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Perception of Sexual Harassment among the Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

Introduction: Sexual harassment means unwanted sexually determined behaviour such as physical contacts and advances, making sexually derogative comments, and sexual pressures whether by verbal or non-verbal actions. Students may not recognize the harassing behaviours and the harasser can take this as an advantage. Therefore, it becomes very important to understand how the students perceive different types of sexual harassment. **Objective:** To assess the perception of sexual harassment by the undergraduate students. **Methods:** A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 408 undergraduate students of selected professional colleges of Udupi district. Data was collected using Perception Scale on sexual harassment. Stratified proportionate systematic random sampling technique was used. **Result:** The data suggest that majority of the students, 396 (97.1%) have agreed that asking to indulge in sexual acts in return to a favour done, is considered as sexual harassment whereas only 203 (49.8%) agreed that repeated requests for dating in spite of rejection by a person is considered as sexual harassment. Most of the students i.e., 371 (90.9%) agreed that establishing sexual harassment awareness programs can be helpful in preventing sexual harassment in colleges whereas only 174 (42.6%) agreed that establishing proper dress code can prevent sexual harassment in colleges. **Conclusion:** The perception on sexual harassment differs with the students' age, gender and course of the study.

Keywords: Perception, sexual harassment, undergraduate students

Introduction

In the last few decades, the crime against women in India has increased by 6.4 percent in 2012 from the previous year (Bhalla, 2013). Sexual harassment is one among them. Sexual harassment means unwanted sexually determined behaviour such as physical contacts and advances, making sexually derogative comments, showing porn pictures or videos and sexual pressures whether by verbal or non-verbal actions. Sexual harassment is irrespective of gender, which means an individual of different or the same sex can sexually harass a person. Sexual harassment

is a very subjective feeling. It differs from one individual to another. What constitutes harassment for one individual may not be the same for the other (Banerjee, 2013). In the colleges, harassment can occur among the students themselves or between the faculty and the students. For the students, the behaviour can be entirely new. They may not even recognize the harassing behaviours and the harasser can take this as an advantage. Therefore, it becomes very important to understand how the students perceive different types of sexual harassment.

A study done in Hong Kong among 5902 students to assess their attitudes and perspectives on sexual harassment reports that 80% of the students agreed that pulling cloths or touching others' body was sexual harassment. Whereas with regard to the verbal harassment such as calling others 'gay' or 'tomboy', only 40 percent of the students considered it as sexual harassment. Overall more females compared to males considered the behaviours mentioned in the statement as sexual harassment

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(Pattie, et al., 2015). A study done in New York, on 200 students to assess their experiences and attitude towards sexual harassment found that more female students (75%) are likely to be the recipients of sexual harassment than the boys (65%). Eighty percent of the harassers were male, fifteen percent female, and five percent unknown. Only 38 percent of respondents considered wolf-whistling as sexual harassment whereas 44 percent considered grabbing or touching without consent as harassment and majority of the students (84%) agreed someone's top being lifted up in a club as sexual harassment (Hughes, Hawkens, Field, & Perkins, 2013). Hence, it is evident that the incidence of sexual harassment is rising. Therefore, this study is to focus on assessing the perception of the students towards sexual harassment.

Materials and Methods

A cross-sectional study was done to assess the perception of sexual harassment among the undergraduate students. The entire study was of one year duration including data collection period of one month. The undergraduate students who were from the professional colleges of Udupi district, above 18 years of age willing to participate in the study and present in the college during the time of data collection were included in the study. The total calculated sample size was 420 including five percentage of the non-response.

Proportionate stratified systematic random sampling was used to select students in the selected colleges. Out of the total 14 institutions, 12 institutions offered undergraduate programs. Among the 12 institutions, eight institutions were selected randomly by chit method. The total population of the eight institutions excluding the 1st year was 7253 and the sample requirement was 420. Hence, the proportion of the student strength was calculated for each institution and the same proportion was used to take the samples from each institution. Same method was used to take the samples from each class of the institution. The proportion of the student strength of each class i.e. 2nd year, 3rd year and 4th (for four year courses) or 2nd year and 3rd year (for three year courses) was calculated and the same proportion was used to take the sample from the respective classes. Finally, samples from each class were taken through systematic random sampling method by using

students' registration number. Hence, sampling interval 'k' was calculated by dividing K with k. Then one 'k' number was randomly selected using the chit method and the student whose register number comes in the same serial number was selected as the first sample. The same method was used for all the other institutions. For the better statistical outcome, the eight colleges were grouped into two groups i.e. technical and health sciences.

First year students were excluded in the study because they were new to the place. Administrative permission was taken from Head of Institution and the Institutional Ethics Committee. Informed consent was taken from the participants and confidentiality of the information was maintained. The researcher developed demographic pro forma and Perception Scale on sexual harassment. The demographic pro forma had nine items including age, sex, religion, native country, course and the year of course, percentage scored in the last exam, place of stay and source of information. The Perception Scale on sexual harassment included the areas like different types of sexual harassment and preventive measures in the colleges against sexual harassment. The tool consisted of 20 items on a three point Likert type scale, the options being agree, undecided and disagree. There were no negative statements. The tools were pretested among 10 participants of a selected institution. The internal consistency of the tool was established by using Cronbach's alpha and the reliability coefficient was found to be 0.94.

Data was collected by distributing the questionnaires among the students of the selected colleges during their free hours and were clearly explained about the purpose of the study. Informed consent was obtained from the participants and the filled questionnaire forms were collected back. Among the 420 students, only 408 filled the forms. The remaining 12 students did not wish to participate in the study. An informational leaflet on Sexual Harassment was developed and distributed among the students after assessing the perception, to provide more information.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

Totally 408 students participated in the study. Majority of the students 390 (95.6%) belonged to the

age group of 18-22 years. There were 223 (54.7%) males, 333 (81.6%) Hindus, and 388 (95.1%) were from India, 316 (77.5%) were from technical course, 145 (35.5%) were from second Year Bachelors, 132 (32.4%) secured 71-80% in the last university exam, 333 (81.6%) resided in the hostel and 343 (84.1%) got the information from TV on sexual harassment.

Perception on Sexual Harassment

The data presented in table 1 shows that majority of the students 396 (97.1%), agreed that asking to

indulge in sexual acts in return to a favour done should be seen as sexual harassment whereas only 203 (49.8%) agreed that repeated requests for dating in spite of rejection is sexual harassment. Majority of the students 371 (90.9%) agreed that establishing sexual harassment awareness programs can be helpful in preventing sexual harassment in colleges whereas only 174 (42.6%) agreed that establishing proper dress code can prevent sexual harassment in colleges.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage distribution of perception of sexual harassment (n=408)

Statements	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
	Frequency/ (%)	Frequency/ (%)	Frequency/ (%)
I would call it a sexual harassment when somebody:			
Pulls my clothing	317 (77.7%)	82 (20.1%)	9 (2.2%)
Makes sexual gesture to me	352 (86.3%)	53 (13.0%)	3 (0.7%)
Gazes at me in a sexual way	293 (71.8%)	110 (27%)	5 (1.2%)
Repeatedly requests for dates in spite of my rejections.	203 (49.8%)	188 (46.1%)	17 (4.2%)
Asks me to indulge in sexual acts in return to favour done to me.	396 (97.1%)	10 (2.5%)	1 (0.2%)
Spreads rumour about my sex life	358 (87.7%)	47 (11.5%)	3 (0.7%)
Calls me 'homosexual'	260(63.7%)	130 (31.9%)	18 (4.4%)
Makes sexual comment on me which makes me uncomfortable	362 (88.7%)	45 (11%)	1 (0.2%)
I feel sexual harassment can be prevented in the colleges by:			
Establishing sexual harassment awareness programs	371 (90.9%)	35 (8.6%)	2 (0.5%)
Starting self- defence classes	369 (90.4%)	37 (9.1%)	2 (0.5%)
Including topic on sexual harassment in the curriculum	301 (73.8%)	96 (23.5%)	11 (2.7%)
Establishing proper dress code	174 (42.6%)	162 (39.7%)	72 (17.6%)
Establishing sexual harassment committee	357 (87.5%)	48 (11.8%)	3 (0.7%)

Table 2: Association between perception of sexual harassment and gender (n=408)

Statements	Agree		Undecided		Disagree		χ^2	p
	Male f/ (%)	Female f/ (%)	Male f/(%)	Female f/(%)	Male f/(%)	Female f/ (%)		
I would call it a sexual harassment when somebody:								
Pulls my clothing	171 (76.68)	146 (78.92)	46 (20.63)	36 (19.46)	6 (2.69)	3 (1.62)	0.67	0.72
Makes sexual gesture to me	188 (84.30)	164 (88.65)	33 (14.8)	20 (10.81)	2 (0.9)	1 (0.54)	1.65	0.44
Writes a sexual message in the library bathroom	132 (59.2)	120 (64.9)	81 (36.32)	60 (32.43)	10 (4.48)	5 (2.7)	1.84	0.39
Gazes at me in a sexual way	145 (65.02)	148 (80)	74 (33.18)	36 (19.46)	4 (1.79)	1 (0.54)	11.81	<0.01*
Passes a sexual comment to a girl who is wearing an exposive dress	178 (79.82)	160 (86.49)	41 (18.39)	25 (13.51)	4 (1.79)	0 (0)	6.88	0.03*
I feel sexual harassment can be prevented by in the colleges by:								
Including topic on sexual harassment in the curriculum	161 (72.2)	140 (75.68)	52 (23.32)	44 (23.78)	10 (4.48)	1 (0.54)	7.14	0.03*
Establishing sexual harassment committee	187 (83.86)	170 (91.89)	33 (14.8)	15 (8.11)	3 (1.35)	0 (0)	7.08	0.03*

Association between Perception of Sexual Harassment and Demographic Variables

The data in table 2 shows the association between perception of sexual harassment and demographic variables. The findings show that there is a significant association between the perception of sexual harassment viz., gazing in a sexual way ($\chi^2=11.81$ and $p < 0.01$ df, 2), passing sexual comment to a girl who is wearing an indecent dress ($\chi^2=6.88$ and $p=0.03$ df, 2) and gender. The data also suggested that there is a significant association between the perception including the topics on sexual harassment in the curriculum to prevent sexual harassment in the colleges ($\chi^2=7.14$ and $p=0.03$ df, 2) and gender at 0.05 level of significance.

The findings in table 3 show that there is a significant association between perception of sexual harassment viz., writing sexual message in the library bathroom ($\chi^2=7.17$ and $p=0.02$, df 2), sending sexually offensive e-mails ($\chi^2=7.31$ and $p=0.03$, df 2), grabbing the waist on purpose ($\chi^2=18.55$ and $p < 0.01$, df 2) and the course of study. Regarding the prevention of sexual harassment, it was found that there was a significant association between the perception of establishing sexual harassment committee ($\chi^2=7.3$ and $p=0.03$, df 2), establishing proper dress code ($\chi^2=16.57$ and $p < 0.01$, df 2) to prevent sexual harassment in the colleges and the course of study.

The data in table 4 depict that the perception on sexual harassment between the two age groups i.e.

18-22 yrs. and 23-27 yrs. The findings are majority of the students (18-22yrs), 338 (86.7%) agreed that making sexual gestures, 347 (89.0%) agreed sending sexually offensive e-mails as sexual harassment. Majority of the students (23-27yrs), 15 (83.3%) agreed pulling ones cloth, 13 (72.2%) agreed writing sexual message in the library bathroom, 11 (61.1%) agreed repeated requests for dating in spite of rejections, 18 (100%) agreed inviting for sexual act in return to a favour, as sexual harassment.

Regarding the prevention of sexual harassment, majority of the students (18-22yrs) 356 (91.3%) agreed establishing sexual harassment awareness programs could be helpful in preventing sexual harassment in the colleges. Whereas, majority of the students (23-27yrs) agreed starting self-defence classes, 17 (94.4%) including topic on sexual harassment in the curriculum, 10 (55.6%) agreed establishing proper dress code and 17 (94.4%) agreed establishing sexual harassment committee could be helpful in preventing sexual harassment in the colleges.

Additional Findings

As per the researcher's interest, some of the questions were included in the questionnaire to find out the response of the students to sexual harassment. A hypothetical question was posed asking what they would do if they were sexually harassed and options were given where they could tick as many options as they liked. If they did not tick, the option "report to the authority" another question was to be answered,

Table 3: Association between perception of sexual harassment and the course of study n=408

Statements	Agree		Undecided		Disagree		χ^2	p
	Health f/(%)	Technical f/(%)	Health f/(%)	Technical f/(%)	Health f/(%)	Technical f/(%)		
I would call it a sexual harassment when somebody:								
Pulls my clothing	74 (80.4)	243 (76.9)	18 (19.6)	64 (20.3)	0 (0)	9 (2.8)	5.25	0.07
Makes sexual gesture to me	83 (90.2)	269 (85.1)	8 (8.7)	45 (14.2)	1 (1.1)	2 (0.6)	2.32	0.31
Writes a sexual message in the library bathroom	66 (71.7)	186 (58.9)	24 (26.1)	117 (37.0)	2 (2.2)	13 (4.1)	7.17	0.02*
Sends me sexually offensive e- mails.	86 (93.5)	278 (88)	4 (4.3)	36 (11.4)	24 (2.2)	2 (0.6)	7.31	0.03*
Grabs me around the waist on purpose	88 (95.7)	262 (82.9)	2 (2.2)	49 (15.5)	2 (2.2)	5 (1.6)	18.5 (5)	<0.01*
I feel sexual harassment can be prevented by in the colleges by:								
Establishing proper dress code	55 (59.8)	119 (37.7)	24 (26.1)	138 (43.7)	13 (14.1)	59 (18.7)	16.57	<0.01*
Establishing sexual harassment committee	88 (95.7)	269 (85.1)	4 (4.3)	44 (13.9)	0 (0)	3 (0.7)	7.3	0.03

Table 4: Association between perception of sexual harassment and age (n=408)

Statements	Agree		Undecided		Disagree		χ^2	p
	18-22yrs f/ (%)	23-27yrs f/ (%)	23-27yrs f/ (%)	23-27yrs f/ (%)	18-22yrs f/ (%)	23-27yrs f/ (%)		
I would call it a sexual harassment when somebody:								
Pulls my clothing	302 (77.4)	15 (83.3)	79 (20.3)	3 (16.7)	9 (2.3)	0 (0)	1.0	0.61
Makes sexual gesture to me	338 (86.7)	14 (77.8)	49 (12.6)	4 (22.2)	3 (0.8)	0 (0)	1.46	0.48
Writes a sexual message in the library bathroom	239 (61.3)	13 (72.2)	136 (34.9)	5 (27.8)	15 (3.8)	0 (0)	1.94	0.97
Gazes at me in a sexual way	278 (71.3)	15 (83.3)	107 (27.4)	3 (16.7)	5 (1.3)	0 (0)	1.64	0.44
Makes sexual comment on me which makes me feel uncomfortable	345 (88.5)	17 (94.4)	44 (11.3)	1 (5.6)	1 (0.3)	0 (0)	0.78	0.67
I feel sexual harassment can be prevented by in the colleges by:								
Establishing sexual harassment awareness programs	356 (91.3)	15 (83.3)	32 (8.2)	3 (16.7)	2 (0.5)	0 (0)	1.44	0.48
Starting self- defence classes	351 (90.0)	18 (100)	37 (9.5)	0 (0)	2 (0.5)	0 (0)	3.70	0.15
Establishing sexual harassment committee	340 (87.2)	17 (94.4)	47 (12.1)	1 (5.6)	3 (0.8)	0 (0)	1.13	0.56

which asked the reason/s for not reporting to the authority and multiple options were provided. The data in table 5 shows that majority of the students 277 (67.9%) said that they would inform the incident to the authority.

The data was further analyzed to assess whether there was any gender difference in reporting to the authority as a response of sexual harassment. The findings showed that majority of the males 154 (69.05%) as compared to 123 (66.48%) females said that they would report the incidents of sexual harassment to the authority.

Table 5: Frequency and percentage distribution on reaction to sexual harassment (n=408)

Reaction to sexual harassment	Frequency	Percentage
Blame yourself	4	1
Ignore	45	11
Perceive as a joke	16	3.9
Report to authority	277	67.9
Talk to parents	201	49.3
Talk to teachers	91	22.3
Talk to a friend whom you trust	225	55.1
Fight with the harasser	65	15.9
Confront the harasser	160	39.2
Withdraw from college	6	1.5

Discussion

In the present study, majority of the students 317 (77.7%) agreed that pulling one's cloth was sexual harassment, 352 (86.3%) agreed that making sexual

gesture was sexual harassment, 260(63.7%) agreed calling one as "homosexual" is sexual harassment, 358 (87.7%) agreed spreading rumours about one's sex life as sexual harassment, 203 (49.8%) agreed sending sexually offensive e-mails as sexual harassment, 396 (97.1%) agreed asking to indulge in sexual acts in return to a favour done as sexual harassment and 350 (80.5%) agreed grabbing around one's waist as sexual harassment. The finding is supported by a study on drawing the line: sexual harassment on campus among the undergraduate students shows that majority of the students 80% agreed that Pulling clothes as sexual harassment, 56% agreed making sexual comments, jokes, gestures, or looks as sexual harassment, 76% agreed calling someone as gay or lesbian as sexual harassment, 92% agreed spreading sexual rumors as sexual harassment, 91% agreed posting sexual messages on the Internet as sexual harassment, 88% agreed asking to do something sexual in exchange to any favors done as sexual harassment and 83% agreed touching, grabbing, or pinching in a sexual way as sexual harassment (Hill & Kearn, 2011).

In the present study it was found that there is a significant association between perception of passing sexual comments and gender ($\chi^2=6.88$, $p=0.03$) at 0.05 level of significance. This finding is supported by the study conducted in Czech Republic on the Perception and Construction of Sexual Harassment.

It was found that there is a significant association between perception of passing sexual comments and gender (Vohlídalová, 2011). The present study found that there is a significant association between perception of gazing in a sexual way and gender ($\chi^2 = 11.81$ and $p < 0.01$) at 0.05 level of significance. The finding is supported by a study that shows a significant association between perception of unwanted sexual or romantic attention and gender ($p < 0.01$) (Menon, et al., 2009).

The present study found that there is a significant association between 'including topic on sexual harassment in the curriculum to prevent sexual harassment' and gender ($\chi^2 = 7.14$ $p = 0.03$) at 0.05 level of significance. It was also found that there is a significant association between establishing sexual harassment committee to prevent sexual harassment and gender ($\chi^2 = 7.08$ and $p = 0.03$) at 0.05 level of significance. There is so far no study to assess the association between perception on including topic in curriculum to prevent sexual harassment and gender as well as association between perception of establishing sexual harassment committee to prevent sexual harassment and gender.

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