

Sexual Harassment at College Level-An Ongoing Gender Issue : A Study on Some Colleges of Purba Medinipur under Vidysagar University

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Abstract:

The concept of sexual harassment, in its modern understanding, is a relatively new one, dating from the 1970s onwards; although other related concepts have existed prior to this in many cultures. "Sexual Harassment" means behavior, including physical contact, advances, and comments in person, through an intermediary, and/or via phone, text message, email, social media, or other electronic medium, that is unwelcome; based on sex or gender stereotypes; and is so severe, pervasive and objectively offensive that it has the purpose or effect of substantially interfering with a person's academic performance, employment or equal opportunity to participate in or benefit from college or University programs or activities or by creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive working or educational environment. Students at academic institutions often sexually harass others by calling them "fag," "homo," "Hey, babe," "Hot stuff," or "Big stud" or other degrading terms that refer to sexual orientation. Additional types of sexual harassment include students starting or spreading sexual rumors, writing sexual graffiti on bathroom walls, sending crude e-mails or letters, and displaying sexual drawings or pornography. A person in a position of power may request sexual favors in return for a starting position on a college team, a higher grade, or access to a popular club or peer group. Individuals who experience sexual harassment feel fearful, intimidated, manipulated, and overpowered.

Almost 60-70% of students in surveyed colleges report experiencing sexual harassment directly or indirectly. At the elementary college level it is exhibited differently and thus it may be overlooked. In fact, sexual harassment has become so commonplace that many accept it as something everyone puts up with. However, sexual harassment is unacceptable, causing personal pain and embarrassment, creating a negative academic environment, and feeding into more violent behaviors. It is important for teachers, parents, and students to gain an understanding of what sexual harassment actually is, how to respond to it, and how to prevent it.

Introduction:

Around the globe, the unwanted sexual attention of men is a common condition of employment and education for women and girls. The experience is universal—transcending all levels of socioeconomic and educational status and cutting across most national and cultural identities. The type and severity of the harm done is subject to interpretation, which is mediated by such things as gender ideology, sexual orientation, nationality, and race relations. Despite these variations, the two most common complaints are the loss of employment and the loss of educational opportunity.

Nearly 35 years ago, U.S. feminists coined the term sexual harassment to describe this multifaceted ubiquity among women (Farley, 1978; MacKinnon, 1979; Wehrli, 1976). Since that time, the issue of sexual harassment has been a potent focal point of the struggle for women's rights throughout the entire world. As a result, answers to such fundamental and practical questions as what behaviors constitute sexual harassment, what are the risk factors, what is the harm done, who should be held accountable, and how to best prevent it have too often become fodder for political theater. For at the core of these queries lie the larger questions of who has the right—or more accurately, the power—to define what constitutes violence against women, what is the role of government in defining it, and to what extent should an employer or school be held accountable when its members commit it.

An exhaustive exploration of all points of contention is too great a task for this report making. I offer, instead, a highlighting of the trends most pertinent to those committed to ending violence against women. Before I do so, three caveats further explicate my choices:

- A significant body of scholarship and government statistics consistently substantiates a need for more attention to the sexual harassment of men and boys. The number of male survey respondents who experience sexual harassment has consistently increased, as have their complaints to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (Stockdale, 2008). Their harassers are overwhelmingly male, but their harassment and complaint experiences are different from those of their female counterparts in a number of important ways. In other publications, there is the chorus calling for greater attention to the sexual harassment of men (Gruber & Morgan, 2005; Morgan & Gruber, 2008). But, in keeping with the scope of this collection, the analysis I present in this report is limited to the experiences of women and girls.
- Recent efforts to make sexual harassment laws more politically acceptable and palatable to the business community have led to a reinvention of sexual harassment as a form of general workplace/classroom incivility rather than a form of discriminatory violence. I remain wary of this approach and conceptualize sexual harassment as a form of sexual violence—committed primarily by men, primarily against women—and place it on a continuum that ranges from the smallest gestures of sexism that women encounter every day through the all-too-frequent murder of women and girls by men. As such, it is the most widespread form of violence against women in the world today (Merkin, 2008).
- Despite the fact that the practice of sexual harassment has been sufficiently documented across history and around the globe, the scholarly literature remains skewed toward the American experience (Willness, Steele, & Lee, 2007). As charter members of the International Consortium against Sexual Harassment, we see this chapter as an opportunity to continue our efforts to correct that bias. Thus, in researching this report, I made a special effort to take a distinct approach to the problem and highlight implications of globalization for this pernicious form of violence against women.

With these caveats in mind, the following pages present an overview of contemporary trends in the sexual harassment in a small academic world including five colleges of Purba Medinipur under Vidyasagar University. While the total report focuses and addresses on the sexual harassment of women and girls at college levels of education. Within each part of this report, I will draw upon objectives, methods and methodology, legal cases, and research findings to address these common questions: What is sexual harassment in colleges? How prevalent is it? What are the risk factors? What is the harm? In addition, I also address the challenges posed by the globalized workplace and multicultural classroom.

Statement of the Problem:

There is an unfortunate silence surrounding this issue. And because it is not in the public arena of debate, not being discussed or analyzed, it is a misunderstood issue. Sexual harassment was earlier called 'eve teasing' or a frivolous pastime for boys and a petty misdemeanor. It took time for high profile cases and protests to be called sexual harassment and to be seen as an offence. As women, as a women's group and as part of the women's movement working with and concerned about women, we know how they have learned to live defensively. We refrain from going out at night or move around in groups after dark and avoid strangers. Whether you are young or middle aged, a homemaker or employed, an activist or student, if you are female then you have internalized defensive strategies when out in public space. It could be in the way you carry yourself, how alert you are in crowds, how aware you are of another's behaviour or how you instinctively carry your bag in front of your chest when in a crowded bus.

There are some women who may not have been harassed. But none have escaped the fear of harassment, of being misunderstood or of having been blamed for being provocative. All of us have our own 'harassment' stories. It is this loss of freedom of movement, which we resent and would like to overcome. Until the late 1980s, there was no recourse for women as the issue had no name. Feelings of

anger, humiliation, fear, loss of confidence and in extreme cases self imposed house arrest and even suicide were the fall outs of sexual harassment. Women sought out individual and private solutions.

The Bhawridevi case in Rajasthan, a spate of protests and public debates lead to the Supreme Court's landmark Vishaka Judgment in 1997. It's guidelines defined sexual harassment and sought to protect women from sexual harassment by placing the onus of providing a safe work environment on the management or administration. It, thus, became mandatory for all work related organizations to have a sexual harassment redressed mechanism. However, regardless of the introduction of legal directives and public debate, the situation seems to remain the same. The silence remains, the problem persists.

In India, every day a woman is harassed every 51 minutes and sexually molested every 26 minutes. We have no idea of the unreported cases which make up the remaining part of the iceberg's tip.

Most people will argue that sexual harassment either happens in isolated and dark roads or large organizations. What they mean is that not all women face it. Let us look at college campuses, which are protected, learning institutions. The Gender Study Group of the University of Delhi, 1996 shows that 92 percent of women in hostels and 88 percent of women day scholars have faced sexual harassment on campus. A 1997 survey of colleges in Mumbai found that 39 percent of women students have experienced harassment.

There have been other studies done in different parts of the country, which have revealed important data and findings. So how will another one, which will probably come up with the same findings, matter? I have seen my study, not only as a form of collecting data but as a form of involvement in the issue. My study is a participatory one which involved both, interviewers and interviewees, men and women, students and faculty, victims and perpetrators.

Objectives and Methodology

My Objectives of the Study are:

- ♣ To assess the level of awareness and perceptions of students and faculty members regarding sexual harassment
- ♣ To assess the impact of sexual harassment on female students
- ♣ To evaluate redressal mechanisms; how well they function, problems faced in running them and if they are accessed by students.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size:

The Convenient Stratified Sampling Technique has been utilized for the study. Five under graduate colleges of Purba Medinipur [Bajkul Milani Mahavidyalaya (Sub-urban), Khejuri College(Rural), Mugberia Gangadhar Mahavidyalaya(Rural), Palpara Yogada Satsanga Mahavidyalaya(Rural) & Contai Pravat Kumar College(Urban)] affiliated to Vidyasagar University were stratified into UGC and government sponsored colleges. From the each category we chose colleges from three zones (Rural, Suburbs, and Urban). We gave ourselves the target of about 600 students an approximately equal proportion of respondents from each zone. They were divided into male and female respondents. Respondents within these two categories were chosen by convenience. They included students from 13th-15th std. from the fields of Arts, Science, Commerce and professional courses. We also included about 60 staff members. We finally interviewed 600 students and 80 staff.

Category	Rural College	Suburb College	Urban College	TOTAL
Female	180	60	60	400
Male	120	40	40	200
Faculty	40	20	20	80
TOTAL	223	228	241	680

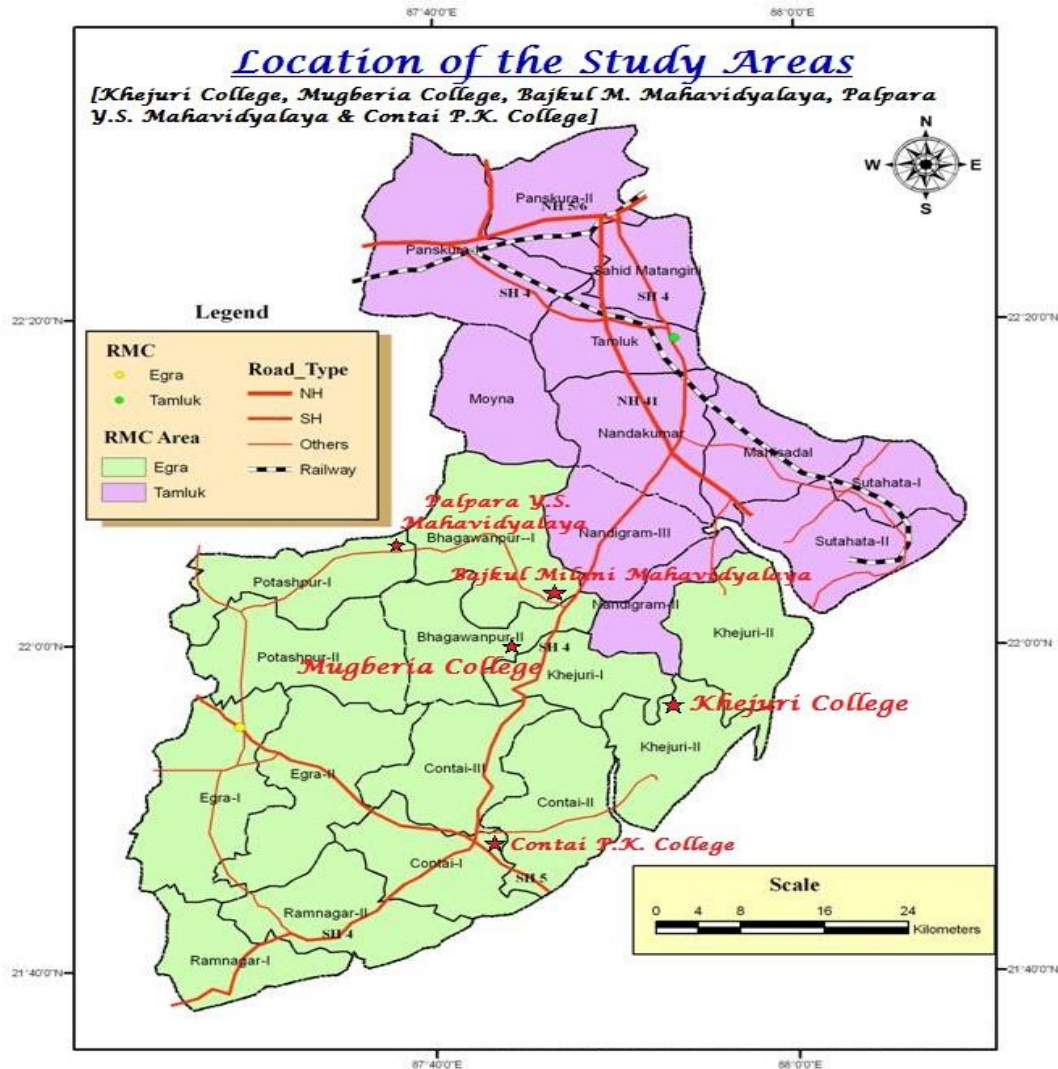


Figure-1: Location Map of the Study Areas

Tools for Data Collection:

The quantitative method of data collection has been chosen as a tool because we wished to cover a range of colleges and students. It contains a mix of open and close ended questions. Structured qualitative interview schedules have been used for faculty members.

Method:

I have approached lecturers of geography, sociology, philosophy and political science especially those teaching research methodology about this study and intentions. They were happy to ask students to volunteer for it as it would give them a hands-on experience. I began with the basics of research methodology and give them an orientation of the study, which doubled as a gender training workshop. Their own perceptions of sexual harassment are explored and analyzed. They are then sent on a trial run to their own colleges in pairs. They report that it would be easier for them to go to other colleges. NSS members also take to interviewing in colleges specially the staff members and principals. Interviewers engage students in lengthy conversations often challenging their views and encouraging a dialogue with onlookers. Students are chosen randomly in canteens, corridors and at the gate.

Before initiating the interviewing process, I contact principals for permission to do the study. All of them give permission but cut short an interview with – there are no incidents in this college. Faculty members give time in between their classes. Some were co-operative and asked their students to stay behind for the interviewing process. Those who were on the Women Development Cells [WDC] committees were sought out after fixing appointments.

Field work is never an easy but always an exciting process. Since sexual harassment is a relatively sensitive issue, there is resistance to discussing it openly and to expressing one's true sentiments. Students as well as faculty members give data collectors 'politically correct' responses. There are several media reports of lecturers having taken up cases of sexual harassment in court. However none of them wanted to be interviewed. Some of the women interviewers report cases of sexual harassment even whilst they were interviewing! This leads to a fresh round of dialogue with male students of the particular college. One of the main drawbacks of having a large sample of 700 is the emphasis on numbers. There was a virtual race to complete the numbers in each zone. The student volunteers were not interested in seeking qualitative answers. The NSS staff was able to do only a limited number of lecturers and principals. Some officials of the WDC were interviewed much later.

Result and Discussion

Prepared structured questionnaire covered eight broad areas namely perception of sexual harassment, identity of sexual harassers, types of sexual harassment, location of harassment, action taken by harassed students, prevalence of sexual harassment, impact on women students and redressal mechanisms. Each had further sub-divisions. Below I present some of our main findings from the study.

1. Perception of sexual harassment:

How do we understand and define sexual harassment? Students and faculty were asked a series of questions to find out what they thought amounted to sexual harassment. Undoubtedly, there is a shift from the earlier understanding of sexual harassment as 'eve teasing' or what our law says 'outraging the modesty of a woman'. To gauge the extent of this shift, we juxtaposed what emerged from the study with the definition put forward by the Supreme Court.

It was in 1997 that the Supreme Court had redefined sexual harassment in the following terms :- "Sexual harassment includes such sexually determined behaviour such as : physical contact, a demand or request for sexual favours, sexually coloured remarks, showing pornography, any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature." This means that sexual harassment is different from sexual desire, mutual romance or love it is unwelcome sexual behavior sexual harassment can come in many forms like physical, psychological, verbal or non-verbal sexual harassment is a serious criminal offence

Forms of sexual harassment that pertain to a campus environment include; demands for sexual favours accompanied by veiled or open promises of preferential treatment or threats concerning an individual's employment or student status, physical and verbal aggression arising from the above, communicating or displaying obscene letters, posters, cartoons, or photographs, disparaging remarks and gestures made with prejudicial intent in the work or study places, which specifically relate to the issue of gender, harassment through unwelcome telephone calls or E-mail, uninvited chasing or following/blackmailing in or outside the campus.

We found that a majority of faculty respondents 71.5% were not aware of its definition of sexual harassment. Only a little over half of them were aware of the policy thus showing a lack of awareness in respect to the history of sexual harassment laws in India. This was further verified by our qualitative interviews. Most students too had little knowledge of the definition of sexual harassment. This gave us reason to deduce that their understanding of sexual harassment was from common knowledge and opinions formed through childhood and in school.

According to the majority of faculty respondents, sexual harassment constituted of touching body parts, sexual rumours and suggestive gestures. When asked about their understanding of sexual

harassment female students rated touching body parts as being the most indicative action of sexual harassment. Spreading sexual rumours and displaying pornographic materials were also rated highly. Among male students the results were similar; a little less than half the student rated touching body parts as being the most indicative action of sexual harassment. Like their female counterparts, male students also rated spreading sexual rumours and displaying pornographic materials highly.

Why do men harass women? A large majority of women, 53.2% believed that men sexually harass women for time pass or fun. Others (56.1%) felt that men do so in order to show their manliness. 73.5% of respondents felt that verbal forms of sexual harassment were the most common. These include comments, jokes, whistling, filmi songs, continuously phoning a person. Similarly half the men interviewed said that men sexual harass for fun or as a form of entertainment. According to male respondents the most likely people to harass women were seniors and outsiders.

We compared our findings with other research studies, which indicated that students, both men and women, described 'verbal harassment' as eve teasing and contrasted this with 'physical harassment', which has been seen as sexual harassment. They described eve teasing as relatively harmless behaviour committed usually by strangers, while sexual harassment would be grievous acts committed by acquaintances or men in positions of institutional power. In addition, most men and women described eve teasing as isolated incidents while sexual harassment would typically be repetitive and sustained over a long period of time. It is clear that so called 'lighter' forms of sexual harassment are considered as eve teasing whereas only if the action is severe and repetitive, is it classified by the majority as sexual harassment.

These findings show that it becomes important to distinguish between sexual harassment and teasing. A deeper analysis points to certain myths related to sexual harassment. These are so ingrained in everyday thought that their influence over us goes unnoticed. It becomes essential to dispel certain myths around sexual harassment so as to identify where our own beliefs related to the issue have emerged. Once we are clear as to where the boundaries lie, it is easier to claim our rights to a sexual harassment free environment to work or study in.

2. Prevalence of Sexual Harassment

How widespread is the phenomena of sexual harassment? A majority of faculty members felt that sexual harassment occurs on a daily basis. The majority of women students or 61.7% reported that they had experienced some form of sexual harassment in or coming to college whereas a minority felt that it was rare. We asked the men, as they do not experience harassment, whether they had witnessed it. About half of them said that they had witnessed such incidents.

Trying to identify the locations where sexual harassment was most likely to take place, a large majority of female students spoke of secluded areas college grounds or alleys. Among faculty members, rural, suburb and urban respondents reported that sexual harassment takes place most frequently in canteen areas. In contrast, urban members felt that college grounds, parking places and secluded places were areas where incidents of sexual harassment were most likely to take place.

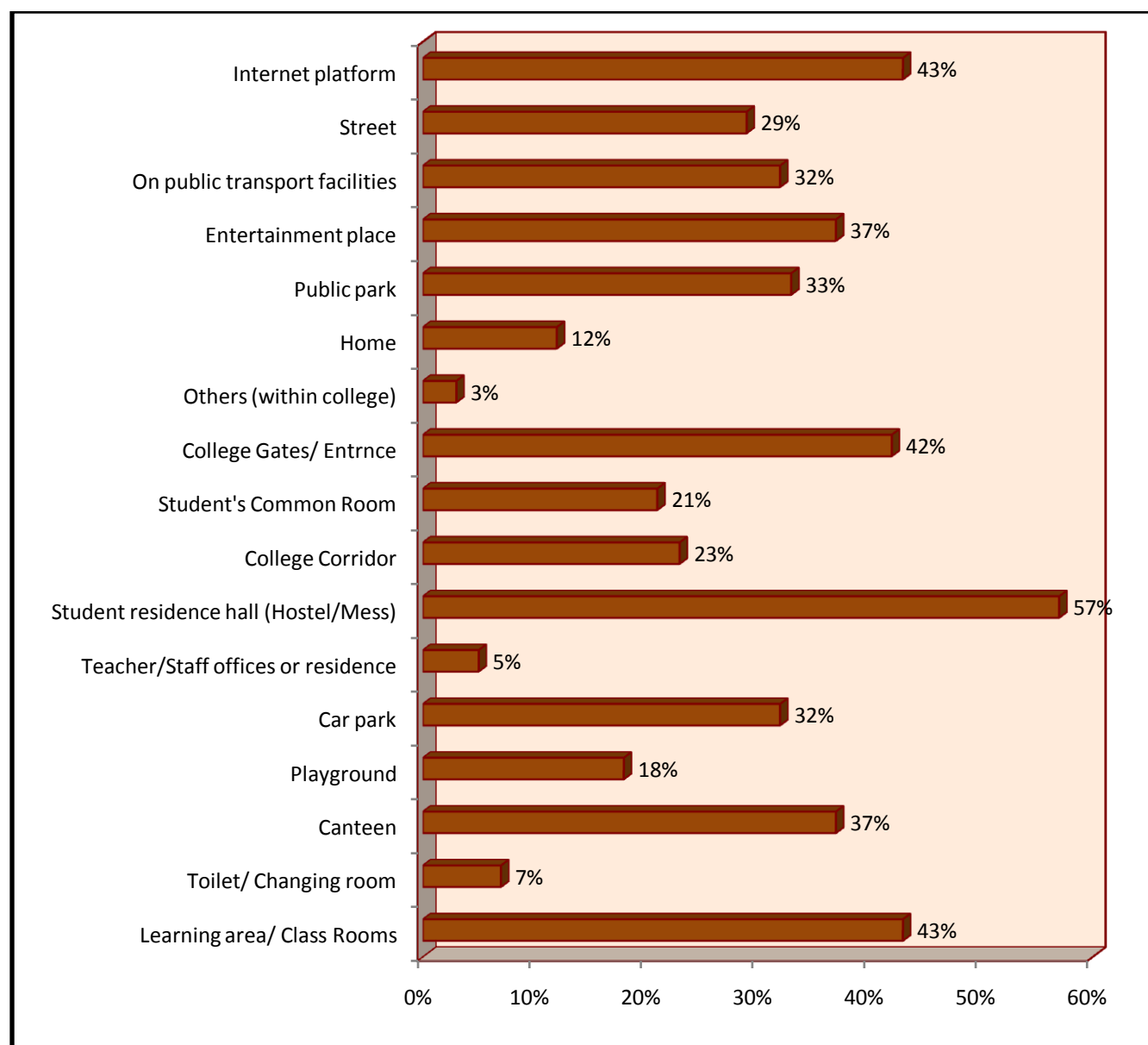


Figure-2: Location of occurrence of sexual harassment (% of the respondents, n=600)

Data indicated that both men and women students as well as faculty members were accurate in their awareness of how often incidents of sexual harassment take place. They were also aware about the locations on campus where sexual harassment occurs and thrives. The moot point to emerge is that as colleges are learning environments, what sort of impact will it have on female students?

3. Identity of sexual Harassers:

On the basis of the survey, it is seen that about 56% of sexual harassers is own boy friend or girl friend whereas 76% of street boys is the leading character to conduct this phenomena at the gate, outside the college or college roads. Own classmates are not less responsible to happen the sexual harassment in the class room or outside the class. Through the hand of social media, cheap and very easily accessible net friends who are also the contributors for sexual harassment in a lot (41%). Without these harassers, outsiders and other friends also harasses the students more and less in and around the college campus.

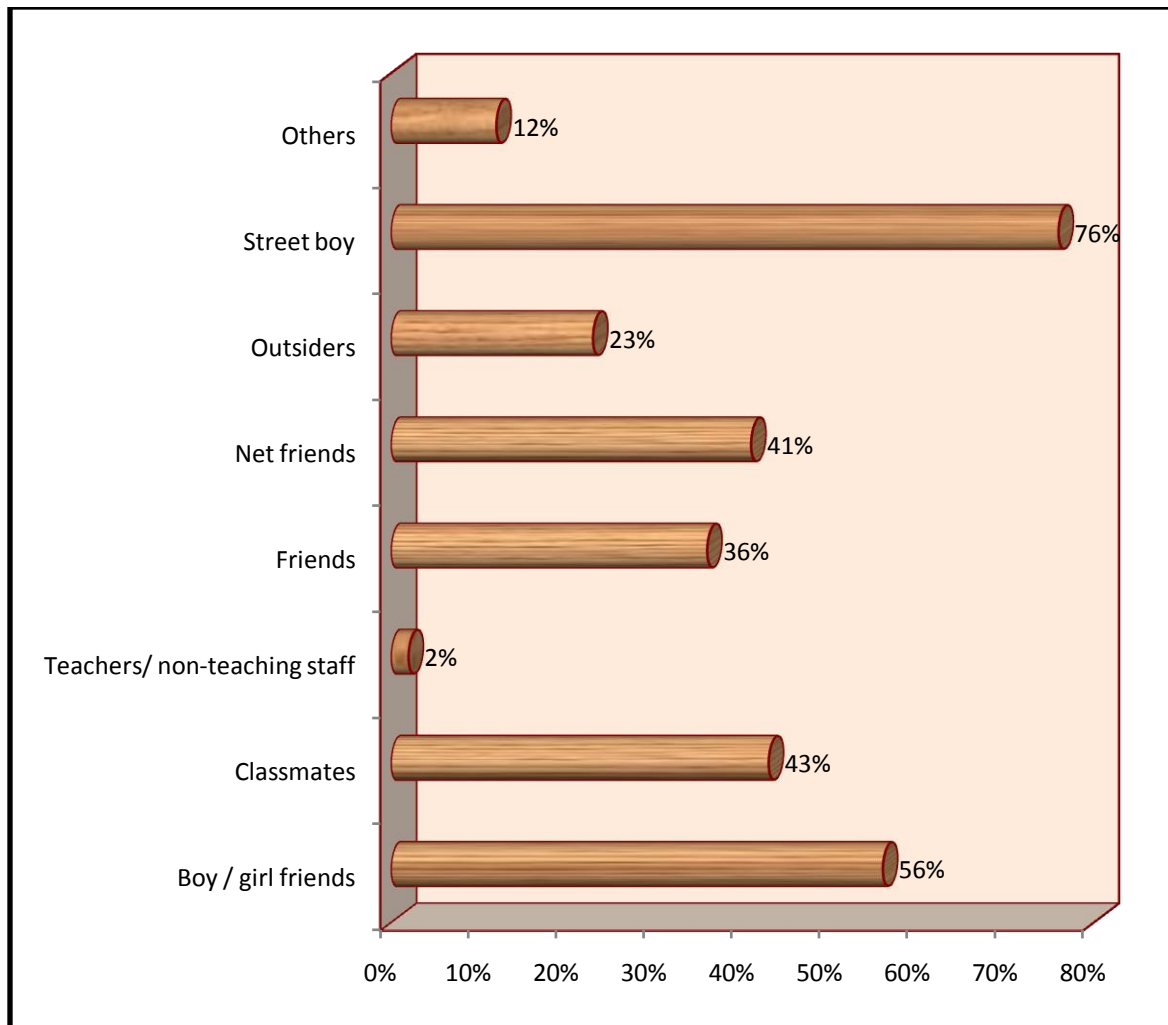


Figure-3: Identity of harassers (% of the respondents, n=600)

4. Types of Sexual Harassment:

Generally sexual harassment is of three types, e.g., verbal, non-verbal and physical harassment. In and around college campus, there are observed the verbal and non-verbal sexual harassment mostly. Data on the types of sexual harassment on the students are given below:

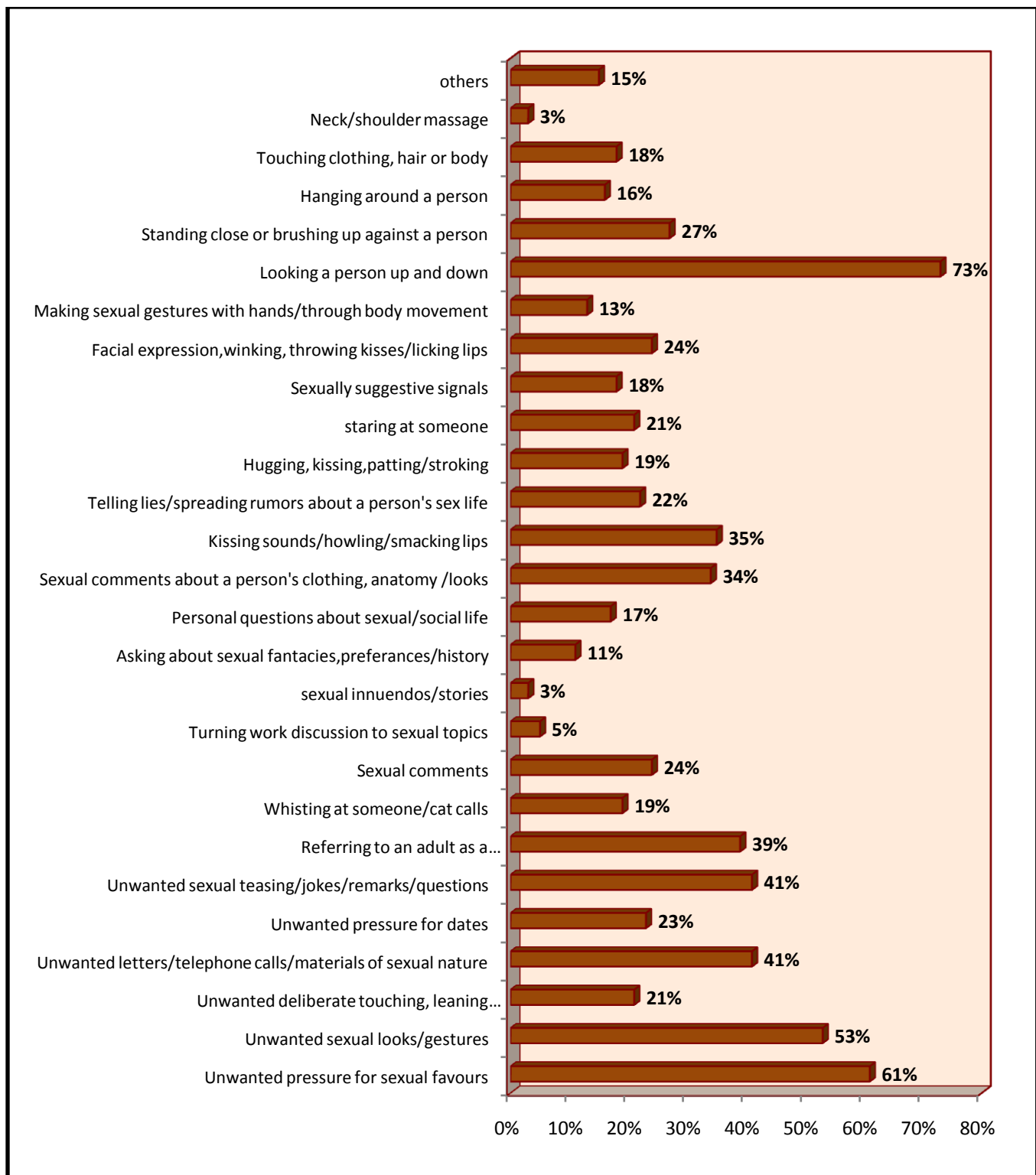


Figure-4: Types of Sexual Harassment faced by the students (n=600)

5. Action taken by Harassed Students:

From the survey, it is seen that in most of the cases harassed students share their harassing event to classmates or friends (78%) and in alone keep silent (57%). A few percent of the harassed students are interested to complain the fact to the college authority or concerned organization of college. Only 29% of the students protests or complains to the harassers and 3% go to call the police for observing the fact.

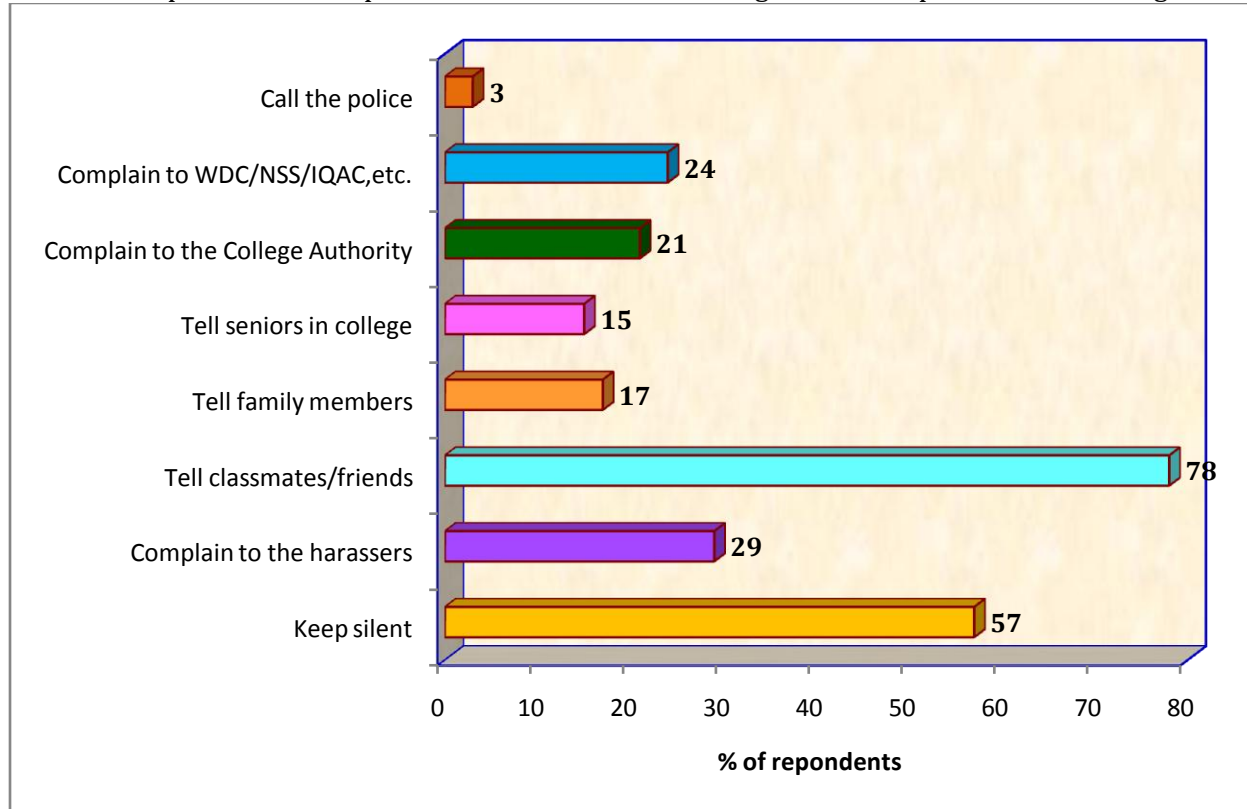


Figure-5: Actions taken by harassed students of different genders (% of the victims, n=600)

6. Impact of Sexual Harassment:

The media portrayal of sexual harassment on college campuses would lead one to believe that eve teasing is a certificate to a woman's desirability. However our findings showed that sexual harassment, far from pleasing women, has the opposite effect.

The majority of women stated that sexual harassment leads to a loss of self-confidence as well as a fear of reoccurrence. Some stated that it even resulted in absenteeism from college. These are severe repercussions of sexual harassment on college campuses and it soon became obvious that preventive measures must be taken. Damage to student's levels of confidence, inculcating fear of repeated harassment and consequent absenteeism from college, are only a few of the effects of sexual harassment on college campuses. Most men students reported that women become angry and self-conscious. They also felt that there is an emotional effect, constant suspicion and absenteeism from college. A few also felt that it lowered grades.

Other research studies have shown similar impacts on women. The Gender Study Group showed that most women felt disgusted, insulted and scared by even the most frivolous kind of harassment. Women often internalize male perceptions of sexual harassment and blame themselves for having brought it on. They not only doubt the validity of their own experiences but begin to believe that they themselves must be 'abnormal', 'cheap', 'indecent' or deserving the violence that comes their way. Many women said that they felt extreme anger, frustration and helplessness at not being able to do anything. Victims of sexual harassment said that they find it difficult to trust or have friendships with men. 45% of women stated that

sexual harassment on College campus and college roads has affected their personal or academic development in one way or another.

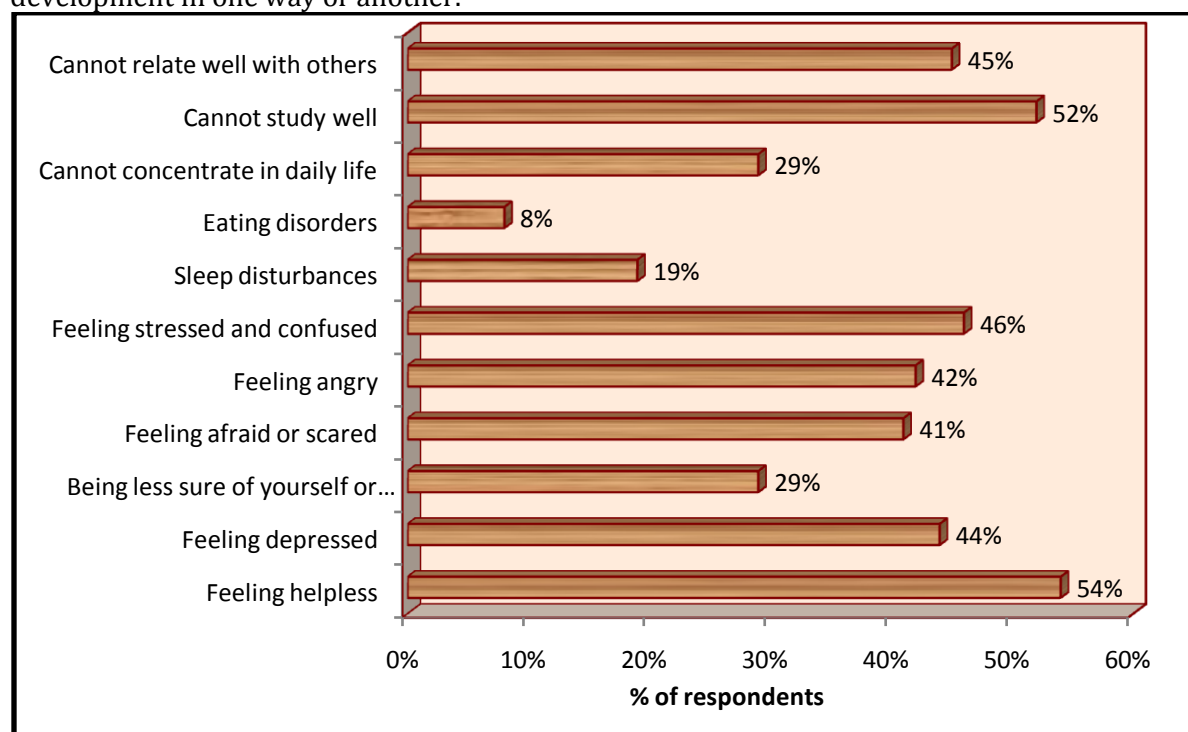


Figure-6: Impacts of sexual harassment on students (% of the victims, n=600)

Given the emotional fall-out of sexual harassment as reported by both male and female students, it is evident that this is a problem with large implications. Its prevalence within a learning environment makes the matter even more serious.

7. Redressal Mechanisms

After the Supreme Court guidelines, several universities and colleges took the initiative to deal with the problem. IIT, Delhi was the first to develop a policy on sexual harassment. The working group on sexual harassment of the Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi also drafted a proposal for an institutional mechanism to combat sexual harassment on campus. The Forum against Oppression of Women, a women's rights group came up with a possible legislation. Different universities and colleges West Bengal and also India took a unique step in its effort to implement the Supreme Court guidelines, by forming Women Development Cells in colleges and universities. The stated objectives of the cell of these five colleges are-

- 📖 Prevention of sexual harassment and the promotion of the general well being of female students, teaching and non-teaching women staff of the University and affiliated colleges/institutes.
- 📖 Provision of guidelines for the redressal of grievances of female students, teaching and non-teaching women staff of the University and affiliated colleges/institutes.
- 📖 Creation of social awareness about the problems of women and in particular regarding gender discrimination.
- 📖 Establishment of committees at the collegiate level and seeking the participation of both male and female students from NCC, NSS and other activities for the prevention of sexual harassment of women.
- 📖 Provision of assistance to the College level Women's Development Cell for taking preventive steps in the matter of gender discrimination and sexual harassment.

- 📖 Encouragement of the participation of NGOs working in the area of women's development in the activities of the Cell.
- 📖 Organization of seminars and workshops at different centres in the Colleges and Universities for the creation of general awareness and for the orientation of both male and female teachers for their participation in the activities of the cell.
- 📖 Organization of various types of training programs and self-employment schemes for the encouragement of self-reliance among women.

This study found that only 48.5% of faculty respondents knew of the WDC in their respective colleges. When questioned as to the working of the Cell, a majority of faculty respondents or 43.7% reported that they were dormant. 29.1% reported that they were in the process of being formed. Statistics indicate that only a small percentage of WDCs are currently functioning. At the level of the students, 37.1% said that they were not aware of the provisions for a WDC to be formed. The majority of them or 68.1% said that they did not know the members of their WDC committee.

A large number of faculty respondents or 65.8% reported that the main reason for a lack of a redressal mechanism was because their Principals/ Teacher-in-charge had not constituted a committee. 43.7% of faculty respondents felt it was because of the principal and faculty were unsure about the rules and procedures for setting up a WDC. A little more than half or 61.3% of faculty respondents reported that the main problem was disinterest in the college especially amongst lecturers.

As the most colleges were in the process of setting up WDCs or had dormant ones, it is not surprising that 87.5% of faculty respondents reported that there were no cases of sexual harassment dealt with by CWDC/ Grievance cells within the last year. A small percentage 13.5% reported less than three cases. However, our data shows that both men and women students and faculty said that there is a large amount of sexual harassment in colleges. What sort of actions do women students as well as faculty take if they are harassed? A large majority or 87.6% of faculty respondents had said that they would never approach the management. Newspaper reports show that women lecturers have appealed to the courts especially if the incident involved the principals.

A large number or 61.2% of women students stated that they would seek support from the authorities and 31.6% reported that they would themselves confront the harasser. Almost an equal number of men students were skeptical about a redressal mechanism.

Our qualitative data shows that women students, by and large, deal with sexual harassment by themselves or with help from friends or simply keep quiet about it. A majority of female respondents stated that the two main reasons behind not reporting incidents was fear of being made fun of by others and not being taken seriously. Even lecturers who have good relations with their students confirmed that they seldom come to them with their harassment cases. Then why did 61.2% say they would go to the authorities? We would like to modify the statement by saying that the majority of women students would like to access the Cell. They would like to if they found the Cells functioning properly, had sympathetic committee members and were assured confidentiality and justice.

Major Findings:

600 women and men students, lecturers from 5 colleges were interviewed using the qualitative and quantitative methods.

- ♣ The majority of men and women students and faculty did not have a holistic awareness of the definition and issue of sexual harassment. Their understanding was a mix of commonly held views. There were 'teasing' and a more serious form of sexual harassment. The majority 64.1% were not aware of the Supreme Court guidelines and definition of sexual harassment.
- ♣ Both the faculty and students admitted that there was a high level of prevalence of sexual harassment in colleges. The usual locations were the canteens, cycle stand, class corridors and isolated maidens. 68.3% of female respondents reported to have experienced some form of sexual harassment and close

to half of the male respondents reported to have witnessed some form of sexual harassment on campus therefore it occurs significantly within an exclusive learning environment.

- ♣ The majority of the women 57.1%, and the men students, agreed that sexual harassment was for time pass or fun or habitual enjoyment. Yet, both of them were aware that it resulted in loss of self confidence and disgust. Women reported that they would become suspicious of all men and sometimes resort to absenteeism.
- ♣ The majority of students 59.1% were not aware of the provision of a WDC in their colleges thus indicating a lack of effectiveness in creating awareness of the University provision by college administrative systems.
- ♣ Only about 25% of colleges had a functioning Women's Development Cell to take up cases.
- ♣ At present neither the faculty nor students access the WDCs. But women students had a hope that they would go to a Cell with their case if they were functioning and were sympathetic to them.

Recommendations for Further Action and Research

- ☉ **Awareness:** Need for awareness generating programs for faculty and students in colleges with respect to the history behind sexual harassment laws, the University policy and definition of sexual harassment. Since seniors were identified as being the main perpetrators of sexual harassment, efforts need to be made to challenge the power associated with seniority on campuses.
- ☉ **Locations of Sexual Harassment:** College canteens and maidans need to be patrolled by student groups and guards and made safe for women students.
- ☉ **Impact of Sexual Harassment:** The study indicated that absenteeism, lowering of grades and loss of self confidence are some of the impacts of sexual harassment on women. College authorities should make available services of counsellor.

Conclusion

Sexual harassment is a sensitive topic. Merely providing students, parents, and staff with information about the college's sexual harassment policy is insufficient. Colleges must provide positive, proactive behavioral supports, ongoing training, and discussions as part of the daily college routine rather than relying solely on disciplinary consequences for inappropriate behavior and language. Administrators, teachers, students, and parents must nurture an inclusive, supportive, and respectful environment in their efforts to decrease and eliminate sexual harassment.

Acknowledgement

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