

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

IN PUBLIC PLACES IN THE KATHMANDU VALLEY

Results of a Survey



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SAATHI
1994

This survey was conducted by contribution from SAATHI members.

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PREFACE

Violence has been an unpalatable but unalienable part of human life before and even after the dawn of civilisation. The survival instinct which helped in fostering the superiority of the human species over the rest of creation has left behind ugly remnants which mar and scar human civilisation even today. Sadly enough the phenomenon of violence seems to be on the rise in every aspect of life in all parts of the world.

Though violence has many faces - the victims unerringly seem to be a constant factor. It is mostly women and children who are the victims. In times of war and even during times of peace - these two groups become the predominant victims of violence. While the phenomenon of violence in all aspects of Nepalese life has not been researched, it is clear that Nepalese society is not violence free, and that in fact violence is on the rise. It was with these facts and the objectives of the group in mind that SAATHI decided to undertake a survey on sexual harassment in public places in Kathmandu Valley.

Women and girls become the target of violence in the form of sexual harassment in public places solely because of their sex. SAATHI has tried to examine the existence of this form of 'movement - restricting' violence against women in Kathmandu with a view to finding out the reasons for its prevalence and the attitude of both sexes towards it.

We wish to share the results of the survey with our readers in the hope it creates awareness about the issue and changes the attitude of the law makers and law enforcers as well as the some male members of our society towards it.

SAATHI has kept an objective point of view in reporting the survey results. The findings presented and the incidents quoted are wholly based on the survey.

... Two young girls are walking down a main street - the light is failing, but lots of people are on the street. The girls pass a group of boys sitting on the steps of a shop front.

The girls tense up - the boys start whistling and cries of "chwak" (What a chick!) can be heard. The girls walk quickly on, their cheeks burning, hoping that the boys don't get up and bar their way,...

INTRODUCTION

For women in Kathmandu incidents such as the one described in the previous page is becoming a more and more familiar scenario. Sexual harassment in public places - or 'street harassment' - can be defined as an incidence of violation of personal space of women by individual or groups of men where they direct unwelcome obscene gestures, comments, slurs, insults, and other obscenities at women in public places.

What is causing a rise in this unpleasant phenomenon? Is it the result of the rapid urbanisation and modernisation Kathmandu Valley is undergoing? The fact is that Nepalese women are coming out of their homes and using public utilities such as the transport system, and moving into the workplace which may have resulted in a rise in sexual harassment in public places. Street harassment can be viewed as another violent method of male dominance and control of women. Unfortunately, street harassment is not recognised by society as a problem; mainly because most social institutions are male-dominated and male-oriented, and men cannot empathise with the distress that is caused to a victim of sexual harassment. The general tendency of negating issues that mainly concern females is also a reason behind downplaying this particular issue as a problem

So is street harassment a problem in the Kathmandu Valley? To study this social phenomenon, SAATHI conducted a random survey on a mixed male and female sample in the Valley. The aim of the survey was to find out the extent of the problem of sexual harassment in public places in the cities of Kathmandu and Lalitpur, as well as the difference in gender perception of the problem, and through this, throw light on an issue that is generally ignored and allowed to continue without any check despite the general acknowledgement of its prevalence.

METHODOLOGY

Separate questionnaires were prepared for the male and female sample. Initially a pilot questionnaire was prepared and distributed among 30 respondents (15 female and 15 male) and reviewed accordingly. The final survey was conducted in Nepali and English among 197 females and 152 males in the age group between 11 - 40 years.

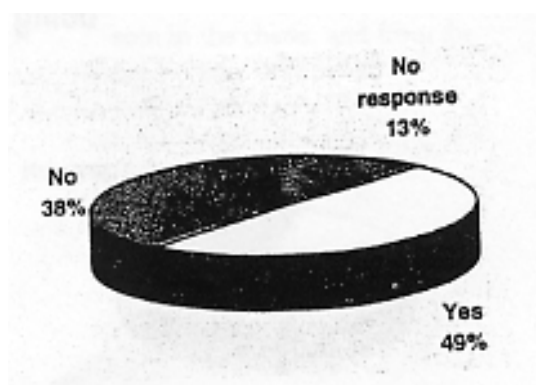
The questionnaires were distributed randomly to men and women from all strata of society in the cities of Kathmandu and Lalitpur. The completed questionnaires were collected, and the data tabulated and analysed by SAATHI members.

RESULTS

"...While we were going to school, a group of boys came and deliberately bumped into us and hurt us badly. We just felt like crying."

In the following pages are statements made by female and male respondents of our survey and the results of the survey.

Have you ever harassed girls verbally or physically in public places? (M)*



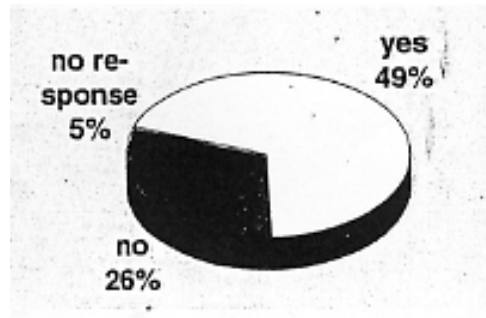
According to the survey, 49 per cent of male respondents said that they had harassed females verbally or physically in public places.

"...There was a man outside my house who/ when he saw any girls, would show off all his body..."

*M = question put to male sample

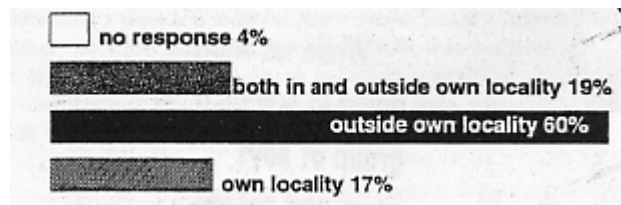
"...While travelling in a pocked minibus, a middle-aged man came very close to me, and I could feel him being aroused."

Have you ever been teased verbally or physically in public places in the past six months? (F)*



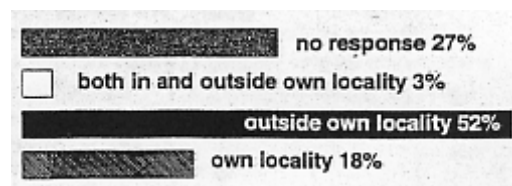
The female respondents were asked to describe the locality of the incident or incidents which were as follows:

Where did the incident or incidents occur? (F)*



Similarly, the males were asked where they or their friends harassed females, responses were as follows:

Where did you or your friends harass the female or females? (M)*

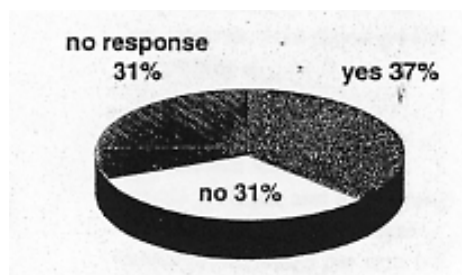


* F = question put to female sample

"...a man put his hands on my breasts as he passed me. I caught him by the collar and confronted him with his action. He denied having touched me"

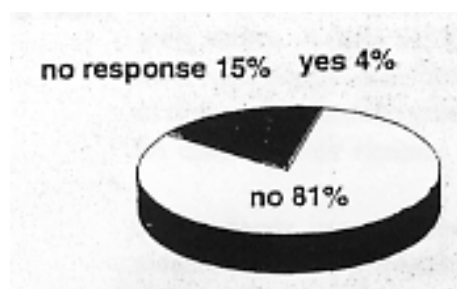
As can be seen from the charts, the majority of incidents of street harassment occurred outside both the male and female respondent's locality. This particular trend - seems to support the theory that sexual harassment in public places results from urbanisation - the tendency to choose victims from outside one's own neighbourhood as the likelihood of there being repercussions is almost negligible and the harasser feels safe in his anonymity. The answer to the query whether the girls/women were alone when harassed dearly indicates that the harassers are not deterred by the presence of companions which, in these cases, were mostly female friends or relatives. The fact that the harassers are not deterred by the presence of a few females together seems to be a reflection of the fact that no or little help is extended by passersby, or the police, and the fact that very few victims retaliate.

Were you alone when the incident happened? (F)



Both male and female respondents were asked whether any help was extended to the victim in the course of the incident. The reply to this survey by both the sexes was mostly negative as can be seen in the charts, and from the responses of 76 per cent of the male respondents who replied that nobody had tried to help the victim.

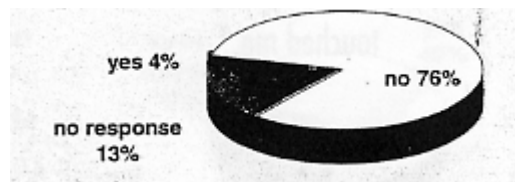
Did anyone try to help you or deter your assailants? (F)



"...I just wanted to burst out in tears. I wanted to hit him. But I couldn't!"

The obvious lack of social support despite the presence of other people (as outlined in the description of incidents) would explain the lack of confidence that women have in social support systems and institutions helping them in incidents of street harassment.

Did anyone try to help your victim? (M)



"... I felt like spitting at them, but I was afraid"

The quotations in this publication are highly illustrative of the feelings of fear, anger, frustration, and humiliation that accompany incidents of sexual harassment, whether it is verbal harassment or physical harassment.

"...At first I thought I had done a great thing by slapping him, but later I started thinking of the next day."

The feelings most commonly expressed by the female respondents at being harassed were, in order of precedence, as follows:

- o Helplessness and insecurity
- o Anger
- o Embarrassment
- o Shock
- o Disgust
- o Fear
- o Hurt
- o Sadness

Contrary to the above sentiments however, 23 per cent of the male respondents felt that females enjoyed street harassment.

"...I felt fear. I was desperately trying to get off at the nearest bus stop (in response to an incident in which a man was rubbing himself against a victim on a local bus)."

At this point, it would be interesting to note some comments made by male respondents with regard to their opinions on street harassment. Given on this page are some samples of comments by male respondents.

*“As long as the words used are not vulgar,
I don't think anything is wrong”*

“... I get a real kick out of doing it.”

“... It is my birthright as a male.”

“... Of course girls enjoy it, and that's why I do it.”

Most of the female and male respondents stated that the victims' predominant reaction to street harassment was to try to ignore the harassment. This typical response may be the wisest course of action as the majority of the male respondents stated that if women retaliated they would increase the harassment. Other reactions to retaliation by the victims, described by the male respondents, were running away or ignoring it.

A negligible amount of male respondents stated that they would apologise and some stated that they would give a vulgar response. Around 9 per cent felt that there was no question of females fighting back in such incidents.

“...Some boys commented on my height. I blamed myself for being short. If I had been tall they would not have laughed at me.”

While male respondents replied that they 'enjoyed', felt 'macho' or 'satisfied' when indulging in street harassment, the victims often felt a sense of guilt and somehow responsible for maybe having 'asked for it'. Blame-the-victim mentality is reflected by 'comments such as, "Why were you dressed like that", "Who told you to go out alone" or "Why were you walking in the dark”.

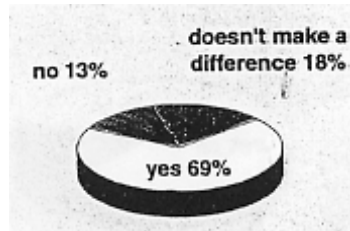
There is a general feeling that a certain type of dressing is 'provocative' and that such women deserve the treatment they get.

This is also illustrated in the male response to their being questioned on what basis they chose their victims. A large majority of male respondents stated the style of dress to be the main criteria for choosing their victims.

Unfortunately, in most Eastern societies, the West symbolises free and easy women depicted as being scantily clad in Western attire. This aspect of Western culture has been emphasised and over represented to our society and particularly the youth by movies and cable TV.

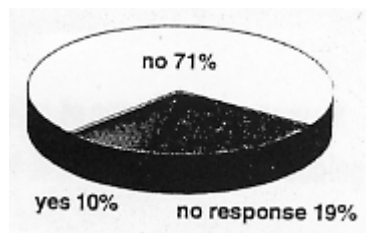
Male and female respondents were asked to give their opinions about public places where harassment was most likely to take place. The most common places reported were temples, public transport and market areas.

Do you feel such remarks are passed or you are harassed more when dressed in any particular style? (F)*



An important issue of concern was the apparent unfavourable attitude in which the respondents regarded the police. The female respondents were asked whether they had ever approached the police for help with regard to incidents of sexual harassment. The response to this query is given below in the chart.

Have you ever approached the police for help in case of such incidents? (F)*



The following responses of the female sample provide answers as to why they do not approach the police:

"...No. What can the police do?"

"...No. There was one standing right in front of me and laughing."

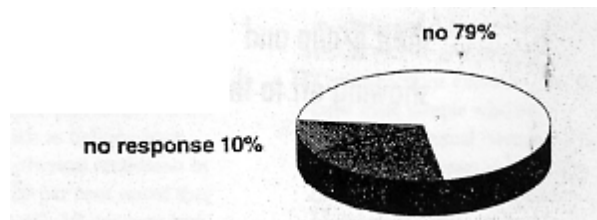
"...I am teased by the police from the 'Prahari Gand' in Naxal ever morning at 5 o' clock while going to campus."

"...Yes, I approached a policeman for help. He just cold me that such things happen every day."

"...By the time I go to the police and report the incident, the culprits will have run away."

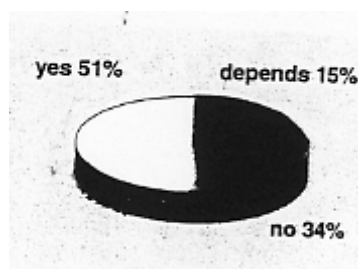
Male respondents in their turn were asked whether the victims had asked for help from the police, and their responses were as given in the chart below.

Did your victim ask for help from the police? (M)



Lack of confidence in the police system's ability to help is very clear in the case of the female respondents. The male respondents also do not take the police or the threat of police action seriously, and this is reflected in the response to the question (see chart below) posed to the male respondents as to whether they would still indulge in sexual harassment if a law or laws were established and enforced against it.

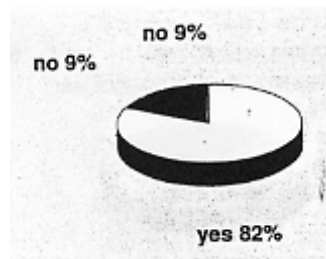
In the case of a law or laws being enforced against sexual harassment in public places, would you still indulge? (M)



Even though 51 per cent of the male respondents replied they would still indulge in sexual harassment even if there was a law against it, 82 per cent of female respondents said that sexual harassment should be made punishable by law. It is interesting to note at this point of time that in Nepal no such law exists.

"...wrong opinions about the opposite sex, obscene movies and books, blindly copying the more liberal Western world, lack of concern for their own culture, and mostly a sense of belonging to their group and showing off to their friends."

Should sexual harassment in public places be punishable by law? (F)



The next phase of the questionnaires dealt with how the respondents analysed the phenomenon of sexual harassment. Female respondents were asked about what they thought were the reasons that men indulged in sexual harassment and the leading causes perceived by female respondents were, in order of precedence, as follows:

- For fun
- Effect of the media
- Idleness
- Effect of 'democratisation'
- Unemployment
- Frustration / lack of education.

"...because they are used to dominating women and they think that they can still do it and get away with it."

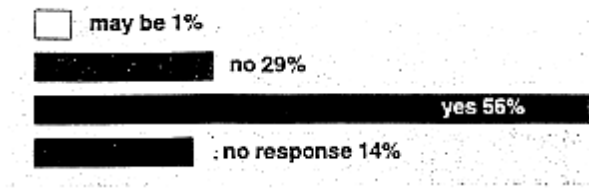
"...They have no respect for women, be it their own sister."

Male respondents gave the following reasons for harassing girls/women:

- For fun and entertainment
- Peer pressure
- To attract attention
- Because females enjoy it
- To prove masculinity

The extent of sexual harassment in our society can be seen from the response of female respondents who replied that they believed that 56 per cent of the males known to them, i.e. relations, friends, colleagues, would indulge in street harassment.

Do you think boys/men you know would indulge in sexual harassment in public places, especially if they felt nobody they knew would find out about it? (F)*



Male respondents were asked what their reaction would be if a member of their family was a victim - 37 per cent stated violent reactions such as fighting back, beating, or physical retaliation in some way, 20 per cent stated they would 'lecture', 29 per cent said they would overlook/ignore the incident, and 4 per cent said they would seek to give protection. These reactions expressed by the same male sample who liked indulging in sexual harassment in public places seems to underline the double standards men have in Nepalese society.

Finally, female respondents were asked if they thought that street harassment had become a problem in Kathmandu. Their responses were as shown in the chart below.

Do you think street harassment has become a problem in Kathmandu Valley? (F)



Female respondents response was overwhelmingly positive to the query as to whether they thought sexual harassment was on the increase, as can be seen from the chart.

Is sexual harassment in public places increasing in Kathmandu? (F)



ANALYSIS

The survey clearly showed that sexual harassment in public places is a definite problem in Kathmandu. The results of the survey also revealed a wide disparity between the perceptions of the male and female sample about sexual harassment. While the male sample viewed it as something they indulged in 'for fun', the female sample viewed it as a violation of their personal space.

The fact that there is no definition of or law against sexual harassment in public places in Nepal; and the attitude of the law enforcers as well as the fact that most of the victims did not get any help from members of the society seems to suggest that street harassment is not regarded as a social problem or an infringement of women's rights, i. e. the right to freedom of movement in Nepal.

While treating these incidents as an infringement of the human right to freedom of movement may seem a bit extreme to some of the readers, the fact that street harassment does restrict the movement of women in Kathmandu Valley cannot be overemphasised. One of the girls who responded to the survey revealed that she has stopped attending college because of the sexual harassment she faced daily on-route. Some of the incidents reported during the course of the survey cannot even be published.

While one is tempted to 'blame-the-victim' for being at the wrong place at the wrong time, this survey has clearly shown that most of the harassment takes place in broad daylight and even when the victim is not alone and in places such as temples and bus stops. Therefore the question arises: Where are women/girls to draw a line while going about their business in this city? How restricted should their movement be? Should all women stay at home like the sister who stopped attending college?

Street harassment, like domestic violence, rape and pornography is a symptom of an unjust society, a society which is unsafe for women. SAATHI aims to promote a safer environment for women and this is one of the first steps SAATHI has taken towards this end goal.

Sharing the information of this survey is a base that SAATHI hopes to build upon in the future. Freedom of movement and freedom from fear of an important half of the society, must essentially be of prime concern to all, as without these in place a large percentage of Nepal's human resources would be restricted from contributing to the development process of the country.

Through this publication we would like to appeal on behalf of all the women of Nepal to the law makers, law enforcers and fellow human beings to help make this country a safer and better place for all of us.

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SAATHI was established in December 1992 by a group of eight women to bring into national focus, by authentic research, gender issues being faced by contemporary Nepalese women with a view to designing possible interventions to uplift the status of women in Nepal and guarantee women human rights.

SAATHI views itself as a catalyst motivating women from all strata of society to work towards their own betterment. Towards this end SAATHI networks with policy groups and grass roots women's groups for exchange of ideas, information and knowledge.

As a first step SAATHI is working in the area of violence against women in the streets and inside the home. Based on social research, SAATHI is currently involved in creating public awareness and designing possible interventions against violence against women in Nepal.