

Silences Speak: Understanding Experiences of Sexual Harassment among Young Women in Colleges of South Delhi

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Abstract—*The paper tries to explore the experiences of sexual harassment as the young women understand it in their everyday lives. Attempt has been to understand the meaning of silences with respect to harassment and why it persists and whether there is resistance to the structures or they are being reproduced.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The research was done with the aim of understanding the silence around sexual harassment, concentrating on young college going women. My everyday interactions and my own experiences of sexual harassment made me take on the research,

My attempt at understanding understand sexual harassment and the silences around it, it can be understood terms of girls talking about the issue, girls not responding to sexual harassment, family and larger society trying to normalise the violence and the restrictions increasing on the girls rather than addressing the issue. The patriarchal and protectionist behaviour increase the restrictions on the girls, their freedom and mobility are curtailed rather, girls are supposed to make compromises to feel safer rather than understanding the reasons for this violence to be taking place. We are remaining quite as a society on the causes of sexual violence because if we do, we are questioning the power and privilege of patriarchy and caste.

The lives and movement of women are determined by the harassment that takes place in public spaces. There is fear instilled in women and the rights even though of equality are not accessible to women. My research is restricted to only young women of middle-class upbringing of the city and their experiences. I want to make clear the fact that by doing this, it cannot be assumed that these are the only women who face sexual violence.

The method that I have used is largely quantitative research methodology using a structured interview, common for all the respondents. The idea of the research is to understand the

perceptions that young college going women have about sexual harassment. How is it that they understand it as part of their daily lives and from it if there is any kind of silence around the issue and what would the silence if any mean to the young women.

2. SOURCE OF DATA

The universe or the sample population for the purpose of my research are young women from largely women's colleges that are part of the University of the reason for taking up research on this issue was to understand that if women remain silent about their experiences of sexual harassment and in what situations and why is that. Delhi

3. COLLECTION OF DATA

The data collection was done during the months of Most of the interviews were done in the college premises, a lot of them in the canteen and the garden, as these were girls would be here when they were a little free. May and June 2018. Very few interviews were done when I had gone to the house of the girl. The interview duration ranged from 20 minutes to 1 and half hour, depending on how much the girl wanted to share her various experiences.

Very few of the interviews in the college lasted long. But the interactions that I had with the girls outside the campus were invariably longer.

4. METHODS AND TOOLS OF DATA COLLECTION

The research is a quantitative research and I have used structured interviews to interview the girls, using an interview schedule. Most of the questions were closed ended and the open-ended questions would also be tabulated using the responses of the girls.

I did most of data collection through the method of structured interview using interview schedule. Through the interview,

according to the girls the interview enabled them to do critical thinking of their daily experiences which they usually do not engage in. The process of the interview is more participatory and girls could about various experiences and not necessarily related to sexual harassment but also how their sexuality is controlled.

5. RESEARCH AS PART OF THE PROCESS

My idea of spaces and especially of safe spaces for women was questioned and a lot of learning and deconstruction took place. I realised that while doing my research my lack of understanding on the issue restricted me from engaging better in the field. Just restricting spaces to physical space with only a limited dimension was an injustice to the concept as well as lived realities of the respondents. There were a lot of opportunities to get into the depth of the lived realities of my respondents but with me going with a narrow framework and hesitation to learn from my respondents stopped me from doing the same.

One thing that was very common among the responses, without direct questions being asked around it, is that there always has to be a reason for the young woman to leave the house. That means that every time she leaves the house she is going out with a purpose in mind and only then is in the open spaces. This being in the open or public space is for a brief period, till she reaches from one point to another.

The respondents that I have interviewed are Delhi university girls. They belong to the middle class educated population of the city. The idea is to understand that how the violence in the lives of girls is normalised and even when we start acknowledging the violence, we want to hush it up and not talk about it as a society. My understanding is that if the girls start questioning these power structures in their lives, they are able to question all the oppressive structures and systems within the family and outside. The idea of honour of the family and the girls being the 'izzat' of the house are values that are revered.

The idea of space that I saw only as a physical space initially has changed a great deal. Space entails much more than just physicality and understanding of what is safe space for women becomes an important component of the research. During the process of research, I understood the importance of solidarity in its real sense, in our lived realities, the girls' as well as mine. It is very important to have people around you who listen to what you say and feel and encourage you when need be and discourage you accordingly. The strengths of the individual get highlighted and the weaknesses are worked upon together.

6. FINDINGS

In this part of the paper I am trying to understand as to what the girls understand form sexual harassment and how they see it in their everyday life experiences. Have tried to understand

the girls and their reasons why sexual harassment is normalised, even though it is a recognised crime. Working with sense of the girls regarding the macro structure due to which violence against women happens.

Profile of the girls

The girls who have been interviewed are between the age group of 18 years to 23 years, with the maximum number of girls of the 19 and 20 years.

The maximum numbers of colleges (90%) are in the south part of the city of Delhi and are in turn part of the south campus of the University of Delhi. The two colleges Maitreyi and JMC are both all girls colleges to whom the maximum numbers of girls (88%) are studying in and both the colleges are in south Delhi. The cut offs of these colleges are comparatively higher than a lot of other colleges of the University of Delhi. A lot of the students of these colleges have a feeling that they are superior to other students of other colleges as they have achieved something more based on the higher grades in academics.

The maximum numbers of girls reside in the southern part of the city or south Delhi. This is not just an area specifically for the middle class in terms of economic income but also to do with the caste, attitude, lifestyle, consumption pattern and so on that is part of that class.

Understanding of girls of sexual harassment

There is a need to look at how the girls articulate the sexual harassment that they face in their daily lives. In the patriarchal language of our society, we term sexual harassment as eve teasing, where it is not recognised as an offence. By the use of term eve teasing we normalise the violence. Eve teasing is something done for fun, by a known person and the girl is comfortable by the act and there is an understanding in that relationship, which is of equality. By the using of the term eve teasing for experiences of sexual harassment, make the experience seem as any other experience that you have to forget. Around 40% of the girls say according to them sexual harassment and eve teasing are different. According to around 30% of the girls eve teasing is verbal in nature and is seen as lesser form of sexual harassment. Around 16.7% of the girls say that sexual harassment is when an act is physical and involves touching of their body. It seen by some as an extended form of eve teasing, 9.5% of the girls said that sexual harassment can be anything that makes them feel uncomfortable.

Table 1: Understanding of sexual harassment

S. No	Understanding	Frequency	%
1	Verbal/Commenting	13	30.9
2	Beginning/ lesser form of sexual harassment	5	11.9
3	Touching	4	9.5
4	Staring	3	7.1

5	Whistling	3	7.1
6	Done for fun	2	4.8
7	Not sure	2	4.8
8	Normal Thing	1	2.4
9	Stalking	1	2.4
10	Done by a known person	1	2.4
11	No response	7	16.7
		42	100

Table 2: Places where Sexual Harassment takes place

S. No	Place	Frequency	%
1	Buses	32	76.2
2	Markets	29	69
3	Streets	23	54.8
4	Roads	21	50
5	Metros	18	42.9
6	Bus stops	17	40.5
7	Metro/railway stations	16	38.1
8	Autorikshaws	13	31
9	Malls	12	28.6
10	Shops	8	19
11	Pavements	8	19
12	Parks/ sports grounds	6	14.3
13	Party/family function	5	11.9
14	Parking areas	3	7.1
15	Concerts/events	3	7.1

When the girls were asked as to what according to them could be the public spaces where sexual harassment takes place, the instant reply was that it happens everywhere and anywhere. When asked to name a few of the areas, then maximum number of girls say that sexual harassment happens in buses (76.2%), this is followed by the young women finding market places as very unsafe for women (69%), then streets (54.8%) and roads (50%) being public spaces where sexual harassment occurs frequently.

Table 3: Forms that sexual harassment takes in public spaces

S. No	Form	Frequency(no. of girls saying yes)	%
1	Touching/feeling	35	83.3
2	Passing lewd comments	31	73.8
3	Staring	30	71.4
4	Whistling/ name calling	26	61.9
5	Gestures	13	31
6	Groping	12	28.6
7	Stalking	12	28.6
8	Flashing	5	11.9
9	Pinching	1	2.4

According to the girls sexual harassment takes various forms in the public spaces. The maximum number of girls (83.3%) said that the touching or feeling or brushing past is the most common form sexual harassment that they face in public spaces, the girls (73.8%) said one of the most common forms that sexual harassment takes on streets and markets is specifically passing of lewd or sexually coloured remarks or something that is meaning to objectify a body part, the girls (71.4%) also said that staring is one of the most common forms of sexual harassment that women have to face almost on a daily basis.

Knowledge of Sexual Harassment

Table 4: Knowledge about laws against SH

S. No	Type of Knowledge	Frequency	%
1.	About the existence of law against SH	30	71.4
2.	Procedure of filing SH complaint	10	23.8
3.	Attended training session on SH	9	21.4

According to Table 4, majority of the girls (71.4%) said that they know that there exist laws that are meant to deal with sexual harassment as a recognised crime. Very few of the respondents (23.8%) knew what the law is, what the legal definition of sexual harassment is and how to file a complaint of sexual harassment. They know that there exist a lot of helpline numbers but are unsure as to how they work. Around 12.5% said that they have the helpline numbers or mobile applications on their phone, but none have actually ever used it. Around 21.4% said that they have attended training session or workshops on sexual harassment where they understood what is this recognised crime and what are the legal provisions available for them and what is the procedure to be followed for a filing a complaint of sexual harassment.

Talking about Sexual Harassment

A lot of the girls remember the initial incidents of sexual harassment in their early teenage years (90.2%). More than half of the respondents (51.2%) said that they at the time, when sexual harassment happened with them initially they did realise that something was wrong and did feel uncomfortable and was sexual harassment in its meaning. Around 95.2% are now able to articulate as to what form the sexual harassment took initially.

Response to Sexual Harassment

58.5% of girls said that they ignore what is happening when they face sexual harassment and would carry on with whatever she is doing in public spaces (58.5%), and maximum percentage shows that they would respond the same way (58.5%). Then the respondents (34.1%) said that they shout or

yell at the perpetrator, some girls (4.9%) said that they through their gestures try showing the perpetrator that he is causing discomfort to her either by staring back or by making angry gestures by the face, some said that they hit or slap the perpetrator (2.4%).

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

All the girls interviewed responded to having faced sexual harassment once in their life time. The degree, occurrence and form may vary. But it needs to be understood that all the girls are able to articulate that they have faced sexual violence. This brings to the forefront the risk taking behaviour of the girls within the particular structures of society.

When trying to understand the experiences of sexual harassment of young women we need to look at how the girls understand the violence in their everyday life. The understanding of what is eve teasing and that of sexual harassment is an important one if we go by the feminist debates. Majority of the girls said that they feel that the two are different, but most of them said that the difference is that eve teasing is verbal or commenting on women and sexual harassment is a physical and a broader term for the similar violence.

Most of the places that the girls said where they face sexual harassment are places or modes of transport that they have to go to while travelling to college. The second was types of places are malls, markets and shops. Very rarely did any girl say ground or parks. From this it can be understood that the purpose of the young women to leave their homes is usually to go to college or to buy something in the markets. From this it can be deduced that the young women are in public spaces because they always have a purpose in being there, they are not outside the home without any reason. There is space for young women to just be and enjoy and always have to be able to justify their presence in any public space and the legitimacy of that presence is decided by family and community.

It can be seen from the data that majority of the girls said that sexual harassment takes place in both crowded places as well as in secluded places. The point being that it is not just secluded that create a fear of someone committing violence but also when there are people are around you the violence is equally likely to occur. The presence of people around the girls does not create any sense of safety and girls feel vulnerable in both the types of spaces; be it secluded or crowded.

Most of the experiences of sexual harassment that the women have faced are during the travelling that they do when going to college. Hence, overtime the girls have devised certain measures that make them feel safer even though these measures might actually not make any difference to the perpetrator but a sense of safety is created by girls in themselves by the way they walk, talk and dress. Only a certain route is taken or leave home early that if something

like harassment happens they have time to change buses and have enough time to reach college on time.

Girls are since childhood taught that they should not do anything that would attract attention of anyone. Socialised to dress in a way where the body should be covered, the rules apply both outside as well inside the private sphere of the home. It is important to understand that the home itself is not a safe space for women; they are as vulnerable to violence in the public as well as the private. The socialisation is a gendered process where the different genders are to conform to certain rules of behaviour and life that are already decided by society.

All the girls said that they were initially affected by the incidents of sexual harassment but over time have trained themselves and try to remain unaffected by the incidents as they occur so often. The sexual harassment that is verbal and involves only gestures is seen as regular and girls almost get used to this despite feeling uncomfortable, only when the sexual harassment becomes physical form that women recognise it as a form of violence and are affected and scared and angry.

The violence of sexual harassment happens so often that it almost seems invisible, in the sense that nothing out of the ordinary is happening, *"It is a normal thing, and can't pay attention to it and waste time"*. The violence is perpetrated in such a way that women in their daily experience have come to accept it as normal. *"Bolte nai hain, kya pata log hume hi dosh denge, hamari besti hogi"*

The girls say that the reasons for not girls not talking about sexual violence is that they are since their childhood taught that they are the 'izzat' of the house, *"Society imposes it as a norm, chup raho uske baare me, izzat ka sawal hai"*. The ideas of shame and honour of the family are measured by the way the girls of the family behave, talk and dress. There is strict control of the sexuality of the girl is followed and is becomes a very natural part of the girls existence.

There seems to be a dilemma among young women as to how to respond to sexual harassment in public spaces. The young women feel the need to challenge the violence but they are not sure as to how and what to do. They are since birth taught to not challenge power and especially that of men but when negotiating public spaces they think it is imperative to challenge the violence, but find it difficult as they are never trained to do so. One girl says that *"Kaise awaaz uthaon nahi pata, samajh nahi ata ki ghar me bolte hain polite raho magar bahar awaaz uthane ki zaroorat hai, dono ek saath kaise ho sakta hai?"*

It can be seen that silence is much more than talking, rather it is the structures that exist in the society that are creating the silence among the girls. Silence needs to be understood not just as an individual working rather as how different structures perpetuate violence and silence. The structures are formed by the ideology of that society and in this particular society it is patriarchy, giving the male power over all other genders, this

unquestioned privilege and power over the women and her sexuality is the basic understanding.

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