



Cover Page



A SOCIOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO SEXUAL HARASSMENT AMONG FEMALE STUDENTS IN VISAKHAPATNAM

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Abstract

The safety of women has become a critical global concern, particularly in educational institutions where young women are expected to grow academically and personally in a secure environment. This study examines the prevalence, forms, causes, and impact of sexual harassment among college girls in Visakhapatnam. Using a descriptive research design, data was collected from 220 respondents through questionnaires and interviews. The findings reveal significant levels of harassment, widespread underreporting, and gaps in awareness and institutional mechanisms. The study highlights the urgent need for stronger implementation of policies, improved awareness, and institutional accountability to create safer campuses.

Key Words: Sexual harassment, Campus Safety, Gender-Based Violence, Gender Inequality, Awareness and Reporting, Psychological Impact

Introduction

The safety of women across the globe has emerged as a significant concern, as incidents of harassment and violence continue to restrict their freedom, dignity, and overall well-being in both public and institutional spaces. Educational institutions, particularly college campuses, are expected to provide a secure and supportive environment for learning and personal development. However, these spaces are not immune to gender-based challenges, including sexual harassment.

In India, the issue gained widespread attention following the #MeToo movement, which exposed the prevalence of sexual misconduct across sectors, including higher education. This led to stronger institutional responses and enforcement of legal frameworks such as the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act). Regulatory bodies like the University Grants Commission (UGC) have mandated the establishment of Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) in educational institutions.

Sexual harassment includes unwelcome verbal, non-verbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature that creates a hostile environment. It ranges from inappropriate comments and gestures to physical contact and online harassment. Such experiences adversely affect victims' psychological health, academic performance, and sense of security.

Despite legal provisions, many forms of harassment—especially subtle ones—are normalised and underreported. Social attitudes, patriarchal norms, and victim-blaming further discourage reporting. Therefore, examining the nature and extent of this issue is crucial for developing effective interventions. (The Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973)

Sexual harassment in colleges manifests in multiple forms and creates an unsafe environment that impacts students' academic and personal development. The persistence of this issue highlights gaps in policy implementation, awareness, infrastructure, and reporting systems. Therefore, there is a need to study its prevalence, causes, and impacts in detail.

Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the prevalence and forms of sexual harassment among female students



Cover Page



2. To examine its impact on academic and psychological well-being
3. To analyse awareness of legal provisions and institutional mechanisms
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of safety measures
5. To identify factors contributing to harassment

Research Methodology

Visakhapatnam, a rapidly developing urban city, provides a relevant context due to its educational institutions and socio-cultural diversity. The study adopts a descriptive research design using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. A sample of 220 female students (aged 18–23) was selected using convenience sampling. A structured questionnaire was

Prevalence and Forms

61.82% reported harassment near or on campus include

- Physical harassment: 25.45%
- Online harassment: 23.64%
- Verbal comments: 9.09%

Locations of Harassment

- Public spaces: 46.36%
- Transport: 27.73%
- Online platforms: 18.64%

Reporting Behaviour

- Only 14.09% reported incidents
- 85.91% remained silent

Reasons for Underreporting

- Lack of evidence: 31.82%
- Lack of awareness: 30%
- Fear of stigma: 14.55%

Causes of Harassment

The findings indicate that sexual harassment is a significant and prevalent issue affecting girls in and around college environments in Visakhapatnam. A majority of respondents (61.82%) acknowledged the presence of sexual harassment near or on campus, while a small proportion (5.91%) chose not to express their opinion, possibly reflecting discomfort or fear.

In terms of forms of harassment, respondents reported multiple experiences: verbal comments (9.09%), lewd comments (3.64%), physical touch (25.45%), and online harassment through messages or images (23.64%). This highlights that harassment occurs both physically and digitally, with physical contact and online bullying being particularly common.



Cover Page



Regarding locations, harassment is most frequently experienced in public spaces (46.36%) and college transport (27.73%), followed by online platforms (18.64%). Incidents within the college campus (4.55%) and hostels (2.73%) were reported less frequently but remain areas of concern, indicating that harassment is not confined to a single setting but spans multiple environments.

A major concern revealed is underreporting. Only 14.09% of respondents reported incidents, while a large majority (85.91%) remained silent. Key barriers to reporting include lack of evidence (31.82%), lack of awareness about reporting mechanisms (30%), and fear of stigma (14.55%). This suggests systemic gaps in awareness, support systems, and trust in reporting processes.

The impact of sexual harassment on students is evident in their sense of safety and well-being. About 26.36% of respondents are uncertain about their safety on campus, and 2.27% explicitly feel unsafe. This indicates that harassment contributes to reduced confidence, fear, and psychological distress, affecting students' overall college experience.

Impact on Students

1. The intervention by the Women's Commission and police according to (46.36%) was introduced only after the tragedy, not before as a result whatever damage happened to the victim could not be rectified.
2. (26.36%) students reported that the involvement of multiple individuals shows that inappropriate behaviour was normalised or unchecked. Repeated harassment by faculty and staff indicates a breakdown of ethical and professional norms. Victims feared reporting to the officials against the perpetrators.
3. (16.36%) say victims lack of assertiveness so they did not report or resist effectively, largely due to fear and lack of confidence. The suicide victim expressed helplessness and an inability to seek help.
4. (42.72%) say girls lack empowerment hence; victims were silenced through blackmail and fear, showing a lack of empowerment. The victim's final message asking for justice reflects suppressed voices and delayed action.
5. (22.27%) accuse management of negligence and abetment has led to many suicide cases, indicating weak institutional safeguards and create protective environments in colleges failed to provide a safe environment, especially in hostels and campus spaces.
6. (68.18%) report crime occurs in hostels and campus areas where there are insufficient surveillance systems (as noted in findings) and so most victims committed suicides.
7. Victims as per (40.90%) feared serious gaps in institutional discipline and accountability. Cases were registered only after the incident not before they occur.
8. According to (42.72%) victims' suffered repeated misconduct by educators indicates a lack of gender sensitivity and awareness of boundaries. post-incident awareness sessions by officials reinforce the importance of sensitization programs.
9. (43.63%) say victims did not approach police or authorities, often due to fear and lack of awareness. Unfortunately, officials promoted helplines like 181, 1098, etc after the incident, showing they were underutilized earlier.
10. (59.09%) say opine victims were overpowered psychologically and socially, even if not always physically. This led to psychological and moral break down of the victim.
11. Women, especially victims are frightened of venturing into poorly monitored spaces as per 15% incidents occurred in such areas.



Cover Page



Government intervention to curb Sexual Harassment

Legal Enforcement-**Strict implementation of POSH Act and Mandatory ICC functioning**
Awareness Programs-**Large-scale campaigns and Integration into education systems**
Infrastructure Improvements-**CCTV surveillance and Proper lighting**
Reporting Mechanisms-**Anonymous complaint systems and Transparent procedures**
Support Systems-**Legal aid Counselling and services Helplines**
Capacity Building-**Gender sensitisation training and Self-defence programs**
Institutional Accountability-**Monitoring committees and Annual reporting systems**

Conclusion

The findings of the study indicate that sexual harassment in higher educational institutions is a multi-dimensional issue shaped by individual behaviour, institutional mechanisms, and societal norms. While legal frameworks and policies exist, their effectiveness is limited by gaps in implementation, awareness, and accessibility.

A key insight from the study is that prevention and response must go hand in hand. Awareness and sensitisation alone are insufficient without strong institutional support systems, and similarly, policies are ineffective without student engagement and trust.

The study also highlights that empowerment of women, promotion of gender equality, and transformation of social attitudes is crucial for long-term change. Ensuring safety in educational institutions requires a shift from reactive measures to proactive, preventive, and inclusive strategies.

Ultimately, creating a safe academic environment is a shared responsibility that involves institutions, government, students, and society as a whole.

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