | Total | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|-------|----------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| | 16-17 years (n ₁ =86) | | 17-18 years (n ₂ =91) | | f | % |
| | f | % | f | % | | |
| Non-verbal | 69 | 80.23 | 78 | 85.71 | 147 | 83.00 |
| Verbal | 68 | 79.06 | 74 | 81.31 | 142 | 80.22 |
| Physical | 40 | 46.51 | 56 | 61.53 | 92 | 51.97 |

Note: Multiple response

Table 2 : Age differences among the respondents with respect to the type of sexual harassment experienced by them (n=177)

| Type of sexual harassment | Adolescent girls | | | | Z-value |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|-------|----------------------------------|-------|---------|
| | 16-17 years (n ₁ =86) | | 17-18 years (n ₂ =91) | | |
| | f | % | f | % | |
| Non-verbal | 69 | 80.23 | 78 | 85.71 | 0.97 |
| Verbal | 68 | 79.06 | 74 | 81.31 | 0.92 |
| Physical | 40 | 46.51 | 56 | 61.53 | 2.00** |

Note: Multiple response

** indicates significance of value at $P < 0.05$

touching/itching of their own private parts by their perpetrators (6.41%). Similar findings were reported by Hassan *et al.* (2012) who found that majority of the girls face whistling and staring as the non-verbal indicators of sexual harassment. Islam (2012) in a study also stated that majority of the respondents revealed that they were teased by the perpetrators in the form of whistling to make them uncomfortable.

Data presented in the Table 4 evince the age differences among the respondents as per the indicators of non-verbal sexual harassment experienced by them. It could be inferred from the data that the indicators of non-verbal sexual harassment like staring, winking, whistling, making kissing sounds, stalking and touching/itching of their own private parts by the perpetrators were more frequently experienced by the younger adolescent girls as compared to older adolescent girls. It is apparent from the data that the adolescent girls in the younger age group were more susceptible to experience staring, winking and whistling as compared to the adolescents in the older age group. Age wise differences depict that there were highly significant differences among the adolescent girls in experiencing the indicators of non-verbal sexual harassment; staring ($Z=2.91$; $P < 0.01$), winking ($Z=3.24$; $P < 0.01$) and whistling ($Z = 3.29$; $P < 0.01$) since, the Z-values were calculated to be significant. However, there

were non-significant differences on the other indicators of non-verbal sexual harassment *viz.*, making kissing sounds, stalking and perpetrators touching/itching of their own private parts between the two age groups. Similar findings were reported by Akhtar (2013) who revealed that gestural teasing tends to decrease with increasing age. Majority of the respondents had first suffered sexual harassment at the ages of 14-16, and 16.70 per cent had this experience at the ages of 16-18 while 14.30 per cent respondents reported having been teased for the first time at the ages of 18-20, as reported in the study.

Data presented in Table 5 portray the per cent distribution of the respondents as per the indicators of verbal sexual harassment experienced by them. Indicators of verbal sexual harassment as reported by the girls included suggestive songs, disrespectful laugh, general comments, comments about looks, sexually explicit remarks, public display of pornography, sexually explicit email/ messages and sexually explicit audios and videos. It is apparent from the data that most of adolescents (95.77%) experienced verbal sexual harassment in the form of general comments followed by targeted songs (83.80%), comments about looks (73.94%), disrespectful laugh (46.47%), sexually explicit email/messages and sexually explicit remarks (44.36%) and sexually explicit audios and videos (17.60%). Amongst adolescents in both

Table 3 : Per cent distribution of the respondents with respect to the indicators of non-verbal sexual harassment experienced by them (n=147)

| Indicators of non-verbal sexual harassment | Adolescent girls | | | | Total | |
|---|----------------------------------|-------|----------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| | 16-17 years (n ₂ =69) | | 17-18 years (n ₁ =78) | | f | % |
| | f | % | f | % | | |
| Staring | 66 | 95.65 | 62 | 79.48 | 128 | 87.07 |
| Winking | 65 | 94.20 | 58 | 74.35 | 123 | 83.67 |
| Whistling | 68 | 98.55 | 64 | 82.05 | 132 | 89.79 |
| Making kissing sounds | 36 | 52.17 | 38 | 48.71 | 74 | 50.34 |
| Stalking | 54 | 78.26 | 58 | 74.35 | 112 | 76.19 |
| Perpetrators touching/itching their own private parts | 9 | 13.04 | 5 | 6.41 | 14 | 9.52 |

Note: Multiple response

Table 4 : Age differences among the respondents with respect to the indicators of non-verbal sexual harassment experienced by them (n=147)

| Indicators of non-verbal sexual harassment | Adolescent girls | | | | Z-value |
|--|----------------------------------|-------|----------------------------------|-------|---------|
| | 16-17 years (n ₁ =69) | | 17-18 years (n ₂ =78) | | |
| | f | % | f | % | |
| Staring | 66 | 95.65 | 62 | 79.48 | 2.91*** |
| Winking | 65 | 94.20 | 58 | 74.35 | 3.24*** |
| Whistling | 68 | 98.55 | 64 | 82.05 | 3.29*** |
| Making kissing sounds | 36 | 52.17 | 38 | 48.71 | 0.41 |
| Stalking | 54 | 78.26 | 58 | 74.35 | 0.55 |
| Perpetrators touching/itching of their own private parts | 9 | 13.04 | 5 | 6.41 | 1.36 |

Note: Multiple Response *** indicates significance of value at $P < 0.01$

the age groups, it was found that most of the adolescents (97.05%) from younger age group and 94.59 per cent of the adolescents from older age group were experiencing verbal sexual harassment in the form of general comments whereas there were only 14.70 per cent of adolescents in age group of 16-17 years and 20.27 per cent of the adolescents in age group of 17-18 years who were receiving sexually explicit audios and videos. These results are in an agreement with the findings of a study conducted by Benson and Thomson (2014) who found that most of the victims of sexual harassment received unwanted sexual attention in the form of general comments. Similar findings were reported by Adedokun (2004), Abati (2006) and Ejiogu and Onyene (2006) who also reported that women faced degrading verbal remarks as an indicator of sexual harassment.

Data presented in Table 6 indicate the age differences among the respondents with respect to the indicators of verbal sexual harassment experienced by them. Age wise differences among adolescent girls with respect to the indicators of verbal sexual harassment highlighted significant differences in the following indicators; singing songs ($Z= 1.81$; $P < 0.10$) and receiving sexually explicit remarks ($Z=2.08$; $P < 0.05$).

The results depicted that adolescents in age group of 16-17 years were more frequently subjected to suggestive songs aimed at them by their perpetrators as compared to their counterparts whereas adolescents in age group of 17-18 years had more frequently received sexually explicit remarks when compared to the adolescents in age group of 16-17 years.

In terms of other indicators of verbal sexual harassment *viz.*, disrespectful laugh, general comments, comments about looks, sexually explicit email/ messages and sexually explicit audios and videos, non-significant differences were found between younger and older respondents. But on the basis of frequencies and percentages, it is evident from the data that the younger girls had more often experienced indicators of verbal sexual harassment like disrespectful laugh as compared to the older girls. On the other hand, girls in the older age group revealed that they had received sexually explicit email/ messages, sexually explicit audios and videos, general comments and comments about looks and body more frequently as compared to younger girls. The results are in line with the study conducted by Hokoda *et al.* (2012) who revealed that 7th graders have lower perpetration and victimization in terms of verbal sexual

Table 5 : Per cent distribution of the respondents with respect to the indicators of verbal sexual harassment experienced by them (n=142)

| Indicators of verbal sexual harassment | Adolescent girls | | | | Total | |
|---|----------------------------------|-------|----------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| | 16-17 years (n ₁ =68) | | 17-18 years (n ₂ =74) | | f | % |
| | f | % | f | % | | |
| Singing songs | 53 | 77.94 | 66 | 89.18 | 119 | 83.80 |
| Laughing disrespectfully | 36 | 52.94 | 30 | 40.54 | 66 | 46.47 |
| Receiving general comments | 66 | 97.05 | 70 | 94.59 | 136 | 95.77 |
| Receiving comments about looks | 49 | 72.05 | 56 | 75.67 | 105 | 73.94 |
| Receiving sexually explicit remarks | 24 | 35.29 | 39 | 52.70 | 63 | 44.36 |
| Receiving sexually explicit email/messages | 26 | 38.23 | 37 | 50.00 | 63 | 44.36 |
| Receiving sexually explicit audios and videos | 10 | 14.70 | 15 | 20.27 | 25 | 17.60 |

Note: Multiple Response

Table 6 : Age differences among the respondents as per the indicators of verbal sexual harassment experienced by them (n=142)

| Indicators of verbal sexual harassment | Adolescent girls | | | | Z-value |
|---|----------------------------------|-------|------------------------------------|-------|---------|
| | 16-17 years (n ₁ =68) | | (17-18) years (n ₂ =74) | | |
| | f | % | f | % | |
| Singing songs | 53 | 77.94 | 66 | 89.18 | 1.81* |
| Laughing disrespectfully | 36 | 52.94 | 30 | 40.54 | 1.48 |
| Receiving general comments | 66 | 97.05 | 70 | 94.59 | 0.72 |
| Receiving comments about looks | 49 | 72.05 | 56 | 75.67 | 0.49 |
| Receiving sexually explicit remarks | 24 | 35.29 | 39 | 52.70 | 2.08** |
| Receiving sexually explicit email/messages | 26 | 38.23 | 37 | 50.00 | 1.40 |
| Receiving sexually explicit audios and videos | 10 | 14.70 | 15 | 20.27 | 0.86 |

Note: Multiple response * and ** indicates significance of values at $P < 0.10$ and < 0.05 , respectively

harassment than 9th and 11th graders. The older respondents were at more risk of perpetration of verbal sexual harassment in the form of obscene remarks, sexually explicit jokes targeted to the victim etc.

Data presented in Table 7 portray the indicators of physical sexual harassment which were identified as rubbing against the victim in crowded places, pushing victim in public transport, touching victims' back, holding victims' hand, touching cheeks and other body parts of the victim and pinching the victim. Data pertaining to the indicators of physical sexual harassment experienced by the respondents revealed that most of the adolescents (94.79%) described that they were rubbed against by the perpetrators in crowded places followed by pushing against in public transport (88.54%), holding hand (72.91%), touching cheeks and other body parts (56.25%), touching their back (19.79%) and pinching (11.45%). Most of the adolescents (97.50%) in the age group of 16-17 years and 92.85 per cent in age group of 17-18 years disclosed that they experienced being rubbed against by the perpetrators in crowded places whereas very few of the adolescents (17.50%) in the age group of 16-17 years and 21.42 per cent of the adolescents in the age group of 17-18 years divulged that their perpetrators touched their back to make them uncomfortable. However, none of the adolescent girls in younger age

group experienced pinching as physical sexual harassment whereas about twenty per cent (19.64%) of the adolescents in older age group experienced the same. Similar findings were also reported by Akhtar (2013) in a study on school going girls that 100.00 per cent girls experienced physical intimacy in buses and while travelling around busy roads and markets. There was no significant increase in the frequency and intensity of physical abuse among girls in different age groups especially on buses, busy roads and markets.

Data presented in Table 8 elucidate age differences among the respondents with respect to the indicators of physical sexual harassment. Respondents expressed that they experienced the problems like rubbing against in crowded places, pushing in public transport, touching their back, holding their hands, touching cheeks and other body parts and pinching by their perpetrators. Data revealed that most of the adolescents (97.50%) in the age range of 16-17 years and 92.85 per cent of the respondents in the age group of 17-18 years apprised that perpetrators rubbed against them in crowded places. Further, the data unveil that majority of the respondents (90.00%) from the younger age group and 87.50 per cent of the respondents from the older age group were pushed against in public transport by their perpetrators.

Moreover a higher number of the respondents

| Indicators of physical sexual harassment | Adolescent girls | | | | Total | |
|--|----------------------------------|-------|----------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| | 16-17 years (n ₁ =40) | | 17-18 years (n ₂ =56) | | f | % |
| | f | % | f | % | | |
| Rubbing against in crowded places | 39 | 97.50 | 52 | 92.85 | 91 | 94.79 |
| Pushing against in public transport | 36 | 90.00 | 49 | 87.50 | 85 | 88.54 |
| Touching victims back | 7 | 17.50 | 12 | 21.42 | 19 | 19.79 |
| Holding hand | 30 | 75.00 | 40 | 71.42 | 58 | 72.91 |
| Touching cheeks and other body parts | 22 | 55.00 | 32 | 57.14 | 54 | 56.25 |
| Pinching | 0 | 0.00 | 11 | 19.64 | 11 | 11.45 |

Note: Multiple response

| Indicators of physical sexual harassment | Adolescent girls | | | | Z-value |
|--|----------------------------------|-------|----------------------------------|-------|---------|
| | 16-17 years (n ₁ =40) | | 17-18 years (n ₂ =56) | | |
| | f | % | f | % | |
| Rubbing against in crowded places | 39 | 97.50 | 52 | 92.85 | 1.00 |
| Pushing against in public transport | 36 | 90.00 | 49 | 87.50 | 0.37 |
| Touching victims back | 7 | 17.50 | 12 | 21.42 | 0.47 |
| Holding hand | 30 | 75.00 | 40 | 71.42 | 0.38 |
| Touching cheeks and other body parts | 22 | 55.00 | 32 | 57.14 | 0.20 |
| Pinching | 0 | 0.00 | 11 | 19.64 | - |

Note: Multiple response

(21.42%) from the age group of 17-18 years and 17.50 per cent of the respondents from the age group of 16-17 years revealed that their perpetrators touched their back in an offensive way which made them uncomfortable. Furthermore more than 70 per cent of respondents in both the age groups, 75.00 per cent of them in the age group of 16-17 years and 71.42 per cent of them in the age group of 17-18 years reported that their perpetrators held their hand in an objectionable way. There were 55.00 per cent of the respondents in the age group of 16-17 years and 57.14 per cent of the respondents in the age group of 17-18 years who revealed that their perpetrators touched their cheeks and other body parts to make them feel embarrassed. Over and above that, a higher number of the respondents (21.42%) in the age group of 17-18 years and 17.50 per cent of the respondents in the age group of 16-17 years disclosed that the perpetrators touched their back to make them uncomfortable. However, there were no significant age wise differences on all these behaviours of physical sexual harassment of the perpetrators. Since the Z-values for all the indicators, rubbing against in crowded places ($Z= 1.00$), pushing against in public transport ($Z= 0.37$), touching victim's back ($Z=0.47$), holding hand ($Z=0.38$) and touching cheeks and other body parts ($Z=0.20$) were found to be non-significant. Similar findings were also reported by Akhtar (2013) in a study on school going girls that 100.00 per cent girls experienced physical intimacy in buses and while travelling around busy roads and markets. There was no significant increase in the frequency and intensity of physical abuse among girls in different age groups especially on buses, busy roads and markets.

Conclusion :

The present study shows that most of the adolescents are experiencing one or other indicators of sexual harassment. Results showed that majority of the adolescents in both the age groups experienced non-verbal and verbal sexual harassment whereas, physical harassment was the rarest form of sexual harassment experienced by them. Most of the adolescents reported whistling as the most common indicator of non-verbal sexual harassment. General comments made by the perpetrators were the most common indicators of verbal sexual harassment reported by majority of the adolescents. The most common act of physical sexual harassment experienced by the adolescents was

intentional rubbing against in crowded places by the perpetrators. The children are facing the problems of sexual abuse as they don't have clear understanding about it. Also, parents, teachers and others in the community have an important role to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse. Adolescence is known to be the most sensitive phase of human life because of the biological changes taking place in their body, and any unwanted and negative experiences during this stage would have damaging influence on their personalities in later life. So, there is a need to sensitize and generate awareness among adolescents regarding the issue of sexual harassment and they need to be intervened so that they can handle such situations successfully.

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