

Psychological Impacts of Sexual Harassment among High School Female Students

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Abstract

Objectives: This study aims to investigate the psychological impacts of sexual harassment among high school female students and its associated factors

Method: A descriptive cross-sectional study conducted in secondary schools for girls in Diyala Governorate during the period from November 1, 2022 to March 1, 2023. By a simple random sample consisting of (292) female students selected through the probability sampling method. The questionnaire was validated by experts and its reliability was validated by a pilot study. The total number of items included in the questionnaire was 16 items for assessing the psychological impacts. Data were collected using the self-reporting method and analyzed by applying descriptive and inferential statistical analysis.

Results: The results indicated that the average age of the respondents was 16.9 years, (43.8%) of the participants were in the fifth grade, (78.8%) were urban residents, (45.9%) were subjected to sexual harassment once. The results showed that (51%) of the high school female students expressed high psychological impacts. There is a relationship between the psychological impacts of sexual harassment with the age of the students, the grade, the residence and the number of times of harassment ($p = 0.05$).

Conclusions: The study concluded that the phenomenon of sexual harassment was found as one of the main factors responsible for the deterioration of psychological and social health among female secondary school students.

Recommendations: The results obtained in this study are particularly important to shed light on the preparation of educational television programs targeting the family and urging them to raise their children properly and instill moral values in them, avoiding all forms of behavioral and moral deviations and not being exposed to others

Keywords: Psychological Impacts • Sexual Harassment • High School Students

Introduction

Sexual harassment is any unwelcome sexual behavior that causes another person to feel insulted, uneasy, frightened, or humiliated [1]. Sexual harassment is a problem that has been documented everywhere. Due to frequent face-to-face interactions when seeking advice on their academic progress, a US study found a higher prevalence of sexual harassment and unethical intimacy between high school students and their professors [2]. This has also been confirmed in educational institutions where male professors abuse their authority to harass female undergrads in a sexual manner [3]. Sexual harassment, a type of harassment, comprises actions and remarks that not only harm the victim but also his or her quality of life and working environment. Whether a woman is at home, at work, or on the street, there is always a chance that she may encounter some form of harassment [4]. Sexual harassment is a form of abuse that involves actions like making inappropriate remarks, making sexually suggestive gestures or jokes, abusing someone verbally, threatening someone, sending obscene text messages or emails, or terrorizing someone [5]. Despite the fact that it is portrayed as a minor and innocent behavior, sexual harassment has major negative effects on the victim, including emotional stress and bodily

disturbances that can induce disease and eventually require hospitalization [6].

Emotional stress can have a variety of psychological effects, including anxiety, despair, low self-esteem, and lack of confidence. Physical trauma can also result in similar aftereffects as insomnia, headaches, nausea, and ulcers [7]. The harassed women may become unwell, feel humiliated, angry, lose confidence, and endure psychological distress. It could result in resignation in some situations. Workplace sexual harassment worsens anxiety and performance, which in turn lowers self-esteem and hinders academic achievement [8]. Even when other forms of victimization were taken into account, numerous studies have shown a link between sexual abuse and low self-esteem in children [9]. Furthermore, studies reveal that compared to non-abused people, those who have a history of sexual abuse are more likely to blame themselves for bad things that happen to them and show weaker self-efficacy [10]. It is therefore possible that the lower levels of mastery, self-esteem, and depressive symptoms frequently reported by adolescent girls may, in part, be a result of higher relationships between victimization exposure and these outcomes among girls [11].

Iraqi society faced many cultural, social and economic challenges, which were reflected in all active social institutions in the field of social control, and contributed in one way or another to the emergence of some behavioral deviations among young people, such as the phenomenon of nationality. Harassment, which may be mainly due to the deterioration of moral values and the predominance of indifference and indiscipline. Accordingly, the imperfection in the moral aspect is largely responsible for the problems that societies suffer from today, if we do not say that many of the problems of our societies today are moral problems in their essence. The aim of the study therefore is to investigate the psychological impacts of sexual harassment on high school student female in Baquba City; as well as, investigate the psychological impacts of sexual harassment based on high school female student age, grade, residents and number exposed to sexually harassed.

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Methods

Study Design

The descriptive cross-sectional study design technique was adopted by questioning individuals of the study population with the sole purpose of describing the examined phenomena in terms of its nature and degree of presence was conducted during the period from November 1, 2022 to March 1, 2023.

Study Sitting

The study was carried out in Diyala Education Directorate at high school female. Diyala Education Directorate includes 26 high school's female. A total of 7 high schools were selected for the purpose of the study by probability sampling approach (systematic sample).

Study Sample

The study sample included in present study are high school female students which approximately 10 % from the total population of selected high schools with a total of 292 is selected according to probability sampling approach (simple random sample). These sample is distributed into 7 high schools according Diyala Education Directorate.

Study Instrument

Three tools were used for data collection in this study:

This section composed of related factors of sexual harassment and include (high school female student age, grade, residents and number of exposed to sexually harassed.

This section deals with psychological impact: Which composed of (16-items) measured on 3-level Likert Scale (1× Always, 2× Sometime and 3× Never). Accordingly, points can be taken range from 16-48. The higher average defined as low psychological impact and lower average defined as high psychological impact.

Data Collection

The researcher distributed study questionnaire to the participants (High school female students), explained the instructions, answered their questions regarding the form, urged them to participate and thanked them for the cooperation. The self-report techniques were used on individual bases, and each report (10-15) minutes after taking the important steps that must be included in the study design.

Statistical Analysis

The IBM SPSS 20.0 program was used for all the analyses that follow.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics.

Variables	Classification	No.	%
Age /years	15 years old	15	5.1
	16 years old	142	48.6
	17 years old	57	19.5
	18 years old	78	26.7
	16.9 ± 0.890		
Grade	Fourth	75	25.7
	Fifth	128	43.8
	Sixth	89	30.5
	Urban	230	78.8
Residents	Rural	62	21.2
	Not exposed	22	7.5
Exposed to sexually harassed	1 time	134	45.9
	2 time	44	15.1
	>2 time	92	31.5

Table 2. Overall Assessment

Variable	Rating	No.	%	M (±SD)
Psychological	High (M=16-26.66)	149	51	
	Moderate (M=26.67-37.33)	126	43.2	8.32±2.456
	Low (M=37.34-48)	17	5.8	

Numbers and percentages (No. and %) were used to categorize the variables, while the mean and standard deviation were used to characterize the continuous variables (mean and SD). Multiple Comparisons (LSD) Post Hoc Tests was used to compare independent variable. Statistical significance was defined as a two-tailed p .05.

Result

Findings show participants characteristics, the mean age is 16.9, the age group 16 years old were records the highest (48.6%) (Table 1). Regarding grade, most of the participants were fifth grade (43.8%). Respect to the residents, the majority of high school female students was urban residents (78.8%). Exposed to sexually harassed related findings, high school female students expressed one time exposed to SH (45.9%).

The results demonstrated that (51%) of high school female students expressed a high psychological impact of sexual harassment as described by low average, which is equivalent to 26.16 (± 7.055) (Table 2).

The psychological impact of sexual harassment among high school female students aged 15 years are not differing from those who are aged 16 years (p= .701) and 17 years (p= .993); and differs from those who are aged 18 years (p= .027). The psychological impact of sexual harassment among high school female students aged 16 years are not differing from those who are aged 15 years (p= .701) and 17 years (p= .486); and differs from those who are aged 18 years (p=.003). The psychological impact of sexual harassment among high school female students aged 17 years are not differing from those who are aged 15 years (p= .993) and 16 years (p= .486); and differs from those who are aged 18 years (p= .000). The psychological impact of sexual harassment among high school female students aged 18 years are differing from those who are aged 15 years (p= .027), 16 years (p= .003) and 17 years (p= .000) (Table 3).

The psychological impact of sexual harassment among high school female students who are fourth grade are differs from those who are fifth grade (p= .000) and sixth grade (p= .000) (Table 4). The psychological impact of sexual harassment among high school female students who are fifth grade are differs from those who are fourth (p= .000); and not differs from those who are sixth grade (p= .417). The psychological impact of sexual harassment among high school female students who are sixth grade are differs from those who are fourth (p= .000); and not differs from those who are fifth grade (p= .417).

The independent sample t-test showed that there were statistically significant differences in psychological impact between female students who are urban and those who are rural (t= 2.347; p=.020) (Table 5).

Table 3. Comparison of Psychological Impact with regards Age Groups.

(I) Age	(J) Age	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
15 years	16 years	0.04781	0.12423	0.701
	17 years	0.001	0.11623	0.993
	18 years	.26795*	0.1207	0.027
16 years	15 years	-.04781-	0.12423	0.701
	17 years	-.04681-	0.06713	0.486
	18 years	.22014*	0.0746	0.003
17 years	15 years	-.00100-	0.11623	0.993
	16 years	0.04681	0.06713	0.486
	18 years	.26695*	0.06033	0
18 years	15 years	-.26795-*	0.1207	0.027
	16 years	-.22014-*	0.0746	0.003
	17 years	-.26695-*	0.06033	0

Table 4. Comparison of Psychological Impact with regards Grade

(I) Grade	(J) Grade	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Fourth	Fifth	0.42545*	0.0577	0
	Sixth	0.46992	0.0622	0
Fifth	Fourth	-0.42545	0.0577	0
	Sixth	0.04447	0.05476	0.417
Sixth	Fourth	-0.46992	0.0622	0
	Fifth	-0.04447	0.05476	0.417

Table 5. Comparison of Psychological Impact with regards Residents.

Psychological Impact	Residents	Mean	SD	t-value	d.f	Sig.
	Urban	1.6	0.427			
	Rural	1.75	0.474			

Table 6. Comparison of Psychological Impact with regards Exposed to Sexually Harassed.

(I) Sexually harassed	(J) Sexually harassed	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Not exposed	1 time	.69091 ⁺	0.08227	0
	2 time	.85386 ⁺	0.09458	0
	>2 time	.85795 ⁺	0.08548	0
1 time	Not exposed	-.69091 ⁻	0.08227	0
	2 time	.16295 ⁺	0.06561	0.014
	>2 time	.16704 ⁺	0.05164	0.001
2 time	Not exposed	-.85386 ⁻	0.09458	0
	1 time	-.16295 ⁻	0.06561	0.014
	>2 time	0.00409	0.06959	0.953
>2 time	Not exposed	-.85795 ⁻	0.08548	0
	1 time	-.16704 ⁻	0.05164	0.001
	2 time	-.00409-	0.06959	0.953

The psychological impact of sexual harassment among high school female students who are not exposed to SH are differs from those who are 1 time exposed (p=.000), 2 time exposed (p=.000) and more (p= .000) (Table 6). The psychological impact of sexual harassment among high school female students who are 1 time exposed to SH are differs from those who are not exposed (p=.000), 2 time exposed (p=.014) and more (p= .001). The psychological impact of sexual harassment among high school female students who are 2 time exposed to SH are differs from those who are not exposed (p= .000), 1 time exposed (p= .014); and not differs from those who are exposed for more than 2 (p= .953). The psychological impact of sexual harassment among high school female students who are exposed to SH for >2 time are differs from those who are not exposed (p= .000), 1 time exposed (p= .001); and not differs from those who are exposed for 2 time (p= .953).

Discussion

Sexual harassment in the schools is a common event with negative consequences for victims (Female students). School environment become unstable because of sexual harassment, and school's insecurity causes psychological and social aspects. Therefore, the study aimed to assess psychological impacts of sexual harassment among high school female students and its associated factors. The mean age in current study findings is 16.9, the age group 16 years old were records the highest. These findings are supported by previous studies conducted in Iraqi schools, the mean age 17.2 years, 16.7 years, 17.81 years and 17 years respectively due to those age group are common in Iraq high schools [12-15,16]. Most of the participants were fifth grade. The majority of high school female students were urban residents. This finding in line with findings from Baghdad city, the most of participants was urban residents [17-20]. Because most of the schools included in the study were located in urban areas.

According to the findings of the most recent study, it is evident that the psychological effects of sexual harassment on female high school students include feelings of loss of self- confidence, helplessness, discomfort when speaking to others, loss of focus, and depression, which have an impact on academic performance and concentration. According to the overall findings, high school female students (51%) reported a strong psychological impact of sexual harassment, which was described by a low average 26.16 (7.55). The participants' high level of psychological expression and emphasis on the significance of social elements serving as mediators for the detrimental well-being of female sexual harassment victims are in accordance with studies from Pakistan [21]. The level of worry was higher among girls who had experienced sexual harassment among schoolgirls in the Lalitpur and Rupandehi District. 52% of the students who responded to the survey were at varying levels of anxiety (from mild to extremely severe), and it was discovered that 35% of them were at a mild to moderate degree of anxiety. 18% of respondents reported

having moderate to severe levels of anxiety [22]. Moreover, Gyawali et al. showed that compared to Rupandehi district and community school, Lalitpur district and institutional school pupils had greater prevalence's of different levels of depression, stress, and anxiety (ranging from mild to highly sever). In comparison to despair and stress, anxiety was found to be the most prevalent mental health issue among schoolgirls in Lalitpur and Rupandehi District, according to the three psychological parameters. This was true even among students who had experienced sexual harassment. There is unequivocal proof that anxiety stems from sexual harassment among female high school pupils. It's possible that social support tends to temper sexual harassment's harmful effects. The current mentality, which places more importance on adhering to societal rules and maintaining integrity than the welfare of the individual, needs to be drastically changed. Moreover, early-career sexual harassment has a lasting impact on adult depression symptoms. Interviews with a subgroup of survey participants point to a variety of coping mechanisms and uncover additional connections between harassment and other mental health issues, such as anger and self-doubt, all of which have an average level of prevalence [23, 24].

The prevalence of sexual harassment has been linked to considerable psychological effects, according to more recent research than earlier studies. Depressive symptoms and severe psychological effects of sexual harassment have reportedly been discovered, with shame acting as a mediating factor [25]. Another study discovered a reciprocal association between female victims of sexual harassment and depression, where the prevalence of sexual harassment is substantial and the levels of depression [26]. It has been documented that experiencing sexual harassment on a regular basis can lead to despair, anxiety, and substance addiction [27]. Also, it has been noted that women who have experienced sexual objectification and harassment have higher levels of rage and sadness [28]. Comparable reports of acute sadness and anxiety brought on by sexual harassment were made by Pakistani women employed in the private sector [29]. In addition, the prevalence of melancholy, anxiety, and stress among the girls who had been subjected to sexual harassment was 45%, 52%, and 35%, respectively [30]. As a result of those findings, it was determined that sexual harassment is one of the main causes of the poor mental health status of female students, and every school must develop anti-sexual harassment policies and take action against it in order to foster a positive learning environment.

Participants in the current study described mild psychological effects of sexual harassment, including fear, melancholy, annoyance, impatience, stress, and sleeping problems. The primary source of the negative impacts on mental health that were brought on by professors, friends (boys), relatives, and strangers was sexual harassment. In order to safeguard female students from harassment, abuse, and sexual harassment both within and outside of the school, decision-makers and school policy must establish rules and regulations that guarantee the rights of the student. Schools must be free from all forms of harassment, thus administrators must declare them to be so in order to effectively carry out the teaching and learning process and raise the academic success rates of female students. Otherwise, female students are more likely to leave school as a result of the psychological repercussions of harassment. In order to manage and resolve these issues, there must be collaboration between the school administration and the parents. In addition, the Ministry of Education should develop and oversee the implementation of a workable policy against various forms of female sexual harassment in conjunction with women's rights organizations. Additionally, educating the school community about the detrimental effects of various forms of SHS on female students, empowering and strengthening the skills of female students in dealing with sexual harassment, and taking stern action against harassers are some other methods that can help to solve the issue. Moreover, schools must work in cooperation with the community and the police in general to combat personal belongings because the problem was also present outside the school campus.

It has been noted that the psychological effects of sexual harassment increase significantly with age (as female students' ages rise, so do the psychological effects of sexual harassment). These findings suggest that the psychological repercussions of sexual harassment are more intense for students who are older. Another aspect that explains this is that women who are older (18 years or older) are more likely to experience sexual harassment than women who are younger (15 years). Findings that showed a substantial positive association between the psychological burden of sexual harassment among young women and their age provide support to this conclusion (this indicates that the greater the age, the greater the psychological effects) [31].

According to study results, female high school students in the fourth grade

experience sexual harassment differently than those in the fifth and sixth grades. This research supports previous findings that participants who experienced sexual harassment in the last stage experienced higher psychological symptoms and deterioration [32]. Female students at the age of 16 who experienced greater sexual harassment than those at the age of 17 [33]. Sexual harassment was more common and increased significantly with age [34]. This means that, in contrast to students in the fourth stage, the psychological impacts on female students increase with their stage, maybe as a result of the high volume of harassment they experience. What was mentioned in the age disparities can also be used to explain the results. When female fifth- and sixth-graders are between the ages of 17 and 18, they may be more susceptible to harassment.

Results revealed that the psychological influence on female pupils in urban and rural areas differed statistically significantly. This research supports findings from Menoufia University that female university students experience numerous forms of sexual harassment, with girls living in urban regions more susceptible to harassment than those living in rural areas due to their preference for pornographic attire [35]. According to a national survey conducted in China, SH affects 19% of metropolitan women between the ages of 20 and 45, with 12% reporting verbal and 12% reporting physical harassment [36]. The differences were in favour of those living in the countryside with less psychological impact than those living in urban areas. This may be due to the fact that the number of participants in the study is mostly urban, so the psychological effects here are due to the number. On the other hand, female students who live in the countryside are less likely to be sexually harassed because they do not follow the fashion in their appearance.

It is observed that the more times sexual harassment has more psychological and social consequences. The high school female students who are not exposed to SH be differ from those who are 1 time exposed, 2 times exposed and more. This findings consisting with findings from Menoufia University, the psychological aspects of sexual harassment were not significantly associated with those who are not harassed [37, 38].

Conclusions

The study concluded that the phenomenon of sexual harassment was found as one of the main factors responsible for the deterioration of psychological and social health among female secondary school students. As well as, adolescence age, school grade, urban housing, frequency, type, place, perpetrator, and causes of sexual harassment are determinants of psychosocial impacts.

Recommendations

The results obtained in this study are particularly important to shed light on the preparation of educational television programs targeting the family and urging them to raise their children properly and instill moral values in them, avoiding all forms of behavioral and moral deviations and not being exposed to others.

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