

Sexual Harassment in Public Transport and its Coping Strategies among Bachelor Level Students: A Cross Sectional study

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Sexual harassment in public transport is a common, yet little discussed form of gender-based aggression, predominantly to women. Such abuses have significant on the mental health of the victims. It also leads them to abandon work and education due to the fear of being harassed on their route. Knowledge regarding the prevalence and coping strategies against such harassment is necessary to formulate effective plans for its mitigation.

Methods: This was a cross sectional study done among 105 bachelor students of Maiya Devi Kanya College of Bharatpur, Chitwan via convenience sampling. Self-administered structured questionnaires were used. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage). Chi square test was used to determine the association between variables.

Results: Almost half (50.5%) respondents had seen other girls being harassed while 21.9% students mentioned that they had themselves been sexually harassed in public transport. Most common form of harassment seen was verbal while most common harassment faced was non-verbal followed by verbal and physical. Harassment was more during morning (52.17%) and evening hours (32.78%). Almost half of the respondents mentioned that they would prefer to remain silent (47.6%) and not react to the situation (54.3%). Self-discipline (66.7%) and effective law (65.7%) were deemed as major ways to prevent such abuses by most of the respondents.

Conclusion: Verbal harassment is the most common form of harassment seen and non-verbal harassment is the commonest form experienced in public transport. Such harassments usually occur during peak hours where vehicles are congested. As majority of the respondents preferred to remain silent to the situation, what is evident represents only the tip of iceberg. Strict laws were deemed necessary by the respondents necessary to curtail this problem.

Keywords: coping strategy, law, public transport, sexual harassment

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is formally defined as unwanted sex-related behaviors that are considered by the recipient as offensive and hostile and that affects the physical and or/mental health of a person.¹ This includes unwelcome verbal and non-verbal sexual behaviors, as well as undesired physical conduct that the target finds difficult to cope with.² Unlike sexual flirting, sexual harassment is an unreciprocated act and takes place in the absence of consent of the target.³ Sexual harassment encompasses a range of verbal, non-verbal or physical behaviour, whether intended or unintended, legal or illegal, that is considered by the victim or a bystander to be undesirable or coerced.⁴ Basically, there are three main acts of sexual harassment: verbal, non-verbal and physical. Verbal form of sexual harassment includes whistling or making cat calls at someone; making sexual comments about a person's clothing or body; telling sexual jokes or stories; asking personal questions about sexual life, fantasies, preferences or history; repeatedly "asking out" a person who is not interested; referring to an adult woman or man as a hunk, doll, babe or honey.^{5,6}

Non-verbal form of sexual harassment includes staring/leering/whistling; displaying sexually suggestive visuals ;making facial expressions such as winking, throwing kisses, or licking; giving personal gifts of a sexual nature; making sexual gestures with hands or through body movements.^{5,6} Physical form of sexual harassment includes hanging around, standing close, or brushing up against a person; touching a person's clothing, hair, or body (to include giving a massage around the neck and shoulders); touching or rubbing

oneself sexually around another person; hugging, kissing, patting or stroking.^{5,6}

Sexual abuses and harassments occur irrespective of age, sexual orientation and gender identity. Therefore, the perpetrator and the victim could be of any sex. However, the overall prevalence of sexual harassment is found to be more in young females.⁷ This study is also centered on the prevalence of sexual harassment among female students.

From milder forms of abuses and flirting to brutal and heinous ones like "Nirbhaya" case in India,⁸ public transport is a hotspot for various forms of sexual harassment. This study aims find out the prevalence and coping strategies of sexual harassment in public transportation. Estimation of prevalence of sexual harassment and the coping strategies helps in formulating effective policies and taking pragmatic actions for its mitigation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted between the periods of 2075 Kartik to 2076 Jestha. The study population included the female students of Bachelor 1st year of Bachelors in Education (Bed), Bachelors in Art (BA) and Bachelors in Business studies (BBS) in Maiya Devi Kanya College, Bharatpur, Chitwan. Students of age 17 years and above, who do not have their own vehicles and use public transportation at least once in a week were included in the study.

Permission was taken from Maiya Devi Kanya College. Written informed consent was obtained from each respondent with detail explanation of the purpose of the study to ensure their right to information.

Confidentiality of the respondents was maintained and information collected was used for study purpose only. The sample size was determined by single population proportion formula. Based on previous studies, prevalence rate (p) of 56 % was considered. Therefore at 95% confidence level and 10 % allowable error, along with the addition of 10% non-response rate, the sample size was calculated to be 105. Study participants were selected via convenient sampling.

Data were collected from the participant with the help of self-administered structured questionnaire. Owing to the lack of standard questionnaire on this topic, we developed a set of questionnaires after adequate literature review. The collected data were checked, reviewed and organized for its accuracy, completeness and consistency. The collected data was then entered in excel and analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 20. Data were interpreted in terms of descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage). Chi square test was used to determine the association between two variables. The p-value of less than 0.05 was considered significant.

RESULTS

Total of 105 bachelor level female students participated in this study. Most of them (89.5%) belonged to the age group 17-19 years. Majority of them were unmarried (73.3%) and practiced Hindu religion (80.7%). Around 64.8 % respondents used public vehicle on daily basis. The primary purpose of using public vehicle was going to college of most of the respondents (74.3%) (Table 1)

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents and their relation with sexual harassment (n=105)

Demographic variables	Frequency	Percent (%)
Age		
17-19	94	89.5%
≥20	11	10.5%
Marital Status		
Ever married (married, divorced, widowed)	28	26.6%
Never married	77	73.3%
Religion		
Hindu	90	80.7%
Christian & others	15	14.3%
Ethnicity		
Brahmin/ Chhetri	65	61.9%
Janajati & Others	40	29.5%
Educational level		
B.Ed first year	44	41.9%
B.A first year	23	21.9%
BBS first year	38	36.2%
Occupation of the parents		
Agriculture	44	41.9%
Business and other	61	58.1%
Frequency of using public vehicle		
Once in a month	5	4.8%
Weekly	15	14.3%
2-3times a week	17	16.2%
Daily basis	68	64.8%
Primary purpose of using public vehicle		
Going to college	78	74.3%
Visiting friends, family, relatives, shopping	15	14.3 %
Work/job	22	21.4%
Primary mode of public transport		
Mini bus	75	71.5%
Magic/Auto/others	30	28.5%

(Figure1) depicts the overall prevalence of sexual harassment in public transport among the respondents. While 86.7% (n=91) had heard of girls being harassed in public transportation, 50.5 % (n=53) had actually seen girl being harassed. Verbal harassment (n=41) was the most common form of harassment seen followed by non-verbal (n=10) and physical (n=8) (Figure 2). Around

21.9 % (n=23) mentioned that they had themselves been harassed in public transportation and non-verbal harassment

was the most common harassment experienced by them (Figure 2).

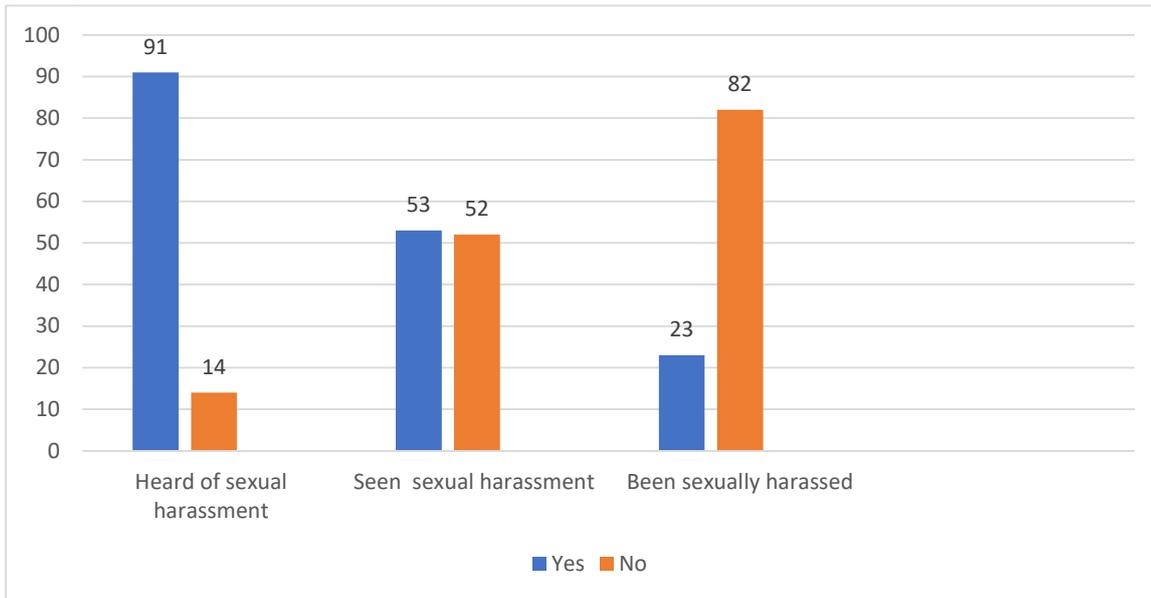


Figure 1: Prevalence of sexual harassment

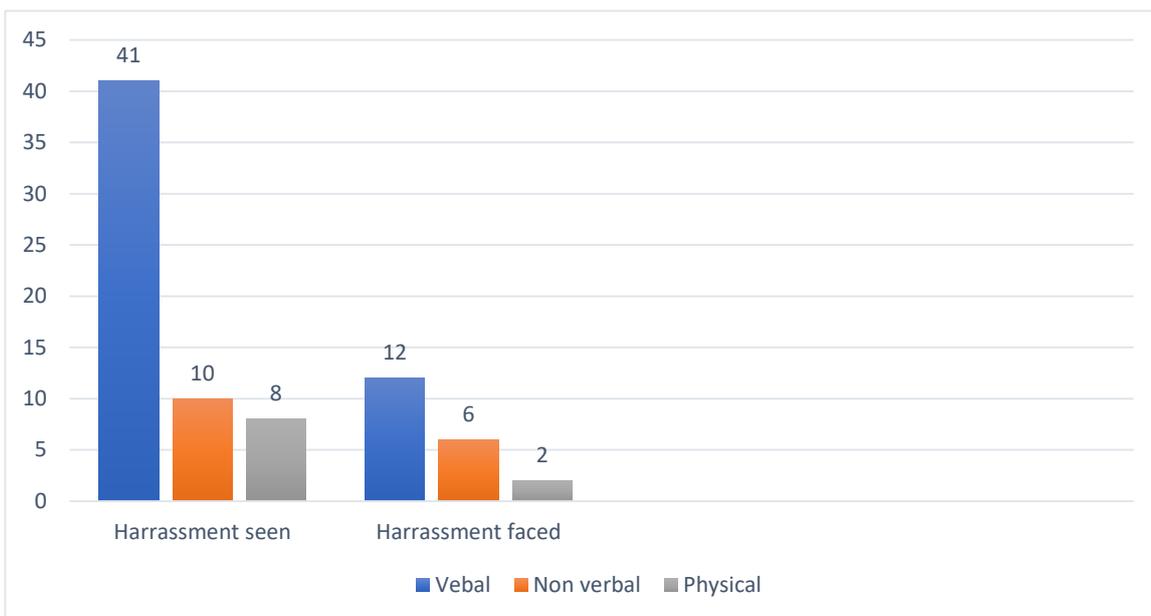


Figure 2: Comparison of types of Harassment seen and types of harassment faced

Those 23 respondents who had faced sexual harassment themselves were further questioned regarding their experiences, the result of which is tabulated in. Out of 23 respondents who had been harassed, 19 mentioned that they had been harassed once while 4 told that they had been harassed twice. Non-verbal harassment was most common [

69.56 % (n=16)] followed by verbal [52.17%(n=12)] and physical [21.73%(n=5)]. In regards to verbal harassment, whistling or catcalling was the most common form (n=10), followed by passing sexual comments on body and clothing (n=8) and referring women as hunk, doll, babe or honey (n=4). In terms of non-verbal harassment, steering/lingering

(n=12) was the most common form followed by making facial expressions like kissing or licking (n=9) and sexual gestures (n=6). Total of 5 participants had mentioned that they had experienced physical form of sexual harassment. Hanging around and standing close by the perpetrator was most common (n=3), followed by brushing up against them (n=2), hugging, kissing, patting or stroking

(n=2) and touching a person's hair, clothing or body (n=1). Out of 23 girls who had been harassed, 20 had reported to their friends, 1 had reported to their family and 2 had reported nobody. Most of the incidents of harassment have occurred during the morning (52.17%) followed by evening (34.78%) afternoon (8.69%) and night (4.34%) (Table 2)

Table 2: Experiences of sexual harassment (n=23)

Experience	Frequency	Percent
1. Frequency of being harassed		
Once	19	82.6
Twice	4	17.4
Three and more	0	0
3. What type of harassment did you face? (multiple response)		
Verbal	12	52.17
Non-verbal	16	69.56
Physical	5	21.73
4. If verbal, which type did you face? (multiple response)(n=12)		
Whistling or making cat calls sometime	10	43.47
Making sexual comments about person, clothing or body	8	34.78
Telling sexual jokes or stories	2	8.69
Asking personal question about sexual life, fantasies, preferences or history	1	4.34%
Referring an adults women as hunk, doll, babe or honey	4	17.39%
4. If nonverbal, which did you face (multiple response)(n=16)		
Staring/leering	12	11.4
Making facial expressions such as wing throwing kisses or licking	9	8.5
Making sexual gestures with hands or through body movements	6	5.7
5. If Physical, which type did You Face (multiple response)(n=5)		
Hanging around and standing close	3	2.8
Brushing up against a person	2	1.9
Touching a person's clothing, hair or body (to including giving a massage around the neck and shoulders)	1	0.9
Hugging, kissing, patting or stroking	2	1.9
6. Who Did You Report/inform (multiple response)		
Friends	20	19.1
Family/relatives	2	1.9
College Teacher	0	0
Police	0	0
Not reported	1	0.9
7. Time of harassment		
Morning	12	52.17
Afternoon	2	8.69
Evening	8	34.78
Night	1	4.34

Chi-square test was used to determine the association between sexual harassment and the demographic variables. Sexual harassment was found significantly more in young girls belonging to age group 17-19 years ($p < 0.001$) and unmarried ones ($p = 0.0274$). While

harassment was seen more among Hindus ($p = 0.014$), no significant association was seen in terms of ethnicity. Much more case of sexual abuses were reported in mini bus compared to magic, auto and others ($p = 0.0036$) (Table 3)

Table 3: Association between sexual harassment and sociodemographic variables of the respondents

Demographic variables	Sexual Harassment		p-value
	Yes (23)	No (82)	
Age			
17-19	16(17.02%)	78 (82.9%)	<0.001
≥20	7 (63.6%)	4(36.3%)	
Marital Status			
Ever married (married, divorced, widowed)	2(7.1%)	26 (92.8%)	0.0274
Never married	21(27.27 %)	56(72.73%)	
Religion			
Hindu	15(16.67 %)	75(83.33%)	0.0014
Christian & others	8(53.33%)	7(46.67 %)	
Ethnicity			
Brahmin/ Chhetri	11(16.92%)	54(83.08%)	0.12
Educational level			
B.Ed first year	10(22.72%)	34(77.28%)	0.86
B.A first year	5(21.74%)	18(78.26%)	
BBS first year	8(21.05%)	30(78.95%)	
Occupation of the parents			
Agriculture	9(20.45%)	35(79.55%)	0.76
Business and other	14(22.95%)	47(77.05%)	
Frequency of using public vehicle			
Once in a month	1(20%)	4(80%)	
Weekly	2(13.33%)	13(86.67%)	
2-3times a week	4(23.53%)	13(76.47%)	
Daily basis	16(23.53%)	52(76.47%)	
Primary purpose of using public vehicle			
Going to college	12(15.38%)	66(84.62%)	<0.001
Visiting friends, family, relatives, shopping	8(53.33%)	7(46.67%)	
Work/job	2(9.09%)	20(90.91%)	
Primary mode of public transport			
Mini bus	22(29.33%)	53(70.67%)	0.036
Magic/Auto/others	1(3.33%)	29(96.67%)	

Table 4: Coping strategies to sexual harassment in public transport (n=105)

1. How did /would you respond in case of harassment? (Multiple response)	Frequency	Percent
1. Take no action	57	54.3
Tell the person to stop	9	8.6
Report to co-passenger	30	28.6
Seek for help	9	8.6
2. What was/would be your reaction to harassment? (Multiple response)		
Remain silent	50	47.6
Angry and leave the bus	8	7.6
Angry but continuous used the bus	6	5.6
Complain to others	41	39
3. Did/ Would you fight with the perpetrator?		
Yes	24	22.9
No	81	77.1
4. How did/would you Cope with the situation? (Multiple response)		
Avoiding	53	50.5
Remain busy in other work to divert mind	9	8.6
Counseling	43	41
5. Is there necessity of prevention program for sexual harassment?		
Yes	101	96.2
No	4	3.8
6. Do you know about is there any sexual harassment related laws in our country		
Yes	80	76.2
No	25	23.8
7. What is the effective method for preventing sexual harassment (Multiple response)		
To develop healthy travel environment	63	60
To reinforce a heavy penalty to abuser	74	70.5
To establish rule and laws related to sexual harassment	86	81.9
To provide systematic preventive program	61	58.1
8. Is the harassment preventable		
Yes	97	92.4
No	8	7.6
9. What are major implements to reduce sexual in public transportation (Multiple response)		
Self-discipline	70	66.7
Effective law	69	65.7
Awareness program	40	38.1
Rule of transportation	25	22.8

Respondents were asked regarding how they had coped or would cope in possible case of sexual harassment. Around 54.3 % (n=57) mentioned that they took/would take no action, 28.6 % (n=30) mentioned that they reported/would report the co-passengers, 8.6 % (n=9) mentioned that they told/would tell the person to stop while the remaining 8.6% (n=9) mentioned that they sought/would seek

for help. When asked about the reaction to harassment, remaining silent was the most common response (n=50) followed by complaining to others (n=41), angry and leaving the bus (n=8, angry but continuing the bus (n=6). 22.9% (n=24) told that they fight with perpetrator. As per the respondents, avoiding was the best way to cope with the situation (n=53) followed by counselling

(n=43) and engaging oneself in other works to divert the mind (n=9). Almost all of the participants (96.9 %) felt the need of sexual harassment but only 76.2% (n=80) knew about any sexual harassment related laws in our country. In regards to prevention of sexual harassment, 81.9 % (n=86) mentioned about the need to establish strict rules and regulations followed by heavy penalty to the perpetrator (n=74), development of healthy travel environment (n=63) and conducting systematic preventive program (n=61). 92.4% (n=97) considered harassment to be preventable. 66.7% (n=70) thought that it required self-discipline followed by effective law (n=69), awareness program (n=40) and law of transportation (n=25) (Table 4).

DISCUSSION

Half of the respondents (50.47%) had witnessed sexual harassment in public transport. Nevertheless, only 21.9 % of the respondents admitted that they themselves had been sexually harassed. This could be due to the unwillingness or uneasiness of the respondents to share their actual harassment experiences. The prevalence in our study is quite low as compared to previous studies in our country. A similar study done in among female students in Kathmandu valley by Gautam et. Al⁹ showed the prevalence of 78.21 % while another similar study done in Kathmandu valley by Mishra and Lamichhane¹⁰ showed the prevalence of 79.6 %.. Incidents of sexual harassment are underreported, both in real life as well as in academic studies,¹¹ thus its magnitude is much larger than what is evident. It could also be partly attributed to the fact that the number of public transportation in Chitwan is less compared to

Kathmandu and the existing vehicles are also not as congested as in Kathmandu.

In our study, harassment was found significantly more in girls younger than age of 20 years than girls above the age of 20. This in contrast to the study by Mishra et al¹⁰ where harassment was found to be more in the age group ≥ 20 years. Unmarried girls were found to have faced sexual harassment significantly more than married ones. This could be because the perpetrators find it culturally and morally wrong and intimidating to harass married women as opposed to unmarried ones.¹² More cases of harassment were reported in mini bus as compared to magic bus and auto. This could be due to the reason that mini bus has more space, comfortable seats and affordable fares, thereby leading to the overloading of passengers and making it easy for the perpetrators to abuse women.⁹ In this study, harassment was found to be more in the morning hours. Previous studies also suggest that harassments are more common in the morning and evening hours. It is reasonable to assume so because vehicles are congested during this time by students and working individuals. This in turn provides the perpetrators proximity and anonymity for their act. Our findings suggest that there is difference in terms of types of harassment seen and faced. Non-verbal harassment was the most common form, which resonated with similar study Pakistan.¹³ This could be explained by the fact that non-verbal forms are often unnoticed by other co-passengers, does not leave any obvious evidences and therefore it is easy for the perpetrators to get away with the blame. On the other hand, verbal harassment was the most common type of harassment seen by the responders. This

finding is also in alignment with the notion that non-verbal abuses are usually unnoticed while verbal abuse easily comes into attention.

After being harassed, respondents reported it to their friends and not to their parents or police. This could be to avoid stress and anxiety in the family, but could also possibly be due the fear of victim blaming by the parents.¹⁴ Self-discipline is quoted by most respondents as an important measure to curb sexual harassment. In a Kathmandu based survey, some male respondents mentioned that they considered verbal abuse as casual as long as it is not vulgar and that it was their birthright as male to do so.¹⁵

More than half of the respondents mentioned they took or would take no action in cases of harassment. This could be due to male dominated patriarchal construct of our society where male aggression and domination to female is considered normal. Also, there is lack of stringent laws for the perpetrators, specially in non-physical forms which could also be one of the potential reasons why girls rather opted to avoid the situation. The fear of being sexual harassed restrains female from progress, to work, get an education, which limits their productivity and further widens the gap of gender inequality.¹⁶ This affects them emotionally and psychologically. Feeling of fear, anxiety, shame, helplessness accumulates over time, thus lowering their self-worth.¹⁷

Thus, the consequence of sexual harassment is dire not just for the victims but also for the nation as a whole secondary to the 'missing opportunities' caused by it.¹⁸ When girls remain unsafe in public transport, it affects their self-esteem and ultimately hampers their personal productivity and national growth. Stricter laws, unprejudiced societies and moral values are necessary to prevent as well as help women cope with such harassment.

Limitations: This study was conducted among the students of a single college and the sample size was also low. So, the findings might not be very representative. Furthermore, sexual harassment is still considered a taboo and therefore victims do not tend to fully open up in this regard. Thus there could be responder bias too.

CONCLUSION

Verbal harassment was the most common form of harassment seen while the most common form of harassment experienced was non-verbal followed by verbal and physical. Such sexual abuses are common specially during the peak hours in congested vehicles as it provides the proximity and anonymity to the perpetrator. Most of the women preferred to remain silent in the situation and rarely reported about it. Enforcement of strict laws against the perpetrator along with cultivation of self-discipline and moral values were deemed necessary by majority of women in order to create conducive environment for women to safely use public transports for work and education.

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