



Sexual Harassment against Female Students in Higher Education Institutions: A Case Study of a State University in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Even though women play a significant role in building human capital and the overall development of a country, they have to face numerous issues while studying at universities. Among these issues, sexual harassment is the most unpleasant experience they frequently face. As the literature reveals, due to socio-cultural and personal reasons, most women are victimized by various forms of sexual harassment and do not take any action against it. This study attempts to investigate the problem of sexual harassment against female students in higher education institutions by inquiring about the forms of sexual harassment and the actions taken by the victims of the harassment. Data were collected through a questionnaire survey, interviews, and discussions by selecting a convenience sample of 100 female students attached to a state university in Sri Lanka. After critically analyzing the collected data and information using elementary statistics, conclusions were drawn, giving special attention to feminist theories. The study found that 92% of respondents have experienced various forms of sexual harassment. Some of them did not take it seriously. At the same time, 25% tried to bear the incidence alone, and none of them had taken any legal action against the offender to maintain confidentiality, due to fear, and uncertainty about appropriate and reasonable actions. Lack of knowledge of sexual harassment and legal protections, existing socio-cultural and personal attitudes, etc. are some barriers to addressing the issue. Imposing laws and policies, conducting awareness programmes, and creating a culture to respect femininity and protect females from any form of harassment are some recommendations.

KEYWORDS: *Female Students, Higher Education Institutions, Sexual Harassment, Universities*

1. INTRODUCTION

Even though education is considered a fundamental human right, in the practical context, women do not have equal opportunities to enjoy the "right to have education" compared to men in many aspects. Because of established socio-economic and cultural practices in some communities, women have to go through many barriers when they engage in learning. Despite all such impediments, one of the positive and considerable factors seen in education in the current world is the increasing trend of women entering the higher education sector. In many countries, including Sri Lanka, it can be identified that women's representation in the education sector is increasing day by day, even in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) subject areas. Confirming this, (Taylor 2003) mentioned that the number of females in higher education has increased considerably worldwide. Globally, female enrollment in higher education has tripled from 1995 to 2018 (Hurtado 2021). Out of the total student enrollment for the academic years 2017/18 and 2019/20 in Sri Lankan universities, 64.3% are female (UGC 2020).

Women's interest in education has increased for many reasons. Among them, the most considerable fact is that "education is the most significant factor that helps to empower women by enhancing the opportunities to enjoy human rights and minimizing unequal opportunities". Women should have equal opportunity to enjoy the right to education, as they play an exceptional role and contribute a lot to the building of human capital and the overall development of a nation. However, evidence shows that women are victimized by various types of discrimination, outbreaks of violence, harassment, and abuse while they are studying in higher education institutions such as universities (Mehmood & Chong Li 2017, Heywood et.al, 2021, Gunathilaka et al. 2022, Liyanage & Liyanage 2020). Women in any age group are generally vulnerable to victimizing sexual harassment in any place, including their own homes, educational institutions, religious institutions, hospitals, or in public or private places.

The United Nations Organization defines sexual harassment as "any unwelcome sexual advance, a request

for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behaviour of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or is perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another person" (United Nations 2002). Sexual harassment is one of the most prevalent forms of violence against women that can be frequently seen in many societies around the world. It is activated through the power of men, intimidation, and humiliation that negatively affect women's dignity. Further, sexual harassment is unwanted and disrespectful behaviour that can make people feel uncomfortable or degraded. Somali Cerise mentioned that sexual harassment is rooted in gender inequality and unequal power relations (Ourwatch, 2022). As a result of male dominance over female sexuality, the prevalence of rape, incest, and sexual harassment, as well as domestic violence, etc., are manifestations of unequal power relations that have proven to be the hardest to change. Sexual harassment is a physically and mentally painful sexual activity by nature. Women who experience unwelcome sexual influences, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or

physical conduct of a sexual nature are identified as victims of sexual harassment (United Nations, 1996).

As the literature reveals, female students in higher education institutions in a male-dominated society are highly vulnerable to sexual harassment as they are at a young age and in a more sexually attractive period of life. It is a common fact that, mostly, more female students are victimized by sexual harassment than male students. Even though the prevalence of sexual harassment against female students is very common, these incidents are generally not reported, because female students are hesitant to disclose such unpleasant experiences to others due to various socio-cultural and personal reasons. Confirming this, Bondestam & Lundqvist (2020) stated that sexual harassment against female students of higher education institutions is reported by, on average, one out of four female students. Sexual harassment occurs under different circumstances and in various forms, and generally, the harasser has a particular type of relationship with the victim. Within a university environment, a harasser would be a lecturer, administrative officer, supervisor,

coworker, peer, or colleague (Rainn, 2022).

There are some types of sexual harassment, such as physical acts of sexual assault, making requirements for employment or progress contingent on sexual favors, either overtly or implicitly, requests for sexual favors, sexually explicit verbal harassment, such as jokes about sexual behavior or sexual orientation, unwanted touching or physical contact, unwanted sexual advances, talking about or fantasizing about sexual relationships at work, school, or in other unsuitable settings, sensing pressure to have sex with someone else, self-exposure or self-sexual actions, unwanted images, emails, or texts that are sexually graphic (Rainn, 2022).

Women and girls are particularly susceptible to various forms of technology-based sexual harassment. In current Sri Lankan society, cybercrime is also growing rapidly. According to media reports, including daily news programmes and police reports, a considerable number of female students in universities and other higher education institutions in the country are more vulnerable to sexual violence. Harassment, as well as domestic violence, are manifestations of unequal power

relations that have proven to be the hardest to change. However, gender ideologies are still adversely impacting women in Sri Lanka (Asian Development Bank, 1999). Adikaram (2016) pointed out that the social construction of gender and sexuality in Sri Lankan society, with its instilled moralistic beliefs and norms such as respectability, sexual innocence, chastity, and purity of women, suppresses and governs their sexuality in the workplace.

1.1. Sexual Harassment in Universities

Mehmood & Chong Li (2017) mentioned, 62.2% of female individuals have experienced sexual harassment during their studies at the university. As per the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, over 51% of the students stated that they were victimized by verbal and sexual violence, while 1.5% revealed that they were forced into having sex. In addition, 44% of university staff had been subjected to verbal sexual violence, 19.9% had experienced physical sexual violence, and 22.3% had experienced requests for sexual bribes (UNICEF 2022). Similarly, a national survey conducted among university students in Australia in 2021 revealed that 48% of students had faced

sexual harassment at least once during their lifetime, and 16% of them mentioned that they had been sexually harassed since starting their studies at the universities (Heywood et.al, 2021).

In this context, women do not appear to have been sufficiently empowered by the educational process to challenge traditional sociocultural norms by advancing gender equality or to appropriately adapt to societal changes. In addition, gender inequality in higher education is a problem in Sri Lankan society. At the same time, girls who are coming to universities from rural areas and lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more vulnerable to sexual harassment. During the past several decades, Sri Lanka has achieved remarkable success in university enrollment of female students and in policies to address educational inequalities based on gender. However, there are still gaps in some areas of education in Sri Lanka. Although there are many studies on sexual violence against women, there are very few studies on the sexual violence faced by women in the higher education sector in Sri Lanka. When reviewing the literature on sexual harassment in the higher education sector in Sri Lanka, it was found that sexual

harassment as well as the consequences of sexual harassment are serious, especially among female students (Bondestam & Lundqvist 2020). However, an extensive literature review reveals that it does not adequately examine the forms of sexual harassment faced by female students within the higher education institutions in Sri Lanka and how they respond to those incidences, as well as the impact of sexual harassment on their educational performance. To fill that research gap, this study tried to investigate the problem empirically.

According to the penal code of Sri Lanka, sentence 345, number 22, sexual harassment is a punishable act. Civil society also does not accept any form of harassment. Violence against women manifests itself as rape, harassment, stripping, kidnapping, abduction, and domestic violence, including wife battering and all other forms of harassment. When trying to identify the sexual harassment against female students in universities in Sri Lanka, "ragging" can be identified as a prominent issue that is attached directly or indirectly to the harassment. It is a harmful practice that affects, in different forms, many students in state universities in Sri Lanka and

causes a negative learning environment. Physical and verbal ragging include drug use, violence, and sexual harassment. At the same time, ragging has been recognized as a serious issue in sexual and gender-based violence practiced in universities in Sri Lanka. Findings of research in Sri Lanka revealed that because of ragging in universities, female students have to be victimized by various types of violence, as over 51% of them experience verbal harassment, 34.3% experience psychological violence, 23.8% experience physical abuse, and 16.6% experience sexual harassment (Gunathilaka et al. 2022).

Some legal actions against ragging have been taken in universities in Sri Lanka, imposing laws and regulations for the prohibition of ragging and other forms of violence in educational institutions. Accordingly, Act No. 20 of 1998 has made ragging illegal, and University Grants Commission (UGC) Circular No. 946, dated February 10, 2011, is one of the strategies taken by the state to prevent ragging. Furthermore, recently, a hotline and a special office were introduced to aid students who have been victims of ragging in universities. Most of the victims of ragging are fresh female students who are

coming from rural areas of the country (Gunathilaka, 2019). However, the author further mentioned that 80% of the students and the staff of the universities have very poor knowledge of the legislative and institutional measures available to prevent them from being ragged and reporting ragging-related issues.

Another survey conducted recently on the harassment of newly admitted undergraduates by senior students in a Faculty of Dentistry in Sri Lanka identified that fifty percent (50%) of female students had experienced mistreatment, including verbal, emotional, sexual, and physical harassment. In addition, it was revealed that verbal and emotional abuse were more severe and frequently occurring than sexual or physical harassment (Premadasa et al. 2011). Meanwhile, it was reported that 18% of females experienced sexual harassment, and one-fifth (1/5) of them had unpleasant memories of incidents related to sexual harassment. However, a higher percentage (85%) of the respondents stated that they did not suffer any ethnic or racial discrimination. Accordingly, it seems that sexual harassment is not an act targeting only a specific group of women, particularly based on their nationality, race, colour,

religion, etc., but the socio-economic and demographic background of the females, such as their age and nature of femininity, are more vulnerable factors in victimizing sexual harassment. Further, as the above-mentioned study has found, emotional harassment of new students by seniors is pervasive, but it has not been reported as a critical problem.

As the literature reveals, gender-based harassment is another important aspect of harassment that female students face within the university environment. Liyanage & Liyanage (2020) noted that university students as well as the staff of the universities face gender-based harassment and some forms of violence in various ways that negatively affect students' academic lives. They have further identified the patriarchal structure of universities as the major cause of sexual harassment, while gendered socialization, unequal power relations, gender identities, gender performance, and gender-related practices within the universities have been observed as some other considerable factors of sexual harassment. Accordingly, as Liyanage & Liyanage (2020) mentioned, existing unequal relations, gendered subjectivities, cultural norms, and values that are constructed or

reinforced by the university community, either consciously or unconsciously, are some of the important aspects that should be taken into consideration in identifying the gravity of the problem of sexual harassment that prevails in higher education institutions.

Gurung, Priyadarshini & Margaret (2020) have conducted a research on knowledge of sexual harassment among undergraduate students in the Udupi district of India and have found that more than 4/5ths of the undergraduates (82.4%) had average knowledge of sexual harassment, while only 3.2% had better knowledge, and 4.4% had lesser knowledge. However, the study found that 61.3% of the students do not know about supportive centres such as grievance handling committees related to sexual harassment at their university, etc. Muasya (2014) noted that fear of facing sexually related incidences, intimidation, and sexual favours make it challenging and demotivate some female students, and therefore, they mostly hesitate to access supplementary sources of income, halls of residence, libraries, catering facilities, etc. during their university life. Muasya (2014) further concludes that female university students experience discrimination at

different levels, probably due to patriarchal norms and structures.

In addition, Mehmood & Chong Li (2017) conducted research on travel freedom, sexual harassment, and family support for female higher education in Pakistan, and they found that sexual harassment is one of the major issues restraining females from entering higher education and forcing them to drop out of their studies. Confirming this, they mentioned that 62.2% of female students have experienced sexual harassment during the period they studied at higher education institutions. In addition to that, as Mehmood & Chong Li (2017) mentioned, 17.6% of faculty members and administrative staff have reported experiences related to sexual harassment within the university premises. It was further highlighted that 68.4% of female students disclosed the experience they had of sexual harassment while using the public transport system. At the same time, 42.6% of respondents accepted that male students, transport staff, and male travelers on public transport also harass them while travelling.

Harassment against students by teachers is a specific and serious situation in higher education institutions. Vohldalova (2015)

conducted a study on coping strategies for sexual harassment in higher education from the student's point of view and has identified the severe power imbalance between students and teachers and the limited options students have to defend themselves as some reasons for students' victimization of such types of harassment. Thus, it can be identified that female students experience a wide range of harassment during their university lives in many places around the globe. Partners/boyfriends, taxi drivers, university colleagues, and teachers/lecturers, as well as strangers, are reported as the harassers to whom female students have been victimized frequently. Female students generally experience sexual harassment in corridors of buildings, on walkways, on their way to university, in using public places, at parties such as fresher's days, going downs, and colour nights, as well as at playgrounds, lecture halls, theatres, or any isolated place that is not safe for them. Meanwhile, online platforms such as social media are recognized as one of the major forms of abuse for women, including female university students.

Some female students use many strategies for their self-security to protect themselves

from harassers. Even though they are victimized by the harassment, most of them do not reveal or report the incident to anyone else for various reasons. Confirming this, literature reveals, that, due to socio-cultural and personal reasons, most of the victims of various forms of sexual harassment do not take any action against this. Within this context, “female undergraduates’ experience of sexual harassment during their university life was taken as the research problem to be investigated. Accordingly, the general objective was to investigate how female undergraduates are exposed to sexual harassment. This objective was addressed by answering questions such as; what forms of sexual violence female undergraduates had experienced, when, where, and by whom they were victimized, how they responded to the sexual harassment, and how these incidents affected their education.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using a mixed-methods approach. Books, journal articles, reports, statistics, and websites were mainly used as secondary sources. A convenience sample consisting of 100 female students in the 4th year attached to the Faculty of Humanities and Social

Sciences at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura in 2022 was selected. The proximity of the researchers and the accessibility of sample members were considered when selecting a convenience sampling technique. 4th year students were considered as those students who have adequate experience of university life. Even though convenience sampling was chosen for its practical advantages, steps were taken to mitigate its limitations and ensure the data collection process was methodologically sound and aligned with the research objectives.

Before data collection, a detailed plan was developed outlining the specific objectives of the study, the target population, and the sampling strategy. The data collection procedures were carefully designed to minimize potential sources of bias and ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. Accordingly, primary data was collected in two steps: firstly, conducting a survey using a structured questionnaire, and secondly, having interviews with 50 percent of the respondents of the survey. In addition to that, an expert opinion survey (academics and non-academics of the university staff, media personnel, and lawyers) was conducted for primary data collection. Drawing special attention to

feminist theories, data and information were critically and thematically analyzed using qualitative techniques with elementary statistics, mainly percentages, and frequencies.

3 RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Sexual harassment is an unwelcome incident that occurs without the consent of the victim. All types of harassment are not accepted by societal norms and values and are also against the existing laws of many countries in the world. Accordingly, as in its meaning, sexual harassment is an offensive, humiliating, or intimidating act done by a harasser that threatens the law and order of society as well as the peaceful living of people. It can be practiced in various forms, such as written, verbal, or physical, showing sexual organs or some pictures, phonographs, literature, films, songs, rhymes, and body language, and can also transpire physically or virtually. Accordingly, anybody can be victimized by sexual harassment, regardless of sex, age, marital status, level of education, or socioeconomic background. Sex-related discrimination or sexual harassment can occur in various forms within or outside the home, in the workplace, or in educational institutes such as schools or universities. As revealed by the related

literature regarding the increasing trend of females entering the higher education sector, it could be identified that the sexual harassment against female students in those institutions is also increasing rapidly (Gunathilaka et al. 2022, Mehmood & Chong Li 2017, Muasya 2014, Vohldalova 2015).

Accordingly, 42% of the respondents to this study mentioned that on many occasions they have experienced teasing, jokes, double-meaning words, or remarks about sex. All respondents to the study are unmarried and belonged to the 23–28 age group, which is a highly sexually attractive period of life. The most important factor found in the study is that 92% of respondents have experienced sexual harassment. Unwelcome pressure for sex (15%), unwelcome physical contact (25%), repeated attempts to make dating (15%), teasing jokes or remarks about sex (20%), and unnecessary display of visual sex materials (25%) are some of the different forms of sexual harassment that have been faced by the respondents of the study. A few of them stated that the threat of having sex and, in some cases, double-meaning jokes, etc. are common features of sexual harassment.

Table No. 01: Experienced the Sexual Harassment in Different Occasions

Where /When	Percentage
During academic work	30
During academic results issuing	7
Selecting class mastery	10
During fieldwork	14
During the Intern period	6
In selecting positions	3
During the rag season	17
Within love affairs	23

Survey data 2022

The above table shows different occasions in which students faced harassment. In discussions with them, it was revealed that some have experienced harassment on more than one occasion. In considering their experience of sexual harassment in university, nearly 1/3 of the respondents (30%) mentioned that they have faced sexual harassment during their academic work. In addition, 17% of them mentioned that they had experienced sexual harassment during the ragging period. Gunathilaka et al (2022) revealed that 16.6% of students in universities in Sri Lanka are subjected to sexual harassment, 21% of them experienced verbal sexual violence, and 1.5% were forced into sexual actions when they were ragged. Furthermore, they found that more than 50% of the students surveyed had experienced verbal harassment on many

occasions, while 34.3% had been subjected to psychological violence, 23.8% had been victimized by physical abuse, and 16.6% mentioned that they had to face sexual harassment when they were ragged.

Another significant fact revealed by this study is that nearly 1/3 of female students (30%) have faced at least one of the above-mentioned forms of sexual harassment while engaging in their academic work. Moreover, 17% of them had to face such incidences during the rag season. In addition, 14% of respondents had unpleasant experiences during fieldwork. Another notable fact is that nearly 1/4 of them have been sexually abused by their partners or boyfriends. It was further revealed that many female students have been victimized by sexual harassment within the university as well as outside the university.

Further, some respondents revealed that they had unpleasant experiences related to “exhibitionists”. Exhibitionists are generally males who expose their genitals, usually to get the attention of strangers, hoping to surprise, shock, or impress the unwilling observer. It's called "exhibitionism," which involves exposing the genitals to become sexually excited or having a strong desire to be observed by

other people during sexual activity (Brown, 2023). When female students had to walk alone on the roads close to the university, hostels, or boarding places, sometimes these exhibitionists are seen around the university hostel premises, and they use some strategies to get the attention of female students to these exhibitionists' unpleasant sexual acts. Generally, they try to show their sexual organs to the targeted females. Sexual harassment done by the exhibitionists and their sexual strategies are not rare incidents and is a known fact to the university community. However, the most important factor that should be highlighted here is that none of them have taken any action legally or personally against these exhibitionists.

Since many students engage in higher education during their youth and as adult students, having love affairs between male and female students in universities is not abnormal or rare. At the same time, some parents of the students give their sanction to their children's love affairs and hope that their children may meet a suitable partner from the university for their marriage. However, according to the cultural norms and values of Sri Lankan society, it does not accept sexual relationships outside of marriage. A concept such as living

together before getting married, which is practiced in Western culture, is not approved by the Sri Lankan society. Several decades ago, most university love affairs ended with marriages. Most male students tried to protect their girlfriends by looking after them with attention, security, love, and affection as their future wives. However, because of the changing societal values and norms, expectations of such relationships have changed due to modern concepts, attitudes, and practices in the current globalized world. Confirming this, it was found that many of the respondents (23%) have experienced sexual harassment in their love affairs instead of having love, affection, care, and security from their partners. The following table shows the type of dating violence experienced by female university students. Respondents revealed that some have experienced more than one type of harassment.

Table No. 02: Experiences of Dating Violence

Statement	Percentage
Partner tried to hurt by pushing or grabbing	28.6%
Partner tried to hurt by hitting	20%
Beating up by the partner	1.4%
Threatened by the partner	7.1%

Insulted with unpleasant words	64.3%
Slapped by the partner	7.1%

Survey data 2022

Universities are higher education institutions, and love affairs are very common features in this community. Even though happiness, affection, attention, the feeling of care and security, positive hopes for the future, etc. are expected through love affairs, the highest percentage of the respondents (64.3%) mentioned that they had unpleasant experiences in their love affairs, such as being insulted, scolded, use of sarcastic words, passing of hints, or being treated cruelly. Instead of having mutual understanding, sometimes one of them or both suspect the other. In addition, 28.6% of the respondents mentioned that they have experienced physical hurt by being pushed or grabbed hard by their partner, while 20% of respondents revealed that their partners hurt them by hitting them. This can be considered violence against women. However, the Women's Wellbeing Survey conducted in 2019

in Sri Lanka highlighted that 18.5% of women with higher education were less likely to agree with men being justified in hitting their wives than women who do not even have primary education (44.1%). Except for that, 42% of females have highlighted the potential role of education in eliminating violence against women.

Vithanage (2015) stated that "Patriarchy, as a strong social element along with religion, gender, and division of labour, is operating in the Sri Lankan society by pushing women into the household." The family, as the main social institution of society, has been affected by patriarchal oppression through marriage and other personal affairs. Vithanage (2015) further mentioned that Sri Lankan society has molded the woman's role according to societal expectations as a daughter, sister, wife and mother." The main reason for this is the culturally established societal attitude that women should restrict their traditional roles to household tasks. These conventional practices are highly

connected with marriages that support the practices of the accepted norms.

Marxist feminists argue that the social class of modern capitalist society is not solely defined by socio-economic status. According to the feminist perspective, women are an oppressed group in this capitalist society because they don't have the right to economic resources or properties; they have a secondary status and are vulnerable to various types of discrimination by the male-headed society. One of the basic features of the capitalist structure of society is the exploitation of women, who are considered the most powerless group in society within the functioning of its socio-economic system. Within this context, it can be identified that not only within their love affairs and from their partners, but also from non-partners or outsiders, they have experienced sexual harassment in many places and on many occasions within or outside the university premises during their study period.

Table No. 03: Emotional Responses to Sexual Harassment

Response	Percentage (%)
Feeling insecure at university	18
Having a poor sense as a female student	7
Depressed	23
Low self-confidence	13
Fear of interaction	16
Inability to concentrate on studies	14
The feeling of inequal treatment in university	7
Don't know	4

Survey data 2022

The patriarchal social system is one of the most significant factors contributing to gender inequality and its practical applications. Sexual harassment cannot be ignored, as it is not easy to measure the severity of the harm's effects on victimized females. As a result of being victimized by sexual harassment, most females suffer more psychological issues than physical and social issues. Particularly, psychological issues are long-term, and the effects are more severe. As depicted in the above table, victims of sexual harassment have to face various types of psychological issues. Nearly 1/4 of the respondents mentioned that they have suffered from

psychological issues such as depression because of sexual harassment. Victims of sexual harassment often experience emotional and physical symptoms for years to come.

Moreover, 18% of the respondents mentioned a feeling of insecurity within the university, and one of the significant factors is that 14% of them stated that the sexual harassment they experienced negatively affected their studies at the university. Further, the study found that 35% of respondents have not revealed those incidences to anybody else as they did not think the authorities would keep their identities confidential, due to their lack of trust in the authority, and their uncertainty about the appropriate and reasonable action to be taken. It is noteworthy that 25% mentioned that they tried to bear the incident alone, while only 5% stated that they consulted a counsellor to get relief from the mental pressure they were suffering. However, the most considerable factor is that some of them mentioned that they did not take it seriously.

Table No. 04: Impact of Sexual Harassment on Education

<i>Idea</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Negligible matter	5
Considerable matter	30
Highly influential matter	44
Extremely influential matter	21

Survey data 2022

Negative influences in the learning environment make it difficult to achieve academic performance of the students. This study concerned the opinions of the sample on how problematic sexual harassment prevails in universities and how it affects their studies. 21% of the respondents mentioned that sexual harassment is an extremely influential and critical problem they have to face within their university career, while 44% of the students accept that sexual harassment is an influential matter as it negatively affects their academic achievements. Further, 30% of the students accepted sexual harassment within university life as a considerable matter. The consequences of sexual harassment directly or indirectly affect students' mental health and their overall lives. Sound mental health is a key factor in performing well in academic life and achieving educational objectives. Female students who faced sexual

harassment during their learning process could not have drawn their attention properly to the studies, which prevented them from doing well in the examinations.

These findings are similar to the findings of the study conducted by Mehmood & Chong Li (2017) on Sexual Harassment and Family Support in Female Higher Education in Pakistan, it disclosed that sexual harassment in universities discourages female students' engagement in higher education and makes most female students drop out of education institutions. At the same time, the above-mentioned study revealed that sexual harassment by faculty members and administrative staff was reported at 17.6% and 15.2%, respectively. Further, they also found that females experienced sexual harassment in the public transport system while travelling to the university. 68.4% of the respondents revealed that females are sexually harassed when they use the public transport system. Furthermore, 42.6% of respondents pointed out that they have been victimized by the sexual harassment of male students, transport staff, and male travelers in the public transport system frequently.

Universities, as systematically organized and highly formalized places, consist of

well-educated people who are not only rich in subject knowledge but also in good ethics, manners, norms, and values, while honouring the law and order of society. Even though the community of the university is concerned with being more civilized and honouring human rights by obeying social and legal acceptances, when it comes to protecting women's rights and their safety, there is evidence that women are not safe and are frequently vulnerable to sexual harassment within their study period at the university. At the same time, society accepts that educated people know what should be done when they have to face any sort of crime, discrimination, violation of rights, harassment, etc. However, in the practical context, it could be identified that on some occasions, even though people's socio-economic and educational status is higher, they don't tend to take any action when they face any type of discrimination or human rights violation. It is proven by the undermentioned table number 05, which shows how female university students who experienced sexual harassment responded to such incidents.

Table No 05: Responses to Sexual Harassment

	Percentage
Didn't reveal to the others	28
Didn't do anything against the incident	15
Avoided contact with the harasser	41
Confronted the harasser	0
Talked with a friend	11
Talked with a counsellor/ lecturer	05

Survey data 2022

Not only in the higher education system but also in the general social system, women are hesitant to complain about the sexual harassment they have experienced or to take necessary legal action against it. It was revealed that 28% of the respondents mentioned that they didn't reveal the incident to anyone else, while 15% of the victims did not take any action against the offender(s). 41% of the respondents mentioned that after the incident, they avoided further contact with the abuser. Accordingly, it was clearly found that women in general, as well as women studying in higher education institutions such as universities, are also reluctant to

inform other parties about the sexual harassment they experienced. Sometimes, if the abuser is physically, socially, and authoritatively stronger than the woman, then the woman does not stand up for her rights.

Table No 06: Reasons for not disclosing the harassment

Reason	Percentage
Lack of knowledge	30
Felt embarrassed	16
Doubt of the responses of others	22
Did not think it was serious	14
Fear of negative social consequences	18

Survey data 2022

Nearly 1/3 (30%) of the respondents mentioned that they did not know how to respond to incidents of sexual harassment. They don't have a clear idea of how to act against the offense. Meanwhile, because of the fear of negative social consequences and the uncertainty of how others would accept the incident, 31% of the respondents hesitated to reveal the incident and what they had to face. Similarly, Gurung, Priyadarshini & Margaret (2020) also confirmed in their findings that most undergraduate students (82.4%) have

average knowledge of the actions they can take against the offender, while 4.4% have very poor knowledge of that, and only 13% have better knowledge of what to do when they have been victimized by sexual harassment and how to respond to such incidents.

Even though the findings show that some of the students have good knowledge of sexual harassment, 61.3% of the students were not aware of the provisions of the grievances committee about sexual harassment in their universities. Lack of knowledge, uncertainty, fear of negative social consequences, and embarrassment are some of the reasons for their hesitation to act against sexual harassment in their educational institutions. Among these factors, the most remarkable response is that they did not think "it was serious". Though sexual harassment is a serious issue faced by female university students, who are accepted as a highly educated social group in society, nearly 1/5th of them do not consider it seriously.

According to feminists, this is a social problem related to gender equality. Physical, social, and economic power men have frequently used to exploit women. Liberal feminism seeks to achieve gender equality in the public sphere. It seeks to

improve women's positions within existing structures and spheres of society, such as equal education and job opportunities, equal pay, freedom from discrimination, and bodily autonomy. Liberal feminists explain that women need the same opportunities as men: to receive a good education, work, and earn a decent, fair living. They demand social change and secure life for women with the protection and opportunities to enjoy human rights, freedom, and equity through legal and social campaigns. Iris Marion Young (2008) one of the feminist theorists, explained, "*Women in sexist society are physically handicapped, and women learn to live out their existence by the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to them; they are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified*".

A university is a place that helps people to be empowered through higher education qualifications. Because of their educational qualifications, women can reach the top level of the occupation ladder, achieving more socio-economic privileges to lead a better life while securing fundamental human rights. Theoretically, many countries in the world provide more opportunities for women to enjoy fundamental human rights. Women

realized this through achieving education goals, however, in the practical context, there are some barriers to their journey to a better life, such as sexual harassment in education institutes. However, it can be anticipated that a growing understanding of feminists around the world will lay the foundation to stand up against the harmful social stereotypes of women. Therefore, to eliminate sexual harassment, it is needed to change societal attitudes and rethink existing and established sociocultural values, norms, beliefs, traditions, and practices rooted in society.

4. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Sexual harassment is a violation of human rights. Although most countries have accepted the Convention on Human Rights and taken actions to protect it by imposing laws and regulations, in the practical context, those are not being implemented properly, particularly relating to powerless people such as girls and women in many societies. Even though education helps to empower females, educated females have also been victimized by various forms of harassment because of their femininity (Mehmood & Chong Li 2017, Heywood et.al, 2021, Gunathilaka et al. 2022, Liyanage & Liyanage 2020). Confirming

that by this study, it was identified that a higher number of female university students have been victimized by various types of harassment, even though they are included in the highly educated and respectable group in society. They have a considerable level of capacities, knowledge, and social experiences, and particularly, as university students, they can get the service of the centres of gender that have already been established in national universities in the country. Gender centres play a vital role in providing support, resources, and advocacy for individuals affected by sexual harassment by offering counselling services, legal guidance, and educational programmes to raise awareness relating to harassment (<https://eugc.ac.lk/cgee/>, hot line: +94112123700). Particularly during the orientation programme, students are informed about the opportunities and resources offered by the university and encouraged to utilize them when needed. In addition, students can attend the annual celebrations of International Women's Day at the university, and they also have accessible facilities for e-resources from which they can update their knowledge of gender-related issues and remedies for such issues.

Further, as identified by the study, some female students have been victimized by ragging as freshers, particularly during the period at the beginning of their university life. Ragging is considered an offence by the University Act No. 20 and is prohibited within the university premises (https://www.ugc.ac.lk/downloads/Policy/CGEE/Act_No_20_EN.pdf). Students who are victimized by any form of ragging can report and seek help from the ragging complaint portal of the Higher Education Ministry (<https://eugc.ac.lk/complaint-portal>). By integrating these initiatives and resources, universities and national authorities can work towards creating safer environments that prioritize the well-being and rights of all individuals, particularly those vulnerable to sexual harassment.

However, those actions do not adequately address these issues relating to sexual harassment against female university students because of improper practices. Lack of knowledge of sexual harassment and legal protections against harassment, existing socio-cultural and personal attitudes, etc. are some of the barriers to addressing this issue. Ending violence against women is directly linked to promoting and strengthening gender equality between men and women.

Therefore, in the attempts to address the problem, it is necessary to consider this in many aspects, such as individually and collectively, through intervention and prevention programmes at the university level and national levels. Changes in power structures, beliefs and values, laws, attitudes, and behaviour, as well as in the home, family, community, and state structures, are more important. Moreover, students should be educated on equal opportunities and gender rights through academic programmes such as organizing lectures, discussions, debates, special forums at local, national, and international levels, posters, handbills, etc. Introducing sex education at the school level, imposing laws and regulations, and policies relating to sexual harassment, conducting awareness programmes, and creating a culture to respect femininity and protect females from any form of harassment with the help of all types of people in society are some of the recommendations for preventing sexual harassment against female students.

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