

Street Harassment and Coping among Indian College Women

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Abstract: Street harassment is the most ubiquitous and insidious form of violence against women. It is happening at an alarming rate and has now become a part of women's daily experience. Women all around the world are affected by it. The present study aimed to examine the type of coping strategy adopted by women to deal with street harassment and also how the coping strategy is affected by the frequency of the street harassment. For the same purpose, ANOVA and post-hoc analysis was used. The data was collected by 187 college-going women between the ages 18 to 30 years, studying in universities located in Delhi-NCR, India. The Stranger Harassment Index was used to measure the experiences of street harassment. The items from the Coping with Harassment Questionnaire were used which pertain to stranger harassment. There are four main coping strategies usually adopted in response to street harassment, namely, active, passive, benign, and self-blame. The findings suggest that there is a significant difference between active, passive and self-blame strategies depending on the frequency of harassment. Since, the issue of street harassment is constantly increasing, there is a need to review and revise some of the policies and laws associated with it. Hence the implications of the study have also been discussed.

Keywords: Street Harassment, Sexual Harassment, Depression, Anxiety, Stress, Coping.

Introduction

Violence against women is considered the violation of human rights which affects millions of women all around the world. The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (2014) defined it as “a manifestation of the historically unequal power relations between men and women which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men. Violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men”. Sexual harassment is the most prevalent and pervasive type of violence against women. It is inherently associated with gender stereotypes and oppression of women. Sexual harassment can be defined as unsolicited sexual advances, asking sexual favors, and sexual verbal or physical misconduct.

Sexual harassment in public is the most omnipresent and subtle form of violence against women. It is deeply ingrained and socially acceptable by most of the people that it is sometimes considered as a “normal” or trivial daily experience (di Leonardo, 1981). Sexual harassment in public is also known as Street Harassment. Street Harassment is used to describe gender-based harassment in public spaces but is not a widely accepted and uniformly used term. Many anti street-harassment social movements, groups, activists, journalists, and scholars prefer to use the term street harassment over terms like “eve-teasing”, “stranger harassment”, “sexual harassment in public” or “sexual harassment by strangers” (Heben 1994; Kears 2010). The terms “eve-

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teasing” and “catcalling” cannot be used interchangeably with street harassment because street harassment includes a range of non-verbal actions and behaviors like stalking, making gestures and name calling, making noises and public exposure. Other terms like public harassment or stranger harassment are closer and more appropriate because street harassment occurs in public spaces. Street Harassment refers to as “all forms of harassment women face in public spaces that are considered trivial, funny and a part of everyday life, thus acting normal mechanisms legitimizing harassment by positioning the very presence of women in public spaces as provocative”. “Street harassment occurs when one or more strange men accost one or more women whom they perceive as heterosexual in a public place which is not the woman’s/women’s worksite” (di Leonardo 1981). Bowman (1993) defined street harassment as the sexual harassment “of women in public places by men who are strangers”. Street harassment constitutes a serious encroachment of basic rights of the women. Street harassment can be defined as unnecessary remarks, gestures, and actions that are forced on people in a public place without their consent. It involves needless and unwanted whistling, passing sexist comments, and “cat-calling”, leering, relentless requests for someone’s name, number or destination after they’ve said no, sexual names, demands, following, flashing, public masturbation, groping, sexual assault, and even rape. The nature, magnitude and forms of the harassment may vary but the very crux of the problem remains the same. A plethora of research literature focuses on the incidences and consequences of sexual harassment, especially in homes, organizations and institutions like schools and colleges (Rusell, 1984; Schneider, Swan, and Fitzgerald, 1997; Barling, Rogers and Kelloway, 2001). Feminist activists and researchers in the United States have addressed the issue of street harassment during 1960s-1970s. However, the graver issues like domestic violence and workplace harassment have overshadowed the issue (Logan, 2015). There is a scant research investigating the street harassment, but that is gradually changing due to the prevalence and significance of the problem (Bowman, 1993; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Nielsen, 2009; Kearl, 2010). The problem of understanding and addressing street harassment is due to the fact that there is a lack of clear, to the point and universally accepted definition of the term. Street harassment is on a rise and has now become a part of women’s daily experience.

Madan and Nalla (2016) surveyed women in Delhi and found out that about 40% of participants reported that they were harassed in a public place in the past year mostly in broad daylight and 58% were sexually harassed at least once during their lifetime. A 2016 report by National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) revealed that in India as many as 39 crimes against women were reported every hour as compared to 21 in 2007. The rate of crimes against women has risen from 41.7 in 2012 to 55.2 in 2016. Delhi, being the capital of India, reported the highest crime rate, i.e. 160.4 against the national average. In 2016, about 84,746 cases of “assault on women with intent to outrage her modesty” were reported meaning approximately 10 cases per hour. “Assault on women with intent to outrage her modesty” includes crimes such as ‘sexual harassment’, ‘assault or use of criminal force to women with intent to disrobe’, ‘voyeurism’ and ‘stalking’. Even though the prevalence rates of street harassment for women is high, few studies have examined negative outcomes of this distressing experience (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). Some of the noted consequences of street harassment are depression, anxiety and stress.

Coping can be defined as “action-oriented and intra-psychic efforts to deal with the problems and neutralize stressful events of life” (Taylor, 2007). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), it is the process of attempting to manage, reduce, tolerate, master, or minimize

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the demands created by stressful events that are appraised as exceeding a person's resources. The two types of coping include problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping strategies aim to solve the problematic situation whereas emotion-focused coping strategies aim to manage emotional responses to those problematic situations. There is a debate upon which coping strategy is better and many scholars have agreed that problem-focused coping strategies are beneficial in the long run (D'Zurilla and Nezu, 2001; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Coping efforts can be both adaptive and maladaptive depending upon how the person perceives a particular stressor or situation.

Coping is a complicated issue when it comes to sexual harassment. There are contradictory viewpoints upon which strategy is more effective. Women who tend to indulge in problem-focused coping, confrontation is considered a successful strategy (Pape and Arias, 1995) but it is also associated with the greater risk of the victims (Smith et al., 2010). Women who adopt emotion-focused coping are at the risk of re-victimization (Iverson et al., 2013). Many studies suggest that a majority of women are likely to use passive and non-assertive coping strategies to deal with the issue of sexual harassment. Passive emotion-focused coping strategies involve wishful thinking (i.e., formation of beliefs and making decisions according to what might be pleasing to imagine instead of by appealing to evidence, rationality, or reality), mental short-term distractions from concerns, pretending to ignore, mental withdrawal, denial, avoidance, acquiescence and self-blame (Dehue, Bolman and Vollink, 2008; Wilton et al., 2000). These coping strategies might reduce the harasser's behavior in the short term but victims ultimately remain vulnerable to abuse (Lodge and Frydenberg, 2007; Vollink et al., 2013; Wilton et al., 2000). Usually, women ignore the harassment or attempt to avoid the person who harassed them (Magley, 2002). Active coping strategies include reporting or confronting the perpetrator or help-seeking. Very few women engage in self-blame, perceive the harassment as a compliment or benign (Fitzgerald, 1990).

The strategies used by women when it comes to street harassment are quite similar to the strategies adopted in response to sexual harassment in general. These usually include ignoring the harasser or harassment. There are also differences as there are no laws specifically against street harassment, even if there are laws, they are not implemented properly. So there is a lack of clarity upon whom to report a harasser or harassment.

Previous research studies have suggested that men have been sexually harassing women in public spaces and public streets since ages (Heben, 1994; Walkowitz, 1998; Bowman, 1993; Johnson, 2011). The findings of these past research studies show that the victims are usually women and girls and an overwhelming percentage of women experience street harassment (Logan, 2015; Neilson, 2009). Kearl (2010) described the issue as "omnipresent" as woman belonging to any age, background, culture, caste or color are subjected to various forms of street harassment. The present study focuses on college going women to target a small group of a larger population who have experienced some or the other form of street harassment. The present study aims to find out the different coping strategies adopted by women in response to street harassment. It is hypothesized that there is a significant difference between the type of coping strategy adopted and the frequency of street harassment.

Method

Participants and Procedure

A total of 187 college going women were selected for the present study. The data was collected between August 2019 and January 2020. Before doing so, a formal permission was taken from the Department of Psychology, Jamia Millia Islamia, for the conduction of the study. The data was collected personally and separately from female college students studying in different universities across Delhi-NCR, India. All the participants were contacted individually and asked specific questions verbally about the prevalence of street harassment and interested participants shared their experiences. The data was collected both online as Google forms and offline as hard copies. Before beginning the survey (both pen-and-pencil based and online-based survey), the selected participants were provided with an information sheet asking for demographic details and an informed consent. The participants were well instructed and were told that their responses will be kept confidential and anonymous. Since all the participants were well versed with English language, the survey was conducted in English only. The participants ranged in the age from 18 to 30 years, with a mean age of 21.8 years. 73.3% of the participants were unmarried and 97.3% of the participants had an urban background. After completion of data collection, the responses were scrutinized and scored. The data for 187 participants were utilized. Scoring for all the scales was done by hand according to the scoring keys and manuals. Then the statistical treatment of the scores was attempted. For analyzing the data, the IBM SPSS Statistics 23 version was used.

Measures

Coping Mechanisms

For this purpose, items from Fitzgerald's (1990) Coping with Harassment Questionnaire (CHQ) are taken. The CHQ is used to assess internal as well external focused strategies which are analogous to "emotion-focused coping" and "problem-focused coping" respectively. Fitzgerald developed these items to assess workplace harassment and found a reliability coefficient of .83. Fairchild and Rudman (2008) borrowed the items from CHQ that seemed more relatable to stranger harassment rather than workplace sexual harassment (e.g. items pertaining to filing grievances or complaining to authority, like supervisor or head of the department were excluded). Participants were asked to respond to the described experiences and rate them according to their possible reactions on a scale of 1-7 (1= not at all descriptive to 7= extremely descriptive). The reactions were divided into four categories according to the Coping with Harassment Questionnaire (CHQ; Fitzgerald, 1990). These are active coping ("I talked to someone about what happened"), passive coping (e.g. "I just ignored the whole thing"), self-blame (e.g. "I felt stupid for letting myself get into the situation"), and benign ("I considered it flattering"). Each subscale showed adequate reliability ($\alpha > .73$). Previous studies showed that women were more likely to use passive coping strategies as compared to the other three.

Street Harassment

The Stranger Harassment Index (SHI; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008) measures experiences of harassment from strangers typically enacted in public spaces (e.g., the street, public transportation, restaurants). Participants then respond to the same nine behaviors rating the frequency of the occurrence, ranging from 1 (once) to 5 (every day). Scores on the SHI have demonstrated acceptable internal consistency reliability (.85; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008) among

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college women. As in Fairchild and Rudman (2008), the mean total SHI (.82) score was calculated.

Results

The data was found to be normally distributed as the values of skewness and kurtosis were found to be in acceptable range. The street harassment data was divided into quartiles and hence three groups were formed, that are, low (scores below 7), medium (scores between 7 and 18), and high (scores above 18). Figure 1 indicates that 56.1% of the women faced medium harassment as compared to 23% of the women who faced frequent and constant harassment experiences and only 20.9% of the women faced low or no harassment.

Table 1 shows the ANOVA tables indicating that there is a significant difference between the coping strategies Passive, Self-Blame and Active and the frequency of Street Harassment among the college-going women. There was a statistically significant difference at the $p < .001$ level in the coping strategy adopted as: Passive $F(2,184) = 5.194, p < 0.01$; Self-Blame $F(2,184) = 6.739, p < 0.01$; Active $F(2,184) = 3.772, p < 0.01$.

Table 2 shows Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey test which indicates that as the frequency of the street harassment changes, the type of coping strategy adopted also changes. It also indicates the means indicating that Passive ($M=31.1628$) and Self-Blame ($M=12.5581$) coping was used by women who faced constant or frequent street harassment whereas Active ($M=16.7905$) coping was used by women who faced medium harassment.

Figure 1: Frequency of Street Harassment in Percentage

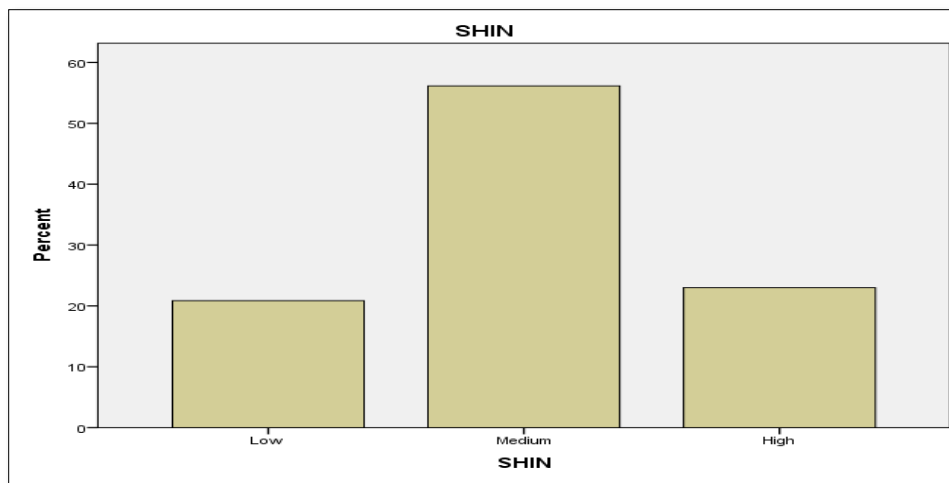


Table 1: ANOVA tables showing the difference between the type of coping strategy adopted and the frequency of street harassment

Type of coping mechanism	Sum of Squares	df	F	Sig.
Benign	5498.406	186	.994	.372
Passive	21232.096	186	5.194	.006
SelfBlame	6713.626	186	6.739	.001
Active	5731.176	186	3.772	.025

Table 2a: Post hoc comparisons of the type of coping strategy adopted

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Benign	Low	39	10.1795	4.69530
	Medium	105	9.8667	5.31519
	High	43	8.6512	6.29393
	Total	187	9.6524	5.43703
Passive	Low	39	25.1538	10.47438
	Medium	105	25.3714	8.94992
	High	43	31.1628	13.44996
	Total	187	26.6578	10.68415
SelfBlame	Low	39	8.7436	4.75017
	Medium	105	8.8762	5.19929
	High	43	12.5581	7.84766
	Total	187	9.6952	6.00789
Active	Low	39	14.7436	6.30671
	Medium	105	16.7905	5.35418
	High	43	14.4419	4.91016
	Total	187	15.8235	5.55093

Table 2b: Multiple Comparisons Tukey HSD

Dependent Variable			Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	Confidence Interval	Confidence Interval
	(I) SHIN	(J) SHIN				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Benign	Low	Medium	.31282	1.01960	.949	-2.0963	2.7220
		High	1.52832	1.20231	.413	-1.3125	4.3692
	Medium	Low	-.31282	1.01960	.949	-2.7220	2.0963
		High	1.21550	.98442	.434	-1.1105	3.5415
	High	Low	-1.52832	1.20231	.413	-4.3692	1.3125
		Medium	-1.21550	.98442	.434	-3.5415	1.1105
Passive	Low	Medium	-.21758	1.95982	.993	-4.8483	4.4131
		High	-6.00894*	2.31101	.027	-11.4695	-.5484
	Medium	Low	.21758	1.95982	.993	-4.4131	4.8483
		High	-5.79136*	1.89218	.007	-10.2623	-1.3204
	High	Low	6.00894*	2.31101	.027	.5484	11.4695
		Medium	5.79136*	1.89218	.007	1.3204	10.2623
SelfBlame	Low	Medium	-.13260	1.09339	.992	-2.7161	2.4509
		High	-3.81455*	1.28932	.010	-6.8610	-.7681
	Medium	Low	.13260	1.09339	.992	-2.4509	2.7161
		High	-3.68195*	1.05565	.002	-6.1763	-1.1876
	High	Low	3.81455*	1.28932	.010	.7681	6.8610
		Medium	3.68195*	1.05565	.002	1.1876	6.1763
Active	Low	Medium	-2.04689	1.02575	.116	-4.4706	.3768
		High	.30173	1.20956	.966	-2.5563	3.1597
	Medium	Low	2.04689	1.02575	.116	-.3768	4.4706
		High	2.34862*	.99035	.049	.0086	4.6887
	High	Low	-.30173	1.20956	.966	-3.1597	2.5563
		Medium	-2.34862*	.99035	.049	-4.6887	-.0086

The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Discussion

The present study aimed to assess the type of coping strategies college women adopt in dealing with street harassment. Street harassment is a form of prejudiced display in the public spaces or public streets which is routinely experienced by women all around the world regardless of her age, marital status, and social or economic background. Using the Stranger Harassment Index, the frequency of street harassment was assessed. Results indicates that 56.1% of the women faced medium harassment as compared to 23% of the women who faced frequent and constant harassment experiences and only 20.9% of the women faced low or no harassment (Figure 1).

The hypothesis of the present study states that there would be a significant difference between the type of coping strategy adopted and the frequency of street harassment. Coping refers to the “action-oriented and intra-psychic efforts to deal with the problems and neutralize stressful events of life” (Taylor, 2007). It is the process of attempting to manage, reduce, tolerate, master, or minimize the demands created by the stressful events that are appraised as exceeding a person’s resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The coping mechanisms can be defined into “emotion-focused coping” or “internal-focused coping” and “problem-focused coping” or “external-focused coping”. Problem-focused coping strategies aim to solve the problematic situation whereas emotion-focused coping strategies aim to manage emotional responses to those problematic situations. Coping mechanisms were divided into four categories according to the Coping with Harassment Questionnaire (CHQ; Fitzgerald, 1990). These are active coping (“I talked to someone about what happened”), passive coping (e.g. “I just ignored the whole thing”), self-blame (e.g. “I felt stupid for letting myself get into the situation”), and benign (“I considered it flattering”).

The findings suggest that there is a significant difference between the coping strategy adopted and the frequency of street harassment, as indicated in Table 1. The results indicate that there is a significant difference between three coping strategies, that are, passive, self-blame and active. When it comes to sexual harassment, research suggests that the majority of women are likely to use passive, non-assertive coping strategies. The older studies indicate that less than 20% of women use assertive or active coping strategies (Gruber, 1989). However, this has been changed and women have started using other coping strategies like reporting or confronting the perpetrator (active coping), engaging in self-blame, or simply ignoring or avoiding the harasser (Magley, 2000). It has been found that many of the coping strategies used by the women who are sexually harassed are similar to the strategies used by women who are the victims of street harassment (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). However, there are some differences like there are less strict laws pertaining to street harassment as compared to sexual harassment.

Table 2 shows the post hoc comparisons and means of the coping strategies used. This indicates that women who faced highly frequent and constant street harassment tend to use passive and self-blame coping more as compared to women who faced low or medium street harassment. Self-blame involves blaming the self, one’s appearance or dressing style for provoking the harasser. Women who use self-blame as a coping strategy believe that the harassment is their own fault and they could have avoided it. The possible reason for this could

be when women face constant and frequent harassment they tend to internalize the issue (blame oneself) and start treating it as a trivial matter by simply denying or ignoring the harassment (passive). Passive and self-blame strategies are a result of our normalization of street harassment as a serious issue faced by women in our societies. Women, who face street harassment or harassment of any sort, tend to accept and rationalize those experiences and get on with it without really stopping to protest or ask why. Women who faced medium harassment engage in active coping. They acknowledge the behavior as inappropriate and engage in active coping by reporting the harasser, confronting them, or talking to a friend, therapist, police or social worker. Some women stand up for the cause and for themselves, by using active strategies like reporting to authorities or confronting the harasser, but it depends upon the intensity and the frequency of the harassment faced. With the advent of #MeToo movement, a lot of women are coming forward and reporting the men responsible for the harassment they have faced. Results show that treating harassment as benign or inconsequential doesn't have any significant value in the present research. The participants do not treat the street harassment as innocuous, flattery or as compliment.

Conclusion and Limitations

Sexual harassment in public places or street harassment has been overlooked by the traditional sexual harassment researchers. The study contributes to the existing literature on street harassment which is a very under-researched topic, though that is changing gradually as each existing study shows that street harassment is a significant and prevalent problem faced by women. The present study suggests that street harassment is a remarkably common occurrence for most of the college-going women. There is a significant difference between the coping strategies adopted by women when they face street harassment and it depends on the frequency of the street harassment experienced. Passive and Self-Blame coping are mostly used when faced with constant and frequent harassment while Active coping is used when women are faced with medium harassment. Overall, the problem of street harassment must be addressed by more researchers and future research should be designed to fully understand the experiences and the consequences of street harassment. In addition to researchers, the implications of the present study must be considered by the policy makers and law enforcement agencies, so that stricter policies and laws can be made for street harassment in India.

The present study has the following limitations. First, this study involves the use of self-report inventories which might increase the possibility of socially desirable responding. Future research should try to examine and focus on other coping strategies that are employed by women in response to street harassment. It may also include a male perspective so as to get an overall picture of the issue faced by women.

The tool used in the present study only focuses on the frequency of street harassment experienced by the women. It does not include the different types of harassment. Future studies can be done to assess the type of street harassment to yield better results with coping mechanism.

Another limitation lies in the usage of a tool that incorporates all the dimensions and criteria of the street harassment faced by women. No metric can accurately evaluate the extent of psychological violence a woman has been subjected to. The current measure used is not widely

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popularized and used in many research studies. Therefore, other measures need to be developed and existing measures must be popularized. A qualitative or mixed method can be used to better understand the experiences of women and to get a whole comprehensive picture of the issue faced by women.

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