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Sexual Harassment of the Adolescent Girls of the Holy Cross College, Dhaka, Bangladesh

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Abstract:

Sexual harassment of adolescent girls is a globally talked of phenomenon in today's world. Youth studies have captured sexual harassments from the perspective of adolescent girls of an urban setting of Bangladesh to a small extent. This study considers the adolescent girls studying in grade XI and XII at the Holy Cross College, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Qualitative research design with in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and free-listing has been employed as the methods in this study. The study sheds light on the sexual harassment experiences of adolescents (girls) from their own perspectives. In doing so, the ways girls try to defend sexual harassments immediately as well as their long-term suggestions to stop sexual harassments have been explored. The findings of the study indicate that the roles of parents and elders, educational institutions, social stigma and cultural rigidity influence the ways adolescent girls perceive sexual harassments.

Keywords: *Adolescents, sexual harassments, holy cross college, perceptions, suggestions.*

1. Introduction

Adolescent boys and girls are an important part of the population of Bangladesh as they play a major role in the country's culture and future development. No less than adults, they should have rights to enjoy a safe and prosperous life. The occurrences of violence such as sexual harassment violate rights of the adolescents. The sexual harassment endured by adolescent girls is increasing in alarmingly Bangladesh. 91% of the girls aged around 10-18 years has experienced sexual harassment in Bangladesh, according to the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA, 2010). Despite this fact, their degree of awareness to deal with sexual harassment remains questionable. This is because the conservative patriarchal society of Bangladesh treats sexuality related knowledge as a taboo. As a result, in spite of having sexual needs, desires, fantasies and dreams, adolescent girls possess incomplete and vague perceptions about sexual harassments. Sexual harassment, being a traumatic experience for adolescent girls, they all want to put an end to it. Nevertheless, the way each girl reacts during sexual harassment is different from each other. This article explores the adolescent girls' (pursuing Higher Secondary Schooling aged around 16 to 18) own perceptions of sexual harassments, and how they deal with sexual harassment incidents.

2. Review of Literature

This study has been designed under three thematic areas-existing literature on sexual harassment, recommendations to stop sexual harassment and adolescent girls' experience of sexual harassment in Bangladesh. Sexual harassment is an instance of gender-based violence, which includes inhuman behaviors that creates a sexually hostile or intimidating environment for the victim. 'Sexual harassment is any unwelcome sexual behavior which is offensive, intimidating or humiliating. It can be obvious or indirect, physical or verbal' (Mahtab, 2012, p. 157). As a type of violence against women, sexual harassment can occur in several ways. Gruber (1992, p.452) claims that 'sexual harassment falls into three distinct forms: remarks, requests, and nonverbal displays'.

Sexual harassment has become a burning issue in Bangladesh because this is undoubtedly a dreadful act against the honor, dignity and self-respect of a woman. According to BRAC (the largest NGO, according to NGO ADVISOR), between 2014 and 2015, the incidents of violence against women increased by 74%. BRAC further shows that in 2014 the number of the incidents of violence against women was 2873, whereas, in 2015 it rose up to 5008 (Hossain, 2016, p.1). Nahar et al. (2013, p.78) argued:

In many societies, violence against women acts as a social mechanism that confirms women's subordination. Sexual violence and harassment negatively impact the psychology of girls, including a persistent feeling of insecurity and loss of self-esteem.

Likewise, Democracy Watch (2009, p. 23) reports:

Sexual harassment happens to be such a debilitating crime which eats up the very core of a human being. It hurts her dignity, makes her feel powerless, helpless and often she may think herself responsible and deserving of such treatment.

Sohel et al. (2014) explored the nature and extent of sexual harassment amongst adolescent girls at Jhenidah Municipality, Bangladesh. He claimed that irrespective of age and education, girls were sexually harassed through obscene languages, physical harassment, and ugly sexual expression. Alam et al. (2009) showed that gendered harassments were experienced by 35% of the girls, unwanted sexual attentions by 34%, and sexual intimidations by 14%, yielding prevalence of sexual harassments of any type 43%. According to Action Aid, 60% of women of the Dhaka city hardly want to go outside alone at evening and 62% do not go outside alone at night in fear of being sexually harassed. 13% of them have already stopped using public transport (The ProtomAlo, 2014). Because of this increasing extent of sexual harassment in Bangladesh, adolescent girls, face a dilemma in deciding how they should react to incidents of sexual harassments.

Adolescent girls, who are either often the victims of 'eve teasing' or sexual harassment, are not prepared to face such a situation (UNICEF, n.d). Hlavka (2014) found how adolescent girls get scared to report sexual harassment incidents to law enforcing authority (police). Welsh et al. (2006) in the context of Ontario, Canada explored that women differently define sexual harassment in relation to their class, race and citizenship status. This study exemplifies a tendency of neglecting the severity of sexual harassment among the black women, because of their position to the lower class.

Australian Human Rights Commission (2008) recognized sexual harassment as a form of violence against women at workplace, and suggested the duties of individuals and employers to prevent sexual harassment occurrences. McLaughlin et al. (2012) demonstrated the power dimension of sexual harassment occurring in work places. Siddiqi (2003) revealed how sexual harassment is faced by industrial workers in Bangladesh, and suggested to consider the connection among sexual harassment, class, honor and the dignity of labor, proper implication of sexual harassment laws and international legal documents (e.g.; CEDAW). Studies usually prefer considering sexual harassment in the paradigm of the work environment. As a result, the issue of sexual harassment of adolescent girls and their own perceptions to combat sexual harassment is ignored. This specific knowledge gap is explored in this study, shedding light on ways adolescent girls' deal with sexual harassments incidents, and their own recommendations to put an end to this heinous form of violence.

Bakker (2013) captured multi-level strategies of different development organizations (e.g.; MEJNIN program of BRAC, Monitoring State Interventions to Combat Violence against Women program of Naripokkho, Stop Violence against Women program of Action Aid) to combat sexual harassment of adolescent girls in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, none of these organizations were able to document adolescent girl' own recommendations for stopping sexual harassment. This study tries to fulfill these knowledge gaps attempting to capture adolescent girls' own perceptions of their experience of sexual harassment, how these girls deal with sexual harassment incidents and their suggestions to reduce it.

3. Methods and Materials

This study uses qualitative research approaches combining with -In-depth Interviews, Focused Group Discussions, and Free-listing. The study employed a purposive sampling method allowing interested informants to participate in the research process. Fifteen adolescent girls were sampled from class XI (aged around 16 to 18 years) of Holy Cross College, Dhaka. The study site was selected for this particular study was Holy Cross College, a renowned girls' college of the country for its academic result. This specific study site was selected to capture how the adolescent girls with fist hand educational facilities conceptualize sexual harassment happening around them.

Ten in-depth interviews were executed an interview guide with twenty-five open-ended questions for capturing participants' in-depth understanding of sexual harassments and its remedies. The interview guide included questions from the thematic aspect of the study-adolescent girls' conceptualization of sexual harassment, girls' reaction to sexual harassment incidents and their recommendation for reducing these incidents. Each interview lasted for thirty minutes. The interview method (which was guided by face to face in-depth interview) applied in this study enabled to practice the process of immersion in order to build a good rapport with the respondents. The immersion assisted researchers to understand the adolescent girls' in-depth perceptions of sexual harassment and how they t plan to deal with it. Two focus group discussions, each of which lasted for ninety minutes were operated to gather collective views of the informants. Each focus group had seven participants. In a conservative social setting like Bangladesh, the respondents might feel a bit awkward to share their own experiences and understanding of a sensitive issue like sexual harassment. In this case, the application of focus group discussion was expecting that a respondent feeling shy to discuss a sensitive issue like sexual harassment may open up and talk more freely among other girls of her age. As the participants found other girls of their own age in a group discussion, they were free and relaxed to express their real views.

A free-listing menu was given to the informants (15 informants) for writing down their individual definition of sexual harassment, experiences of sexual harassment, how they cope with sexual harassment incidents and their suggestions to minimize sexual harassments. This approach was helpful for the informants to write down their hidden views and experiences of sexual harassment for which they were not comfortable to discuss in public with the researchers. Since the study uses three data collection tools, it has executed methodological triangulation. Validity and reliability of this research project have been ensured through triangulation of data collection method.

The ethical consideration (e.g., informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality) was ensured throughout the research process. An informant consent form (containing study purposes along with guarantying anonymity and confidentiality) was given to each

informant to ensure their own consent so that their opinions would not be negatively used by the researcher. The questionnaire was provided in English and Bangla. Anonymity was assured through the use of pseudo names and confidentiality was guaranteed by storing data in a password secured computer that was only accessible to the researchers. Administrative clearance was obtained from Holy Cross College, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

4. Sexual Harassments According to the Informants

According to most of the in-depth interview participants (7 out of 10), sexual harassment is an inappropriate sexual behavior. But the dimension of this inappropriate behavior is not clear to them. Most of these informants used the term 'eve-teasing' as a synonym to sexual harassment.

"To me, eve-teasing or sexual harassment is when a roadside hooligan says 'I love you' to me."

(Tisha, a 16 years old respondent)

Behavioral aspects, the respondents listed as sexual harassment are sexual comments, jokes, touching any parts of their body in a nasty manner, leering like unwanted behavior, dirty comments on girls' dress, unnecessarily pushing a girl in a crowd, and forcing a girl against her will to take sexual advantages. According to the informants, in most cases perpetrators of these crimes are roadside hooligans. The definition of sexual harassment varied from respondent to respondent. There were many respondents who could not differentiate between sexual harassment and sexual harassment. Even rape is one kind of sexual harassment according to them.

"For a woman, the most important organ of her body is sex arousal organs (e.g., Boops, Chest, Eye, and Buttock). Because of these organs, women are subjected to certain kinds of harassments. Some lustful people harass and threaten women and girls sexually. I think rape and gang rape can be good examples of such harassments."

(Lamia, a respondent of 17 years)

It is evident that most of the adolescent girls are unable to define sexual harassment. They perceive sexual organs of women are responsible for their sexual harassment. They even are unable distinguish rape from sexual harassment. When asked in an in-depth interview whether they considered rape to be a part of sexual harassment, all of them responded in positive. There were a few introvert respondents who denied identifying any indicators of sexual harassment. They only termed sexual harassment as 'embarrassing moments' creating 'uncomfortable environment'. This type of shy response from the informants indicates that they even fail to share any type of sexual harassment related experiences with their adults (sister, brother, cousin). As a consequence, they fail to show a strong protest against sexual harassments.

When informants were asked to share their own experiences of sexual harassment, many of them felt shy sharing their experiences. After being a little intimate with the researchers during the in-depth interview and also during focus group discussion (when they were surrounded by young girls of their age), they were free to share their experiences. In most cases, they are sexually harassed while moving alone for tuitions, schools and colleges. As per the informants, they are sometimes sexually harassed by their intimate relatives (e.g.; uncles, cousins etc.).

5. Defending Sexual Harassment

Though each informant of this study had individual perceptions of sexual harassment, all of them were inclined to avoid any type of sexual harassment. Each informant had their own way (either actively or passively) of dealing sexual harassment. How sexual harassment dealing experiences differ from individual to individual on the basis of certain criteria is demonstrated below:

5.1. Immediate Action

Few informants shared that they actively protest any incident of sexual harassment they face. For example, they directly challenge the perpetrator shouting help and help. Informants of this group are brave to protest on behalf of their friends, who dare to raise voice against harassment. According to this group of informant, perpetrators of sexual harassment are really coward; therefore, if they are challenged, they would get scared and give up harassing girls. An informant of this group claimed:

"I once faced sexual harassment in a local bus when a man was pushing from my behind. I challenged him directly; also other people in the bus supported me. Hence, the man was forced to move aside. Besides, if I face eve-teasing in roads I ask the perpetrators directly and they then just run away."

(Swarna, a 17 years old respondent)

This brave informant never feel shy, rather she stood for herself protesting against the perpetrator. She realizes protesting is the right decision immediately after being harassed. Informants do not blame themselves for sexual harassment incidents. They believe they need to collectively raise voices to stop this heinous crime. In contrast, there are girls either feel shy to protest or assume that there is no point in protesting as the perpetrators are dared to frequent commit sexual harassments. Also, they prefer that to be silent even if they are subjected to sexual harassment. They usually pretend as if they heard nothing. Some of them were found completely unaware of their rights to be protected from sexual harassment believing themselves responsible for being sexually harassed.

5.2. Sharing the Sexual Harassment Incidents with Elders

The informants, who were found aware of their human rights to be safe from violence, knew the necessity of sharing their experience with adults like parents, teachers or other elders for their own safety. They perceive their parents will take actions against the perpetrators or guide them the right path.

"When we are with our parents we face fewer incidents of sexual harassment. Whenever I face teasing I instantly share with my mother. She then advises me on how I should react and what do to protect myself."

(Sejuti, an 18 years old respondent)

Informants hardly find the convenient environment for sharing inside the house; they share their problems with friends even with teachers close to them.

“I am very fond of Shikha madam. She lives beside my house and I used to have tuitions from her when I was in school. Gradually, she became friendly to me; therefore, I shared every single problem of mine with her. Even if I get teased I used to share it with her without any hesitation. She advised me what I should do and what I should not. After coming to college, I indeed miss her advices as I can't go to her as frequently as I used to. However, I still try to visit her every Friday.”

The adolescent girls, who prefer to be passive to deal with sexual harassments, are introvert in nature. This is because they feel shy to share experience of sexual harassment to anyone specially elders. However, there is always a difference. It is seen that if the adolescents are provided open minded environment by the elders to share their experiences of sexual issues, they can share their experience of sexual harassment without any hesitation. Sharing the experiences of sexual harassment with adults sometimes depend on the reaction of the parents and elders. Some adolescents, still being conscious and active have been seen unintended to share their experience of sexual harassment with elders. It is because they think their elders would somehow consider the adolescents themselves are responsible for sexual harassment.

“I don't share the incidents of teasing with my mom because she can do nothing but make me responsible for it. She would ask me to wear veil and to remain quiet in such situation.”

(Proma, a 17 years old informant)

An informant reported that-

“If I face harassment only once by someone I won't share this with my parents because it is a common part of a girl's life and my parents will be worried for no reason. But if it continues for many days and goes out of my tolerance I will have no other option than to tell my parents.”

(Upoma, a 16 years old respondent)

5.3. Dealing with Sexual Harassment: Feeling of Empowerment versus Guilt amongst the Victims

Informants' bolded reported that they have to face certain phases of psychological instability that includes extreme anxiety, depression and lack of self-esteem. Those who actively protest against sexual harassment may enjoy a certain level of self-satisfaction as they could assist themselves. They feel empowered as they were able to raise voice against the perpetrators. The passive respondents think that they are solely responsible to be sexually harassed. Out of shy, they fail to share the experience with others. As a result, a feeling of guilt arises out psychological instability. The conservative urban society dwelling in Dhaka encourages these guilt feelings among the victims.

6. Measures to Reduce Sexual Harassments: Informants' Perspectives

6.1. Personal Modification

Adolescent girls believe they need a certain level of self-modification to avoid sexual harassment. They are advised to restrict their mobility in order to be protected from sexual harassments. According to informants, self-modifying includes:

- To avoid lonely place: A girl must not go to a lonely place. A girl must not move alone at night.
- To maintain 'purdah': Few girls maintain veil 'purdah' for keeping them safe.
- To avoid groups of men: According to some informants, as men are the one acting as perpetrators of sexual harassment, the best way to avoid groups of men.
- Be or pretend to be alert: A girl is to be aware about her surroundings always.

6.2. Immediate Actions on the Incident Place

Many informants argued that to reduce sexual harassment an effective way might be protest from individual level. They believe if the eve-teaser and his assistances are confronted publically they will be scared to do such things again and again. Some girls consider confronting is not a solution rather it would create agitation provoking the perpetrator to take even worse actions like murder, kidnapping or throwing acid on the victim. So they perceive it is better to stay quiet and pretend there is nothing happening in such situations.

6.3. Sharing the Experience

Most of the adolescent girls believe sharing the experience of sexual harassment with elders are effective because they can take necessary actions to prevent such incidents as well as advising the girls rightly. Some informants consider it is of no use to share with elders because they can do nothing except putting bars on the girls' mobility. So these girls try to deal with sexual harassment all alone pushing them to a more severe situation.

6.4. Role of the Parents

Parents' role in stopping sexual harassment has a special importance according to the adolescent informants. They think the parents should maintain friendly relation with t children providing enough room to share all their problems with them. The adolescents believe the parents should be supportive and must understand their point of views, inspite of just imposing certain bars on their mobility. Some informants also believe that sometimes the parents fear to take any actions against the perpetrator and that encourages him. A

group of informants supports the ideology of conservative society. They believe that the safety of the daughters is the responsibility of the parents and so the parents should restrict the mobility of the girls. For example, they should not allow the girls to move alone or to move at night.

6.5. Raising Awareness

Eve teasing has become a brutal form of sexual harassment that can result in permanent physical and psychological damage and profoundly alter the course of a girl's life. The harassment manifests itself in different ways, ranging from verbal abuse to abduction, acid-throwing even rape and gang rape. Hence, most of the adolescent informants were cautious enough to identify the necessity of making the mass people aware to stop eve teasing and other sexual harassments. They consider government and other NGOs, as well as mass media, can arrange campaigns in this regard. The girls feel that awareness raising programs both in local and national level should be encouraged not only to make them and their parents aware of sexual and reproductive health rights but also the perpetrators cautious of the impact of the heinous act of sexual harassment. Actually, most of the adolescent girls (8 out of 10 interviewees and 6 out of 10 free listing participants) opine that the awareness raising campaigns by NGOs, government organizations as well as media can make a change to the helpless condition of the victim girls.

6.6. Duties of Law Enforcing Agencies

According to most of the informants, strict punishment of the perpetrator can be an effective way to control sexual harassment. The strict punishment can frighten criminals keeping a check on the actions of the perpetrators. New laws against perpetrators of violence against women should be addressed. The informants suggested that law enforcing agencies (e.g.; police) should perform their duties in an effective way that the perpetrators get punished every time.

6.7. Role of the Mass Media

The informants perceive that mass media (both printing and electronic) can play an influential role in stopping sexual harassment. They claimed that most of the times mass media represent sexual harassment incidents insensitively. The news are not represented in a victim-sensitive way by mass media of Bangladesh. As a result, the victims get stigmatized even more. The informants urge the need to change this situation. They opine that the media should run campaigns that would not only raise awareness among the mass people but also reduce societal tolerance for sexual harassment.

7. Key Findings of the Study

This study sketches out the adolescent girls' interactions with the incidents of sexual harassment. It has been found that all informants want to share their experience with elders but sometimes the reaction of their parents discourages them. The parents in some cases do not act friendly. They just perceive the girls to be liable for their victimization. As a result, informants are more comfortable to share their problems with their friends. This, in turn, results in their incomplete understanding of the severity of sexual offenses. As a result, sexual harassments may turn into more severe sexual violence like rape and gang rape.

Interestingly, this study documents girls' transformation from being passive to active in dealing with sexual harassments. Many girls who received training or had been to workshops aimed to create awareness on sexual and reproductive health and sexual harassments in their school life are reported of being active in dealing sexual harassments. They believe before they received such training they remained silent in situations of sexual harassment but now they actively come forward and confront the perpetrator.

"I first experienced Sexual Harassment in Bangla Academy's Book fair when I was only in class two. I did not really understand what it was and so remained silent and failed share it even with my parents. But things are different now. Now I strongly protest. A few days back just before my S.S.C. test exam, I was crossing the Farmgate Over Bridge alone when a middle-aged man touched my back from behind. I instantly turned back and slapped him. All the people on the over bridge were taken aback."

(Upoma, a 16 years old respondent)

This respondent is reported of attending workshops providing knowledge on sexual and reproductive health as well as sexual harassments in her school years. The girls belong to religious or ethnic minority group always prefer to keep silence in the incidents of sexual harassment. It is because they fear to challenge the perpetrator coming from the majority group. Sometimes this fear is instigated in minority girls by their parents. This is a clear evidence of the vulnerable and helpless condition of the minority communities of our country. Sometimes religious fundamentalism and traditional society of ours play an influential role in the attitudes of the adolescent girls. As argued by Full (2013, p. 56) 'in Bangladesh there has been a recent backlash by fundamentalists against progress on women's rights'. Actually, the conventional society that relies on religious superstitions teaches the girls to remain silent and be passive. Hence, the girls act passively in dealing with sexual harassment.

The adolescent girls no matter how to react during sexual harassment, they have their own perceptions on how to put an end to the heinous offense of sexual harassment. A number of girls' suggestions are seen to be molded by religious superstitions. Nigar (2012, p.1) revealed the negative role of the religion in causing violence against women:

- Violations of women's human rights are often sanctioned under the garb of cultural practices and norms, or through misinterpretation of religious tenets. The condition of women in Bangladesh is not an exception to this. For decades, they have been kept oppressed by religious fanaticism, superstition, oppression and various discriminations

As a result, many girls were found holding the thought that being confined to the house or maintaining religious obligation of preserving veil would be a possible suggestion to prevent sexual harassment. Again there were girls who were cautious enough to

acknowledge the role of media, parents, awareness raising programs, law enforcing agencies and protest by the victim in minimizing sexual harassment occurrences.

8. Conclusion

One in every ten females worldwide is raped or sexually assaulted prior to reaching the age of 19. In South Asia, Bangladesh has the highest rate of such abuse (Unicef 2014). This study unveiled new dimensions of sexual harassments in the context of Bangladesh. Unlike previous studies, this study explained sexual harassments from the eye of adolescent girls. How do adolescent girls perceive sexual harassments, how do they react, do they share their experience of sexual harassments with elders, how does sexual harassment leave a long-lasting impact on girls, all these questions are answered in a critical manner in this article. The role of elders, educational institutions and traditional conservative society and how they directly or indirectly influence girls' strategies of defending sexual harassments are also discussed here. In addition, the demonstration of suggestions prescribed by the adolescents helps us to understand how they posit themselves against the heinous act of sexual harassment.

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