

## Experiences of Sexual Harassment and its Association with The Levels of Depression and Self-Esteem among Female Higher Education Students in Selangor

Nur Arissa Aini Mohamad Azhar & Hilwa Abdullah @Mohd.Nor

Centre for Research in Psychology and Human Well-Being, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor

Corresponding Author's Email: hilwa@ukm.edu.my

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### Abstract

The experience of sexual harassment can significantly impact one's mental well-being, leading to feelings of shame, guilt, helplessness, and humiliation, which can result in lower self-esteem. This study aims to explore the relationship between sexual harassment experiences and their effects on depression and self-esteem among female students in higher education institutions in Selangor. The research involved 384 respondents aged 19 to 30, employing non-probability convenience sampling through a Google Form questionnaire. The study's findings indicate a significant relationship between sexual harassment experiences and depression and self-esteem levels. Additionally, sexual harassment emerged as a contributing factor to depression and self-esteem issues among female higher education students in Selangor. The findings of this study are expected to help enlighten and open the public's eyes about the importance of speaking up if sexual harassment occurs and immediately seeking help.

**Keywords:** Sexual Harassment, Depression, Self- Esteem, Mental Health, Higher Education

### Introduction

In the field of social science, experts characterize sexual harassment as a source of stress that can have detrimental effects on both an individual's mental and physical health. It encompasses unwanted verbal, non-verbal, or physical actions, whether they are intentional or not, that infringe on a person's psychological and physical integrity. This transgression creates an environment characterized by fear, hostility, degradation, embarrassment, and offense. Additionally, Fitzgerald et al (1994) found that sexual harassment is associated with an increased risk of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as reduced self-esteem, confidence, and overall psychological well-being.

According to a 2022 Ipsos survey as reported by Malay Mail, sexual harassment emerges as the foremost concern for women in Malaysia. Research by Wood and colleagues (2019) highlighted that young women experience sexual harassment more frequently than their male counterparts. However, societal norms and stigmas often result in victim-blaming, as documented by Hidayat Mohamad in (Harian, 2018). Recognizing and addressing cases of sexual harassment is crucial for individual well-being. In 2009, Chiodo's study revealed that victims of sexual harassment, even when incidents occurred 2.5 years earlier, exhibited higher levels of depression. While mental health issues can stem from various sources, sexual harassment significantly contributes to depression.

Earlier studies have confirmed a link between encountering sexual harassment and diminished self-esteem. Bendixen (2018) introduces an interesting angle, proposing that teenagers with elevated self-esteem may exhibit heightened sensitivity to harassment, which, in turn, could increase the likelihood of them reporting such incidents. In contrast, Cunningham's (2010) research presents an alternative viewpoint. It revealed that teenagers who view themselves as more attractive than their peers face a greater risk of experiencing sexual harassment compared to those who perceive themselves as average or less attractive.

Pearlin's (1989) Stress Process Model outlines the connection between these factors. It suggests that the frequency and intensity of stress, including experiences of sexual harassment, are significant predictors of an individual's mental health and overall well-being. Additionally, sexual harassment can elevate the risk of chronic depressive symptoms, a viewpoint reinforced by Fitzgerald in 2003, who also noted its association with anxiety disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and lower self-esteem and confidence. Therefore, it's crucial for the general public to grasp the importance of addressing sexual harassment, given its substantial impact on the mental health of individuals, particularly women. Accordingly, this study aims to empower survivors of sexual harassment by improving their understanding of their experiences and offering strategies for enhancing their mental well-being and self-esteem.

### **Psychological Effects of Sexual Harassment**

The experience of distractions can profoundly impact an individual's emotions and academic performance, particularly when they lack social support (Benson and Thomson, 1982). Women in the study described emotional responses such as feelings of helplessness, confusion, anger, anxiety, depression, and diminished self-confidence. Moreover, when women confront any form of sexual harassment, they often respond by avoiding the harasser and may develop apprehension about forming relationships with men. This sense of insecurity can result in a decline in academic performance, potentially leading to long-term adverse consequences. Women facing sexual assault on college campuses reported a notable yearly drop in their grade point average (GPA) following such incidents (Baker, 2016). While all participants in this study successfully completed their college education, victims of sexual misconduct faced an increased risk of dropping out due to declining GPA. Furthermore, the study's findings indicate that women are more prone to experiencing symptoms that primarily concern their emotional well-being and psychological state in comparison to men (Pengpid, 2020).

Sexual harassment is categorized as a form of bullying, and its victims are not the sole individuals vulnerable to symptoms of depression, substance abuse, and low self-esteem. This

vulnerability stems from victims often self-blaming and experiencing a decline in their inner motivation. Consequently, they encounter challenges in forming interpersonal relationships and tend to experience isolation (Estévez, 2009). Sexual abuse diminishes the self-esteem of victims, affecting both their direct self-esteem and their overall self-esteem when compared to individuals who haven't experienced such abuse. Furthermore, the study highlights that those vulnerable to sexual abuse encounter challenges in socialization, including dealing with maladaptive issues, experiencing frequent disturbances, exhibiting weak interpersonal skills, and struggling to establish intimacy with others in their surroundings (Bung-Nyun Kim, 2017). Keplinger's study (2019) provides further support, highlighting a significant link between sexual harassment and increased self-esteem, along with reduced self-doubt when compared to data from 2016. This shift in perspective can be attributed to heightened awareness and research concerning the issue of sexual harassment. Through interviews conducted alongside survey responses, the majority of participants expressed feeling more confident in asserting their rights and defending their dignity.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

This study employs quantitative research methods and collects data through the distribution of questionnaires. The chosen research approach is a cross-sectional method. In terms of sampling, a non-probability method, specifically simple random sampling, was utilized. The questionnaires were distributed online via Google Form which consisted of validated scales that went through a back translation procedure to the Malay Language which is the native language to the respondents.

### **Participants and Procedure**

Respondents were selected based on specific criteria rather than random selection. The sample size for this study was determined using the Raosoft, Inc. software program, resulting in a sample size of 384 respondents, which is considered sufficient for representing the target population. The research population consists of female students between the ages of 18 and 30 who are pursuing higher education in Selangor, Malaysia. This age range encompasses early youth (15-18 years), middle youth (19-24 years), and late youth (25-30 years). However, the study focused on middle and late youth segments due to ethical considerations. The research was conducted in the state of Selangor, Malaysia, and the questionnaire was completed by female students living in Selangor or those enrolled in educational institutions within the Selangor area.

### **Assesment Tools**

**Sexual Harassment Scale (SHS).** The sexual harassment scale is the independent variable in this analysis. The assessment tool used in this section is the Sexual Harassment Scale developed by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) in 2005. This assessment tool comprises 15 questions pertaining to experiences of sexual harassment. Respondents were asked about the frequency of encountering these unwanted behaviors over the preceding six months. This test tool is developed using multiple items to assess various dimensions of sexual harassment, encompassing verbal, gestural, physical, visual, and psychological disturbances. Respondents are asked to report any form of sexual harassment experienced over the past six months. The scale employs a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (never at all) to 3 (several times). Each item is scored from zero to three, indicating the

frequency of sexual harassment. The total score on the sexual harassment scale ranges from 0 to 45 points, with higher scores signifying more significant interference and increased experiences of sexual harassment. Additionally, respondents were furnished with a definition of sexual harassment to ensure a clear understanding before commencing the questionnaire. The provided definition in this study describes sexual harassment as unwanted sexual behaviors that disrupt one's life. It emphasizes that sexual harassment involves actions that are not desired or consensual.

**Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D).** This variable serves as the dependent variable in the analysis. The scale used is the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) developed by Radloff in 1997. The impact of cultural differences on the factor structure of the CES-D necessitates the availability of the CES-D in the native language of the studied population. Given that Malay is the official language of the country, it is imperative to translate and authenticate the CES-D in Malay. This assessment tool comprises 20 items, and each item in the tool is scored between 0 (rarely or never) and 3 (most or all the time) to indicate the frequency of symptoms experienced over the past week. The total scores on the CES-D scale range from 0 to 60 points, with a higher score signifying a higher level of depression.

**Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSE).** RSE developed by Rosenberg in 1965. The scale consists of items with positive statements, such as '*I think I have some good qualities,*' and items with negative statements, like '*Sometimes, I feel like I'm useless at all.*' There are a total of 10 items related to individual self-esteem, each of which is rated on a 4-point Likert scale, with a scoring range from 1 to 4. This four-point scale ranges from 1, which represents 'Strongly Disagree,' to 4, which corresponds to 'Strongly Agree. The total score for this assessment tool is obtained by summing the scores for all the items. The average score for individuals answering the Rosenberg scale is typically around 22, with most falling within the range of 15 to 25. A score below 15 indicates low self-esteem.

### **Data Analysis**

The data from this study were analyzed using SPSS version 26.0. Initially, 403 women participated, but after data cleaning, the final sample consisted of 384 respondents. Furthermore, the researchers employed correlation analysis to examine the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable. Subsequently, simple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine how the independent variable influences the dependent variable.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Relationship Between Experiences of Sexual Harassment and Depression Levels Among Female Higher Education Students in Selangor.**

This study's first objective is to examine the relationship between sexual harassment experiences and depression levels among female higher education students in Selangor. Using Pearson's Correlation in SPSS 26.0, the results reveal a moderate yet significant positive correlation ( $r = 0.531$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) between sexual harassment experiences and depression levels. This leads to the rejection of null hypothesis.

Table 1

*Pearson correlation of the relationship between the experience of sexual harassment and the level of depression.*

Variable	Depression Level
Experiences of Sexual Harassment	Pearson Correlation .531**
	N 384

\*\*  $p < 0.01$

### **Analysis of the Relationship Between the Experience of Sexual Harassment and the Level of Self-Esteem Among Female Students in Higher Education in Selangor**

The second objective of this study is to assess the relationship between sexual harassment experience and self-esteem among female higher education students in Selangor. The results show a significant, modest negative relationship ( $r = -0.462$ ,  $p = 0.02 > 0.05$ ) between sexual harassment experience and self-esteem. This leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis.

Table 2

*Pearson's Correlation of the Relationship Between Experiences of Sexual Harassment and Level of Self-Esteem.*

Variable	Depression Level
Experiences of Sexual Harassment	Pearson Correlation -.462**
	N 384

\*\*  $p < 0.01$

The study revealed a significant positive relationship between sexual harassment experiences and depression levels, consistent with Houle's (2011) research. Even after individuals attempted to cope with sexual harassment's effects, it remained linked to elevated depression symptoms. Persistent harassment into adulthood had enduring effects on victims' depression levels.

Numerous studies have yielded similar findings, underscoring the serious mental health consequences of sexual harassment. Prolonged symptoms of depression increase the risk of continued depression in victims. Sexual harassment, a distressing event, significantly impacts mental health and women's well-being inducing emotions like shame, guilt, helplessness, isolation, and loss of control, often leading to depression (Mushtaq, 2015). This may be attributed to social stigma, causing victims to isolate themselves rather than report the harassment (Dworkin et al., 2018). In conclusion, exposure to sexual harassment increases the likelihood of depression, leaving lasting psychological effects, especially in women. The study's analysis uncovered a moderate yet noteworthy inverse relationship between the two variables. An inverse result implies a connection or adverse impact between the variables being studied. In this research, a greater degree of encountered sexual harassment corresponds to a diminished level of self-esteem among the victims. This discovery aligns with the outcomes observed by (Helen, 2002). The study discovered that sexual harassment

frequently occurs in public spaces, resulting in many young women maintaining silence and, without realizing it, experiencing a decline in their self-esteem. Women often prioritize beauty and personal hygiene and may contemplate changes like modifying their hair or body size. Interestingly, they may fear that such alterations could increase their susceptibility to sexual harassment.

Traumatic experiences, such as childhood exposure to sexual behavior, profoundly affect a child's self-esteem and their self-perception, future outlook, and ability to form interpersonal relationships. These experiences can bring about significant changes in a child's worldview as they mature (McCann and Pearlman, 1990). Cloitre, Miranda, Stovall-McCloug & Han (2005) support this view, underscoring that child sexual abuse hampers a child's development of healthy emotional regulation and interpersonal skills. These effects can be enduring and contribute to a decline in the victim's self-esteem. Previous research Huang (2013) supports this relationship. Children and adolescents who experience sexual abuse or neglect tend to have more negative self-evaluations than those without such experiences. Those who have experienced both physical abuse and sexual violence tend to have even lower self-esteem. Furthermore, maltreated children are more likely to show symptoms of depression and other mental health issues, often connected to their low self-esteem.

### **Conclusions**

In summary, while this study's findings align with those of other studies, it offers valuable insights specific to the Malaysian population. Understanding the complexities of sexual harassment is vital, especially for women, as it empowers them to defend their dignity. This study can serve as an early awareness tool regarding the association between sexual harassment, depression, and self-esteem among female higher education students in Selangor. It's expected that the applied theory will aid future researchers in exploring this issue and its interplay with related variables. One limitation of this study is its limited focus on sexual harassment and its consequences on depression and self-esteem. Other factors like social support were not considered, which may lead to differing results compared to previous studies. Future researchers are encouraged to broaden the scope of study. To address sexual harassment, interventions are recommended. Schools play a pivotal role in raising awareness and preventing its spread. Learning about sexual harassment helps students recognize and respond to it. Lectures and courses on workplace harassment should be introduced at the university level to prepare students for future employment. Such programs can encourage victims to seek help and assert their rights, promoting self-respect. Clear policies, robust support services, and organizations can create safer environments, demonstrating commitment to addressing the issue and fostering a culture of respect and equality.

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