

## Gender differences in the attribution of responsibility for sexual harassment: A students' perspective

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### Abstract

Sexual harassment is largely experienced by working women and students and it is common especially in educational institutes. This research aimed to find out the gender differences and prevalence of students' attribution of responsibility for sexual harassment. It was a survey based quantitative research with purposive and convenient sample of 500 university students enrolled in two public (Quaid-i-Azam university and Arid Agriculture university) and two private universities (Foundation and Bahria university), Time period of study was from September to October 2018.

Of total 500 participants, 204 (40.8%) were males and 296 (59.2%) were females. In all 390 (78%,  $d=.47$ ) participants gave responsibility to women for sexual harassment while only 110 (22%) reported that men are responsible for sexual harassment. High prevalence of attribution of sexual harassment towards women were found. Men blamed women for sexual harassment as indicated by high mean score achieved on t-test analysis. Prevalence of such phenomenon was not explored previously for student population and also, this study can serve as a very strong basis for planning relevant intervention programmes that focus more on perpetrator instead of victims of sexual harassment.

**Keywords:** Sexual harassment attribution, University students, Victims, Perpetrator.

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### Introduction

Sexual harassment is a widespread phenomenon experienced largely by working women and students at their workplaces, educational institutions, and public places like shopping malls, bazaars and markets. It is considered as an unethical, unwelcoming and morally wrong code of conduct that women find threatening and inappropriate. It is actually a non-reciprocated,

unwelcomed and forceful behaviour of men towards women. It constitutes passing sexual and negative nature of comments and jokes on the basis of their gender, staring at women inappropriately and following them in markets and public places, unwelcoming and coercive requests demanding sexual intercourse, and all sorts of coercive sexual nature behaviours.<sup>1-3</sup> Gender harassment is the most common form of sexual harassment that is largely experienced by women. It involves both verbal and non-verbal abuse like inappropriately touching body parts, stalking by opposite gender for the purpose of gaining attention, unwelcoming requests for sexual intercourse, threats to comply with these requests or also demanding for date, etc.<sup>4</sup> Majority men accuse women for sexual harassment and rape. They believe that woman's revealing clothes, character, her inappropriate attitudes and gestures forced or invited men to sexually harass them. Furthermore, men also think that women enjoy being sexually harassed, and they do provocative dressing to actually invite men to harass them and then they enjoy this attention. Men do not consider themselves as responsible for sexual harassment and justify their inappropriate conduct and actions by putting all the blame on women (victims).<sup>5,6</sup> The survey carried out in Pakistan showed that approximately half of the population in Pakistan is of women, and almost 50% out of them are working and studying in different educational institutes all over the Pakistan. Therefore, it was suggested to hire more women heads to control or reduce sexual harassment and to make higher education institutes more comfortable and safe environment for women.<sup>7</sup>

Several indigenous researches have explored the concept of sexual harassment qualitatively,<sup>7,8</sup> however no research has been carried out locally to check the prevalence of sexual harassment attribution to men, women or both. The present research aimed to fill this gap and tried to check the current prevalence and gender differences in sexual harassment attribution in Pakistan. Furthermore, in Pakistani culture and some other Asian societies, things like sexual harassment and rape are still considered as taboo and people do not like to openly talk or discuss about it. Hence, the present study was designed after

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identifying the gaps in this area and aimed to explore the current situation of sexual harassment and its prevalence in order to use the prevalence data for devising relevant intervention and awareness programmes.

Methods and Results

The nature of this research was a descriptive cross-sectional study whose sample was taken from Rawalpindi/Islamabad. The Twin cities were chosen as

Table-1: Frequency (f) and percentages (%) of the demographic characteristics of the participants (N = 500).

| Variables                 | Categories | f (%)      |
|---------------------------|------------|------------|
| Gender                    | Male       | 204(40.8)  |
|                           | Female     | 296 (59.2) |
| Age (M= 21.59 ± 2.49)     | 17-24      | 446 (89.2) |
|                           | 25-32      | 54 (10.8)  |
| Education of participants | BS         | 316 (63.2) |
|                           | MSC        | 114 (22.8) |
|                           | MPhil/PHD  | 60 (12)    |

Table-2: Gender differences for sexual harassment attribution.

| Variable | Gender        |      |                 |      | t    | p   | 95% CI |      | Cohen's d |
|----------|---------------|------|-----------------|------|------|-----|--------|------|-----------|
|          | Men (n = 204) |      | Women (n = 296) |      |      |     |        |      |           |
|          | M             | SD   | M               | SD   |      |     |        |      |           |
| SHA      | 21.50         | 5.40 | 19.44           | 3.07 | 4.92 | .00 | 1.23   | 2.88 | .47       |

Note: SHA = Sexual Harassment Attribution Questionnaire; CL = Confidence intervals; LL= Lower limit; UL= Upper limit.

students from all provinces of Pakistan are studying here due to better education facilities. Sample size was 500 university students and it was calculated using g-power software (sample size for a prevalence survey, with finite population correction).<sup>9</sup> Students studying in Foundation, Quaid-i-Azam, Arid Agriculture and Bahria universities participated in the research. Purposive and convenient sampling were used. Ethical considerations and protocol was followed and this research was approved by Ethical committee of National Institute of Psychology, Islamabad. Written informed consent was also taken from participants. The research protocol contained demographic sheet containing all the biographical questions like age, education, gender, and the Sexual Harassment Attribution Questionnaire (SHA).<sup>10</sup> The obtained data was analyzed through the use SPSS software version 21. Percentages and frequencies were calculated. For gender differences, t-test was applied.

A total sample of 500 university students were taken. Out of which 204 (40.8%) were males and 296 (59.2%) were

females (see Table-1 for demographic details). In all 390 (78%) of the participants had the opinion, that women are responsible for sexual harassment while only 110 (22%) attributed the responsibility to men. The results obtained from T-test analysis also showed that men attribute more responsibility to women for sexual harassment cases as their mean score (M = 21.50) is also high as compared to women students as shown in Table-2. High mean score indicates that most men believe that women are responsible and blamed for sexual harassment.

Conclusion

The research found that men assign responsibility of sexual harassment on women as evident from t-test results and prevalence is quite high. Generally both men and women participants believed that women are responsible for sexual harassment. This thinking is the result of our socialization and culture where men are given a dominant position and women as subordinate position. Women are trained in the manner to believe that they are weak and for any wrongdoing it is always

their fault. There is an exigent need to change the mindset of men by developing awareness and intervention programmes focusing on perpetrator actions and its harmful consequences on women by keeping in mind Pakistani culture. It is time to shift the spotlight on perpetrator instead of always blaming the victims (women) in most cases. As victims do not only experience shame associated with such incidents but also experience high levels of depression, stress and anxiety that can have serious impact on their personalities and overall life and health. So, in order to reduce such incidents, institutions must adopt the anti-sexual harassment law to curb such practices in their institutes. Awareness seminars should be planned in all institutions and workplaces to acquaint students with the harmful consequences. There must be an enquiry committee especially created for such cases in every institute to critically deal with such issues. Strict punishments should be given to perpetrators and all kinds of support must be extended to victims.

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**Conflict of Interest:** None.

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