

Riding in Fear: Female Students' Lived Experiences of Sexual Harassment in CNG Auto Rickshaws in Sylhet City

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Abstract

In recent years, violence against women has taken on a new form in our society, involving considerable intimidation of women's mobility and dignity. Due to significant under-reporting rates, sexual harassment on public transportation is one of society's neglected aspects of gender-based violence against women. In Sylhet City, the CNG Auto Rickshaw is the primary public transportation mode. Drawing on the findings of a qualitative research design, we aimed to highlight the issue of sexual harassment in CNG Auto Rickshaws. We conducted in-depth interviews with twenty female students from both a public and a private university in Sylhet City. The findings reveal that sexual harassment is common in CNG Auto Rickshaws, with young female students from the universities being highly vulnerable to such incidents. This dehumanizing misconduct causes a significant degree of panic and anxiety among female students, which in turn impacts their academic performance and social lives. Despite experiencing various forms of abuse that result in trauma, none of the participants reported these incidents to the university authorities or the police. CNG Auto Rickshaws seem to provide perpetrators with proximity and anonymity, leading to significant levels of abuse with minimal risk of social or legal consequences.

Keywords: Sexual Harassment, CNG Auto Rickshaw, Female Student, Mental Health

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Introduction

Individuals who rely on public transportation due to the absence of choices are commonly known as "captive passengers" or "transit captives" since having access to transportation is a necessary condition for having access to employment (Dear & Wolch, 1989). Research indicates that the proportion of female motorcyclists in captivity is higher than that of males. Access to public transportation is crucial for these women as it provides them opportunities for employment, education, leisure, and engagement in public life (Smith, 2008). Lack of public transportation may hinder girls' access to education (Latif, 1999; Fernando and Porter, 2002, as cited in Harrison, 2013).

Paudel (2011) examined the correlation between masculinity and the promotion of violence in Nepal's public transportation. Her research unveiled that incidents of violence are more prevalent at bus parks, on the highways, and inside buses during peak business hours, namely in the mornings and nights. Most drivers said that they perceive this as a means of exerting control and deriving enjoyment. Men perceived violence as an indication of authority. Nevertheless, due to their perception of being sexually dominant and possessing greater physical strength compared to women, conductors and males would sometimes intervene to protect women from mistreatment. Most women expressed physical vulnerability, discomfort, and powerlessness while utilizing public transit, particularly during working hours.

Mitra-Sarkar and Partheeban (2009) assessed the extent of harassment adult women face when using public transit in Chennai through a survey. A sample size of 274 female participants, predominantly college students, was selected through random sampling from various locations, including college campuses, residence halls, trains, buses, and bus/train waiting areas. Based on the findings, 66 percent of these women reported encountering harassment throughout their commute to work.

Given its low socio-economic status, the population of Bangladesh predominantly relies on public transportation. Individuals from all kinds of businesses utilise public transportation in this area due to its more affordable cost than other modes of transportation. Students across all grade levels use public transit to commute to their educational institutions. Based on a recent study conducted by ActionAid (2016), 84 percent of the women surveyed stated that they had encountered instances of verbal and physical sexual harassment while travelling. Women, particularly younger women, and girls, often experience harassment in public transit and associated spaces, such as receiving verbal and physical sexual remarks, unwanted groping, hostile stares, and even direct physical assault in the country.

From 2011 to 2019, a total of 2830 girls in Bangladesh were subjected to various forms of sexual harassment (Odhikar, 2019). A total of 258 women

in Bangladesh fell victim to sexual harassment in 2019, as reported by Ain O Salish Kendra (2020). According to a survey conducted by the Fair Wear Foundation in 2013, around 60 percent of employees working in textile factories in Bangladesh and India reported experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace. According to a poll conducted by ActionAid in Bangladesh, 80 percent of the women surveyed reported experiencing workplace sexual harassment and abuse.

Based on the research conducted by Ain O Salish Kendra (2016) and Naved et al. (2006), it has been found that women in Bangladesh continue to endure or remain silent regarding sexual harassment due to the fear of social stigma and insinuations (Mamun et al., 2021; Stake et al., 2020; Uzzaman et al., 2021). Women's rights are infringed upon when they are subjected to sexual harassment. These restrictions limit their autonomy and ability to move freely, decrease their time spent in school, disrupt their mental well-being, and hinder their involvement in personal and societal development (Parvej et al., 2020).

In brief, public transportation emerges as a critical area for research, focusing on identifying risk factors and implementing interventions to enhance safety for passengers. By addressing these research gaps, this study examines the trajectories of sexual harassment in CNG Auto Rickshaws, a public transport, and its consequences on the mental health of female students at the universities in Sylhet City, Bangladesh. Furthermore, addressing the pervasive issue of sexual harassment requires a multifaceted approach informed by comprehensive research. Current literature highlights significant gaps in understanding the barriers faced by female students in reporting, particularly in religious and cultural contexts where societal norms and stigma deter victims from seeking support. Intersectional analyses are crucial to recognise how various identities intersect to shape female students' experiences of harassment and their likelihood of reporting. Moreover, there is a need for more robust research examining the long-term mental health consequences of sexual harassment and evaluating the effectiveness of prevention and intervention strategies followed by the victims. Low socio-economic contexts merit particular attention, given the heightened vulnerability of individuals in these communities to sexual harassment.

Literature Review

Sexual harassment not only infringes upon a woman's rights, but it can also have detrimental effects on her immediate and long-lasting well-being (Jina & Thomas, 2013). The 1991 European Commission Code of Practice provided a clear definition of sexual harassment as unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature, or any behaviour based on gender that undermines the dignity of individuals, both women and men, in the workplace.

Sexual harassment encompasses a range of behaviours, all of which

share the common characteristic of being sexually suggestive. While there is a common consensus that sexual harassment falls under the category of gender discrimination, it is essential to note that not all instances of gender discrimination qualify as sexual harassment. The presence of a sexual element distinguishes it from other behaviours that may be considered gender discrimination but do not meet the criteria for sexual harassment (Huda, 2003; Dine & Watt, 1995).

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2000, sexual harassment is any behaviour, whether it is physical, verbal, or non-verbal, that is sexual or based on gender and that negatively impacts the dignity of both women and men. This behaviour is considered unwelcome, unreasonable, and insulting to the person experiencing it. In the same vein, according to the Bangladesh Supreme Court in 2009, 'Sexual Harassment' is any form of unwelcome sexually explicit activity, whether expressed directly or through gestures. It includes the display of pornography, making sexually explicit statements or gestures, engaging in indecent gestures, making sexual advances or comments, or stalking someone. Engaging in the act of mocking or ridiculing someone by using sexually suggestive language is also be classified as sexual harassment.

Research highlights the widespread occurrence of sexual harassment, which is common worldwide in various settings, including educational institutions, workplaces, public transit, and leisure areas (Madan & Nalla, 2016; McLaughlin et al., 2012). Startlingly, data from UN Women (2019) indicates that globally, one out of every three women encounters physical or sexual abuse, with distressingly low levels of reporting, highlighting the structural obstacles victims encounter when seeking justice and assistance. Sexual harassment aims to infringe upon an individual's inherent worth and create an atmosphere that is menacing, antagonistic, belittling, degrading, or offensive. Sexual harassment victims have adverse life experiences and encounter social repercussions. According to Kalra and Bhugra (2013), bullying diminishes the victims' self-esteem by inducing feelings of weakness and powerlessness.

According to the WHO's research, more than 35 percent of women globally have experienced physical, sexual, or partner violence and non-partner sexual assault. The study also found that only 2 percent of women in India and East Asia, 6 percent in Africa, 10 percent in Central Asia, and 14 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean reported their abuse experiences formally (WHO, 2013).

In Indonesia, there is a significant level of concern around sexual harassment, as seen by 85 percent of employed women feeling apprehension about it (Better Work, 2014). Although SH is widespread, the proportion of women seeking help for it is relatively small. Only 3 percent of abused women sought police assistance, with the rates varying from 10 percent in Moldova and Ukraine to less than 1 percent in Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Haiti, Mozambique,

Nigeria, and Zimbabwe (Ergöçmen et al., 2013).

The consequences of sexual harassment go beyond the initial trauma and have a profound impact on the victims' self-assurance, psychological well-being, and interpersonal relationships (Kalra & Bhugra, 2013). Moreover, victims of sexual harassment are frequently discouraged from reporting such instances due to cultural norms and societal views, which in turn contribute to a culture of silence and lack of accountability (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020).

However, a significant number of rapes and sexual harassment remain unreported, despite being prevalent, due to the reluctance of witnesses, bystanders, and victims to come forward, primarily out of fear of the consequences (UN Women, 2019). According to Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020), a majority of self-harm victims in higher education do not report the incidents to the authorities. A substantial body of scholarly research has uncovered multiple rationales for refraining from expressing opposition to sexual harassment. Owing to their apprehension of facing scrutiny, scepticism, culpability, and social disgrace, individuals who have experienced sexual harassment often refrain from reporting the occurrence to law enforcement authorities (Foster & Fullagar, 2018).

Methods

A study, which was attempted to explore the extent of sexual harassment in a spiritual area like Sylhet, Bangladesh, and its consequences on female students' mental health was conducted. Sylhet is frequently called Bangladesh's spiritual capital (Saha et al., 2020). Sylhet is one of the fastest-growing districts in Bangladesh. Sylhet was reorganised into a city corporation from a municipal board in 2001, and the city was administered by the Sylhet City Corporation (SCC) in 2002. In March 2009, Sylhet was granted metropolitan city status. Sylhet district covers a total area of 1332.00 square miles and is home to over 0.5 million people. The total population of Sylhet district is 3.43 million, whereas the number of males is 1.73 million, and the number of females is 1.78 million (Bangla Bureau of Statistics [BBS], 2021). In Sylhet city, the number of public universities is three, which includes- Shahjalal University of Science & Technology, Sylhet Agricultural University, Sylhet Medical University, and the number of private universities is four, which includes- Leading University, Sylhet (LU), Metropolitan University, Sylhet, Sylhet International University (SIU), and Northeast University Bangladesh (NEUB).

The research methodology, a crucial aspect of this study, was meticulously designed to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. It relied on a combination of primary data collection and secondary source analysis. Primary data were obtained through an open-ended structured interviewing technique, following the case study approach. Secondary sources, including journal articles, academic books, and official documents, were

consulted to enrich the study's context and findings. Twenty female respondents were purposively selected from a private and a public university in Sylhet City to gather primary data. With the participants' explicit consent, individual interviews were conducted on the respective university campuses. The female co-author facilitated the interviews to ensure comfort and rapport. The analytical approach adopted in this study was the general inductive method, utilising thematic analysis to uncover patterns and insights within the collected data. A key aspect of this study was the voluntary participation of the respondents, which was strictly adhered to throughout the research process, demonstrating our commitment to ethical considerations, including informed consent.

Result

Socio-demographic profiles of the participants

The study participants represent a wide variety of sociodemographic origins, which adds to the rich tapestry of viewpoints in the research setting. The sample comprises women in the 20–30 age range, reflecting a homogeneous gender representation intended to capture subtle insights unique to this particular demographic sector. Their educational backgrounds cover business studies, humanities, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), and social sciences. Participants were from the universities of Sylhet City, both public and private, providing a mix of institutional and academic settings.

Forms of sexual harassment

(a) Verbal

Forcefully criticizing, threatening, or insulting someone in public or privately is known as verbal harassment. It is a harmful kind of communication used to undermine the other person's esteem for themselves (Ratnawat & Jha, 2014). Contrary to forms of discriminatory harassment, verbal abuse is frequently not considered to be unlawful (Omonijo et al., 2013). Threatening someone with sexual approaches, spreading sexual rumours, dropping sexual clues, persistently asking someone out, making remarks about their clothing, personality, or physical attractiveness, making sexual jokes, and asking for sexual favours are also included in this category. Compared to non-verbal or physical harassment, verbal sexual harassment is less frequent. The most typical verbal sexual harassment involves making unwanted words about a woman's appearance. Verbal sexual harassment is committed by talking and commenting on the victim's private parts and outfits. Almost all women from all corners of the country suffer from this harassment.

Sexual comments

The study findings show that the majority of female students have experienced sexual harassment in verbal form. These verbal forms of sexual harassment are usually committed through sexual comments by passengers in local transportation. These comments are hateful comments about female students' demeanour as well as their outfits. Sometimes, as part of an interaction, whether positive or negative, sexual, or otherwise, these remarks are directed at women's bodies. Furthermore, rather than emphasising women as complete beings, these statements emphasise them as sexual objects. The most frequent setting for comments labelled "Focus on Physical Appearance/Bodies" was public transportation. The following narratives show the picture.

One day, I was coming to my university hall from one of my tuitions. I stopped a CNG auto rickshaw, and there was a male passenger whose age was, I guess, around 50-55. When I intended to get on the autorickshaw, that passenger suddenly commented, "Sylhet has become inhabitable because of these whores of the university."

[Female student from the public university]

I was going to a market in town. So, as usual, I got on a CNG auto-rickshaw from the varsity gate. I could barely remember how many passengers were there. I was wearing a T-shirt. One of the passengers in the back seat commented on my outfit. "Why are you wearing clothes? You had better remove them". I was overwhelmed and shocked as well.

[Female student from the public university]

(b) Non-verbal

Nonverbal sexual harassment is the most typical form to occur in public. The most frequent nonverbal sexual harassment tactic is giving unflattering stares, which is then followed by whistling and singing vulgar songs. The study indicates that the majority of female students have faced non-verbal forms of sexual harassment. As physical sexual harassment requires direct physical contact with the victim's body, the offender will likely be caught. This might be one of the factors contributing to the preference for non-verbal modes among offenders because the offender has a low risk of getting caught as there is no need for direct contact with the body to commit these harassments. This type of sexual harassment occurs differently, such as by negatively looking at the body, facial expressions, and sexual gestures.

Leering or staring at the private parts of the body

Constant leering or staring can be considered sexual harassment in and

of itself or can serve as proof that other types of sexual harassment are more likely to occur. Staring suggests an unwavering look. Whether a look should be seen as leering or staring depends on where the gaze is directed. A leer or stare that is directed at the breasts, buttocks, or genitalia is more likely to be construed as sexual harassment. This type of sexual harassment has become enormously spread out all over the city. Surprisingly, this type of harassment has become an everyday affair in city life. Women, especially female students, have perceived that they cannot help preventing this type of harassment as they cannot show evidence about the issue.

I was sitting in the back (in a CNG auto-rickshaw). Five people were in the CNG auto-rickshaw (three were at the back, and two were in the seat beside the driver). One disgusting passenger was sitting in the seat beside the driver and was staring at the private part of my body frequently through the side-view mirror.

[Female student from the private university]

Facial expression

The study findings reveal that this is one of the most frequent forms of sexual harassment in local transport. It includes showing any sexually suggestive facial expressions, such as licking, winking, or opening the mouth. This type of sexual harassment occurs frequently, but neither passengers nor the victims talk about it. This type of harassment happens because it is very subtle, and the victim usually has no proof against that passenger. The following extract echoes the issue:

I was coming to Amberkhana from Bondor by the CNG Auto Rickshaw. A young boy was sitting beside me. I was shocked when I saw the young boy winking at me.

[Female student from the public university]

Sexual gesture

Showing sexual gestures to do sexual harassment is the worst form of sexual harassment. It shows the extreme level of disrespect towards women. In our study area, sexual gestures such as sexual harassment are also concerning. The following narratives explain the situation.

I was coming to my university hall from home at night after Eid vacation. I was on a CNG auto rickshaw alone. In a lonely place on the way to my university, I suddenly saw the driver looking at me through the rear view mirror, and I realised that he had started masturbating. I was shocked, and instantly, I did not know what to do! I told the driver to stop the vehicle. When he stopped

the vehicle, I got off.

[Female student from the
public university]

Once, I was in a CNG auto rickshaw, going somewhere I could not remember clearly. Two male passengers were with me in the back seat, and one passenger was beside the driver. I still remember the passenger sitting beside the driver, continuously biting his lip by looking at me through the rear view mirror. It was intentional.

[Female student from the
private university]

© Physical

The most typical forms of physical sexual harassment involve touching a woman's hand while giving her something. The study evidence suggests that female students at universities are frequently experiencing physical forms of sexual harassment. This is an extreme form of sexual harassment. The physical form of sexual harassment can be a significant burden to a woman in leading her social and personal life.

Sitting close, brushing up and touching clothes, hair, or body

The study provides significant evidence that harassers often sit close to the victims and pretend to touch or brush them unintentionally. Sometimes, damaged roads give perpetrators the advantage of touching or brushing female students' bodies as if their actions are unintentional and they are unable to control their bodies because of the damaged road. The following narratives point out the situation.

I was going to my village on the puja vacation. I got on a local CNG auto-rickshaw to go to the bus terminal. Two men were sitting beside me in the back seat. The man who sat in the middle seat started pushing me through his leg. I told that man to sit correctly, but he did not care and continued his actions after some time. I had to get off that CNG auto-rickshaw because of the disgusting activity of that man.

[Female student from the
public university]

I went to the town, far from my university campus, to buy a scarf. So, I got on a local CNG. I was sitting beside two people in the back seat. The middle one was female, and the other one was

male. The male took his hand at the back of the seat and tried to touch my hair, crossing the female sitting in the middle. I shouted instantly, and the driver stopped the CNG auto-rickshaw. People gathered around to know the incident and told that man to get off.

[Female student from the
public university]

I was returning home by a CNG auto-rickshaw after buying some stuff from a market. When I gave the driver the fare, he tried to touch my hand by pretending he was taking money from me. I instantly removed my hand and asked him why he was doing that! He said nothing and left that place quickly with his vehicle.

[Female student from a
private university]

Occurrence of sexual harassment (time of harassment)

From female students' responses, the study has found that most of the sexual harassment occurs in the morning and evening. It happens because these two times are different and similar in how people notice. In the morning, the streets remain depopulated. So, the perpetrator can easily harass a female student as no one is watching. Also, in the evening, people usually rush to return home from work and other activities, and no one pays attention to what is happening around them. So, the perpetrator can commit sexual harassment without any trouble. This happens when female students go to the university, back to the hall or home, or shopping or tuition. The following extracts echo the issue.

I always feel stressed about missing the university bus. What if I miss it? Because if I miss the bus, I cannot help but go to the university by CNG auto rickshaw. The reason behind my stress I am telling you. One day, I missed the bus in the morning. So, I picked a local CNG auto rickshaw. There was only one passenger with me in the CNG auto rickshaw. Suddenly, I felt that he was trying to push me through his waist. I instantly shouted at him, saying, "What are you doing?" Then, he moved aside.

[Female student from a
private university]

My classes usually end at 5:00 PM. But one day, I was late as I had my thesis course lab work. So, I missed the bus. Then, I got in a local CNG auto rickshaw. In the middle of the road to my destination, I felt the passenger sitting beside me trying to grab

me by moving his hand back from my seat. I screamed instantly and told the driver to stop the CNG auto rickshaw. And then I got off.

[Female student from a private university]

Mental health consequences

Sexual harassment can profoundly impact women's lives, causing them to experience anxiety, diminished self-esteem, and enduring psychological damage (Tripathi et al., 2017). This study result shows that most female students talked about stress resulting from the fear of being sexually harassed in local transportation. Several students agree that this stress lasts from the morning to the evening.

Low self-esteem

According to research, self-esteem is essential to well-being (Shannon et al., 2007). Additionally, research revealed a link between sexual assault and lowered self-esteem (Gruber & Fineran, 2008). In contrast to non-victims, Gruber (2008) showed that victims of harassment had lower self-esteem. The study findings reveal that sexual harassment in local transportation gives female students feelings of inferiority and powerlessness. They tend to think that they are the marginalised portion of society. As a result, they often disrespect themselves. The following narratives raised the issue.

There is no security of life for women in society. We were born to be ruled, neglected, and harassed. Men look at us like we are pieces of meat. They always look at me and my body parts whenever I get in a local vehicle like a CNG auto rickshaw. I do not know whether it only occurs in Bangladesh or worldwide.

[Female student from the
public university]

I try to use private CNGs or Rickshaws when I need to go somewhere. I hate to travel by local transport for these problems (sexual harassment). I always try to avoid crowded environments because who wants trouble? Who knows, maybe all women face the same problem because they are women.

[Female student from the
private university]

Fear

The relationship between women's fear and the built environment has shown that women feel insecure in public transit. Transportation environments

are frequently among these. According to the study findings, female students commonly fear using local transport like CNG auto rickshaws. Most of them do not complain about sexual harassment to anyone. The following narratives clarify the reason.

I never complained to anyone about the troubles I faced in CNG auto rickshaws. Because I fear that people will know about the harassment I have gone through, which can be shameful for me. That is why I always remain silent in these cases.

[Female student from the private university]

I avoid going by local CNG auto rickshaws when I have plenty of money. I am tired of and scared of the harassment in local transport. Whenever I face harassment in these transports, I always feel stress and anxiety. But I hate to complain about it to preserve my self-dignity.

[Female student from the public university]

I usually get scared when two men are beside me in a CNG. What if they try to touch my body? Day by day, this fear of mine is getting worse. However, this fear varies from person to person. When I sit beside an older man, I fear most. I do not know why this happens, but maybe because if they harass me, I cannot tell others as they are the same age as my father.

[Female student from the private university]

Depression

Depression is a common occurrence for sexual harassment victims (Campbell et al., 2008). Compared to those who experienced physical violence, some victims had a twofold increased risk of being diagnosed with depression (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). The study evidence suggests that the female students who have suffered from the sexual harassment in local transport have talked about some issues they are dealing with daily, indicating the symptoms of depression. The following extracts echo the problems.

I always feel stress and anxiety. I cannot find the energy to do any innovative work. I cannot finish my assignments on time due to lack of motivation. I always feel tired of doing my daily activities. I cannot find inspiration to end things in just time.

[Female student from the

public university]

My sleeping pattern has changed. I am suffering from a sleeping disorder. It started in my first year of university. I do not know what this disease is resulting from. Maybe from the stress that I have been going through, including sexual harassment in local transport.

[Female student from the
public university]

I feel pain in my neck whenever I try to concentrate on anything. I do not know how to explain it to you. My neck gets hard when I try to focus on something.

[Female student from the
private university]

Sadness has become my partner. I cannot bear this anymore. I always feel exhausted when I think of my circumstances and these filthy people with these ugly sexual desires. I will be mad soon, indeed, if these occurrences will not be stopped!

[Female student from the
public university]

Phobia

The study findings reveal that most female students get worried and scared when they are about to get on the local transport. They often check whether there are any women in the local transport or not. If there are women in local transportation, they feel safe. The following narratives point out the issue.

Whenever I think of going somewhere by CNG Auto Rickshaw , my heartbeat gets faster, and I sweat extensively. What if I get harassed again?

[Female student from the
public university]

Nowadays, I doubt every male passenger in CNG. Who knows whether all of them are harassers or not? So, I always make sure that whether there are any women or not. Going somewhere besides a female is safer.

[Female student from the
private university]

Coping Strategies

The study findings show that female students respond to harassment differently, which depends on the situation. The type of response also varies

from person to person. Some respondents said they avoid the perpetrator even at the time of occurrence, some said they got out of the vehicle as they do not like trouble, some mentioned they had been used to these types of occurrences, and they usually tell the offender to stop his activity, some expressed they tried to tell the driver or co-passenger. The following extracts echo the issue:

I have faced sexual harassment in CNG auto rickshaws or local buses two times in my university life. Both times, I got off from the CNG auto rickshaws or local buses and took another CNG auto rickshaw. I did not want any trouble.

[Female student from the private university]

These troubles in CNG auto rickshaws have become a regular occurrence for me, as I have faced many of them. Whenever I encounter these troubles in CNG auto rickshaws, I usually tell them (who are irritating me) to move aside.

[Female student from the public university]

I have faced sexual harassment in a CNG auto rickshaw only one time. The man who sat beside me tried to touch my thigh. I told the driver of the CNG auto rickshaw to do something, but he did nothing. I instantly got off the CNG auto rickshaw and took pictures of that man and the driver, as well as a picture of the number plate of that CNG auto rickshaw. After reaching the university hall, I contacted one of my department's seniors, a police officer.

[Female student from the public university]

Reporting against sexual harassment

Most of the victims of sexual harassment in local transport were hostile towards reporting the harassment they faced. Distrust towards legal authorities and fear of social stigma are also causes of ignoring or remaining silent after sexual harassment, which compelled them to tolerate sexual harassment against the perpetrators. The study shows some different reasons behind the lack of motivation to report.

Fear of getting viral

The study reveals an intricate interaction between the fear of social consequences and the hesitation to report cases of harassment among female

students, with a specific focus on the anxiety related to the possible widespread sharing of such incidents on social media platforms. The following narrative portrays the picture.

Nowadays, people tend to go live on Facebook no matter what happens. So, I never show any activity because what if I react or try to report the harassment and it goes viral?

[Female student from the private university]

Conservative society

The study reveals a troubling pattern where female students choose not to speak out about incidents of harassment because of the existing cultural attitudes towards women. The following extract demonstrates this phenomenon by showing how the fear of being blamed as a victim and facing negative consequences from society discourages people from seeking justice or help.

Living in this city, I have understood that people here do not like women going somewhere alone. So, I never reported anything to anyone because, who knows, they may blame me for all of this as I was alone in the CNG auto rickshaw.

[Female student from the public university]

Administrative complexity

The study findings reveal that several female students often decide not to report sexual harassment because of the formal and complex procedure of the legal process. The process itself puts the victim in a state of depression. The following extract echoes the issue.

Once, I went to write a complaint about the sexual harassment I faced in the CNG auto rickshaw. After I reached the police station, I found that there were no female police officers. Also, I was in a kind of trauma because of the harassment I faced. So, when they told me to write an application mentioning the harassment, I could not bear the complex procedure anymore, and I went back without filing the report.

[Female student from the public university]

Discussion

Despite recent advancements in promoting gender equality and empowering women in the community and society, reformers still encounter numerous

obstacles to further enhancing women's equality and empowerment. Specifically, gender-based violence against women is one of these concerns. Instances of gender-based violence (GBV), such as lewd conduct by individuals of the opposite gender, are a common occurrence that women face daily in public areas. Women's safety is compromised while travelling due to the occurrence of sexually explicit remarks and uninvited physical contact. Human rights inherently encompass the entitlement to unrestricted movement or secure mobility. The planning of public transportation networks is closely linked to this (Nath et al., 2022).

Sylhet is recognised for its profound spiritual importance (Saha et al., 2020). Although the population in Sylhet City follows religious and disciplinary customs, sexual harassment is still widespread in CNG Auto Rickshaws. Our study data elucidates the correlation between people's sensitivity towards women venturing outdoors and the diminished occurrence of reported cases of sexual harassment in local transportation. The study indicates that three forms of sexual harassment (verbal, non-verbal, and physical) are prevalent in the area.

Investigation into the region has identified sexual comments as the predominant kind of verbal sexual harassment. Harassers typically employ sexual remarks with the intention of provoking irritation in women. Within the designated area of study, those who engage in harassment frequently direct derogatory and offensive remarks, particularly of a sexual nature, towards women. This behaviour constitutes sexual harassment. Non-verbal sexual harassment encompasses actions such as prolonged gaze at intimate body parts, facial expressions, and explicit sexual gestures. This form of harassment arises from the absence of physical contact with the victim's body as a means of engaging in sexual harassment.

Furthermore, victims frequently lack meaningful proof against the harasser due to the absence of physical contact between the harassers and the victims. Therefore, the probability of the harasser being apprehended is minimal. Studies from Egypt (i.e., Brown & Osman, 2017) and Iran (i.e., Lahsaeizadeh & Yousefinejad, 2012) also noted the most frequent type as being stared at.

The physical form of sexual harassment is the most extreme level of sexual harassment, and the harasser can get immediate sexual satisfaction for his deformed mentality. The physical form of sexual harassment includes sitting close, brushing up, and touching clothes, hair, or body. Female students usually go to universities in the morning, and the classes generally finish in the

evening. So, it has been found from the study that female students at universities mostly get harassed in the morning as well as in the evening.

Most universities in Sylhet city are situated on the edge of the town. So, the students cannot help going a long way to buy their daily essentials by local transport. Also, the majority of the students at the universities earn their pocket money by doing private tuition. So, they often get back to their homes or halls in the late evening. So, there are plenty of chances of sexual harassment in the case of female students.

Paudel (2011) reveals that masculinity encourages sexual harassment in public transportation in Nepal. According to her research, harassment is most common during busy times like evening and morning. Female students at universities suffer a lot because of the sexual harassment in local transport. These harassments result in fear and stress and give them feelings of inadequacy, incapableness, and minority.

Sexual harassment is also responsible for the consequences of depression in female students. The symptoms of depression include anxiety, lack of motivation, changes in sleeping patterns, and muscle aches (Kirchheimer, 2004). Worry due to sexual harassment leads female students to the phobia of getting on local transport with male passengers. Sexual harassment may impact a victim's professional chances, self-esteem, psychological well-being, capacity to function at work or school, career opportunities, personal relationships, and physical health. Sexual harassment victims experience a tremendous amount of emotional pain. They describe a wide range of symptoms, such as rage, dread, despair, weeping fits, anxiety, irritability, loss of self-esteem, feelings of shame and estrangement, and a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability (Loy & Stewart, 1984; Gosselin, 1984; Gutek, 1985).

The rights of women are violated when they are subjected to sexual harassment. This reduces their freedom and liberty to independent movement, shortens their time in school, disturbs their mental health, and prevents them from participating in personal and societal growth (Parvej et al., 2020). Responses by female students toward harassment vary according to the study findings. The differences in reactions depend on the personality of the victim. Some stay quiet, some take it expected, and some report sexual harassment.

A victim has several options, including agreeing to the harassment, ignoring it, avoiding the offender, confronting them, changing jobs or classes, reporting the behaviour to a supervisor on a grievance committee, or seeking legal counsel (Baker et al., 1990; Loy & Stewart, 1984). Most female students

refuse to file a complaint against the harasser because they often get worried about getting viral on the internet. They tend to think that conservative people in the study area will view them as problem creators because they do not want women to go out without a guardian or male partner. Some do not go for reporting because of the complex procedure of filing a case.

A prior study also shows that in the case of sexual harassment, more than half of the victims in higher education do not notify the authorities (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). Much academic research revealed numerous justifications for not speaking out against sexual harassment. Due to their fear of being scrutinised, doubted, blamed, and subjected to social shame, victims of sexual harassment frequently do not disclose the incident to law enforcement officials (Foster & Fullagar, 2018).

As Sylhet is a small city, the primary local transport here is the CNG Auto Rickshaw. There is no separate sit for women in CNG auto-rickshaws as they are small vehicles, which is one of the core reasons behind sexual harassment. Buses or other oversized vehicles are hardly seen here as local transport. Research has shown that respondents view buses as the least secure. This perception may be because buses and trains are more packed than rickshaws and taxis, providing more opportunities to offend (Smith & Clarke, 2000; Tripathi et al., 2017), which is a different picture from the findings of the study area.

Based on our study findings, it has been revealed that in a developed city like Sylhet, where people are very religious and more educated than at any other time, there is also sexual harassment. Sexual harassment exists in a different form, and non-verbal sexual harassment is mentioned there. Since students at the universities here come from other areas of the country and they think and behave more liberally, and since the transportation of the universities is not enough, the majority of the female students at universities become victims of sexual harassment in public transport. They prefer not to show any activity or file complaints because of the conservative environment and the complicated procedure of filing a case. These inhuman activities and the overall situation create depression and phobia in their mind, which affects their daily activities and creates obstacles to the progress and development of their life.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The study findings show that sexual harassment in public transport affects female students' mental health badly, leading them to the worst mental health consequences, such as stress, depression, and phobias. These mental health issues make them spiritless and reduce their ability to finish work properly. Legal and emotional support should be highlighted in situations of sexual

harassment events through the helpdesk to assist these women and girls who have experienced sexual harassment. Given the importance of women in society, the government must pay more attention to sexual harassment incidents and implement processes, laws, and enforcement to help prevent it from occurring in public transportation.

The study also identifies that Sylhet, the study area of this research, is a spiritual city, and people here are too sensitive toward women going outside alone. This sensitivity results in less talk about sexual harassment in local transportation. So, people are not concerned about the current state of sexual harassment in local transport. Throughout this instance, a poster and leaflet campaign targeting public transportation should be launched immediately in the district as part of a comprehensive awareness-raising effort to increase public understanding of sexual harassment.

Community awareness campaigns should be undertaken to educate the public about women's independence and empowerment and to encourage them to abstain from offensive behaviour. To have a solution to sexual harassment and other types of violence in public transportation, a code of conduct for passengers should be created following High Court directives. The public transportation code of conduct and the fundamental human rights of passengers should be explained to drivers who are unaware of them. The media may help spread awareness of sexual harassment and information on the laws governing such harassment and the penalties for offenders.

The government also should introduce separate transport facilities for women in Sylhet. For equal social and economic growth, gender must be considered in transportation planning and implementation projects. The study found that women usually do not report to the police the sexual harassment they have faced because of the unwelcoming behaviour of police authority and the scary environment of police stations. Hiring motivated, goal-oriented female police officers and retraining the current staff must increase and improve the number of female police officers. The best way to address the issue at a more significant social level is through more extensive awareness programmes that highlight the idea that sexual harassment is unacceptable and encourage women to come forward to file complaints by offering more victim-friendly reporting facilities.

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