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Students' perspectives on sexual harassment of genders in public places in the Southeast region

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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment in public places is a matter of concern in Vietnam. The purpose of this article is to understand and explain gender differences in perceptions of sexual harassment in public places, which is based on Brooks Gardner's gender interaction perspective. The study used both quantitative analysis based on the Chi-square test procedure and analysis of in-depth interview data coded by NVivo software. Research results showed that there were gender differences in the perceptions of students in the Southeast region in terms of the forms, causes, and consequences of sexual harassment in public places. To improve understanding and reduce gender differences, it is necessary to organize communication activities to raise awareness and skills to prevent this evil in universities.

Keywords: *gender difference, sexual harassment in public places, students*

1. Introduction

Research on sexual harassment in public places is important for two reasons. First, sexual harassment in public places, according to numerous studies (Fairchild and Rudman 2008; Fairchild 2007; MacMillan et al., 2000; Lenton et al., 1999), is more common than sexual harassment in the workplace. Second, sexual harassment in public places has many negative personal and social effects (Bowman, 1993).

The Party and the State have been concerned about the issue of gender equality and safety for women and children, which is reflected in legal documents such as the 2006 Law on Gender Equality or the promulgation of national programs on gender equality for the 2016-2020 period. At the international level, Vietnam was the second country in the

world and the first signatory in Asia to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990. Equally, Vietnam promulgated a law on child protection, care, and education in 2004. However, sexual harassment in public places is still a prominent and pressing issue in today's public opinion. Indeed, the mass media has recently reported a series of cases of sexual harassment in public places, in which many of the victims are students. Studies by Le Thi Lam (2016, 2019) and UN Women (2016) have shown that female students are the target of sexual harassment. In Vietnam, sexual harassment is one issue that receives great attention from society, especially when the victims of this behavior are children and students. However, according to the concept of Vietnamese society, sex is a delicate and sensitive issue, so teaching basic skills or knowledge about reproductive health and sex in families and schools is still not focused enough. Many victims are students when they are sexually harassed without knowing or not daring to disclose and make the situation of sexual harassment public, which increases its seriousness and severity (Ngo Thuy Dung, 2019). Previous studies and reports have shown that women and girls are often the main targets of sexual harassment in public places. Studies often focus on women's perceptions and experiences, but there doesn't seem to be much interest in the rest. This study is an attempt to understand the perception of sexual harassment in public in terms of gender. This study also examines the differences between male and female students when they view the problem in different aspects (i.e., forms of sexual harassment, causes of sexual harassment, and consequences of sexual harassment in public places). The article is the product of the project "Awareness and how to respond to sexual harassment in public places of students in the Southeast" sponsored by Thu Dau Mot University in the subject code DT.20.1-021.

2. Theory and research methods

2.1. Theory in consideration

In this paper, we rely on Carol Brooks Gardner's (1995) view of gender interactions. The author argues that sexual harassment should be considered within the framework of the greater power inequalities between men and women since men have greater physical, legal, political, and economic resources than women do, and women tend to be placed in subordinate or subordinate positions. Gardner rejects the notion that sexual harassment in public is natural or related to a male demonstration of masculinity, but rather based on male power. The author notes that the groups targeted for discrimination are most likely to be harassed, including women, members of racial minorities, and people with disabilities. We can find similarities in this view between Gardner and other authors such as Robinson (2005), Lahsaeizadeh, and Yousefinejad (2012). Robinson (2005) argues that sexual harassment should be understood as part of the broader social context and power relations in society. Looking at the sociocultural model, sexual

harassment originates from patriarchal society (Rospenda, Richman, & Nawyn, 1998; Stanko, 1985, cited by Mellgren et al., 2017) and is the result of the imbalance of power and status between men and women in society (Fitzgerald, 1993).

2.2. Research method

The method of collecting the information in this article was a mixed method. For quantitative data, we collected it online through the Google form tool. Meanwhile, qualitative data was collected through in-depth interviews via Zoom and Google Meet.

The samples were students who were studying at 12 universities in 6 provinces and cities in the Southeast region. Based on the sample population of 510,857 students in the region at the end of 2019, the minimum sample base that needed to be surveyed was 400 people, according to the Slovin's (1960) formula. However, in fact, we surveyed 3475 people whose 27 students belonged to other gender groups. Since this article has not been able to identify these 27 students, we determined the total sample was 3448 students, including 1820 male students (52.48 percent) and 1628 female students (47.2 percent).

The collection process was conducted by collecting qualitative information in advance through in-depth interviews with students at the schools within the scope of the survey, including Thu Dau Mot University (Binh Duong); the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City; Dong Nai University; and Ba Ria – Vung Tau University. In the next step, we designed the questionnaire and conducted a pilot survey to refine the questionnaire and conduct the large-scale data collection.

In this article, we used SPSS 20.0 software to analyze quantitative data and focused on gender differences in aspects of sexual harassment, including forms, causes, and consequences of sexual harassment in public places for students by the Chi-square test. Besides, the article used qualitative data that was selected from 7 in-depth interviews out of a total of 81 that we conducted and coded with NVivo software.

Students participated in this study on a voluntary basis, and they had the right to refuse to answer or to abandon the interview if they felt it was not appropriate or uncomfortable to provide information. All participants' responses were kept confidential, and the information was encrypted before being used in the article.

3. Results

3.1. Gender difference in perception of forms of sexual harassment

Analysis results from table one showed that in all four forms of sexual harassment in public; there was a difference between men and women in perception. All the tests had a p-value of less than 0.05, with the general trend being that the rate of "full awareness" from women in the four forms was always higher than that of men. In particular, the gap was most pronounced in the perception of sexual harassment "language" when 89.6

percent of women had "full awareness" compared to 76.3 percent of men. When comparing different forms of sexual harassment, it could be seen that the rate of "confusion" in the form of "non-verbal" sexual harassment was the highest, at 5.4 percent, and that this rate by women was 8.4 percent compared with 2.7 percent in men. A remarkable result was that up to 22 percent of male students in this study had inadequate awareness of "non-verbal" forms of sexual harassment. These statistics demonstrated that identifying forms of nonverbal harassment was a problem for a large percentage of today's students.

TABLE 1. Awareness of forms of sexual harassment by gender (%)

		Gender			Coefficient testing
		Male	Female	Total	
Physical	Partly awareness	22.0	7.5	15.1	$X^2 = 140.376$ p = .000
	Uncertain	1.3	1.6	1.4	
	Full awareness	76.8	90.9	83.4	
Social Network	Partly awareness	21.4	9.3	15.7	$X^2 = 103.555$ p = .000
	Uncertain	1.2	2.7	1.9	
	Full awareness	77.4	88.0	82.4	
Language	Partly awareness	20.3	4.5	12.9	$X^2 = 196.727$ p = .000
	Uncertain	3.4	5.9	4.6	
	Full awareness	76.3	89.6	82.6	
African Language	Partly awareness	22.0	7.8	15.3	$X^2 = 171.752$ p = .000
	Uncertain	2.7	8.4	5.4	
	Full awareness	75.3	83.8	79.3	

Source: Survey results of the project in August 2021

The results of in-depth interviews on perception of non-verbal forms of credit relationship such as whistling and teasing also showed hesitant opinions, as shared by a female friend. Second-year students were staying in district seven – TP. Ho Chi Minh:

Whistling or teasing, in my opinion, is not a certain sign because it can be a common behavior. If a man whistles or teases me, I will ignore him, and it is over. I can express my disapproval of such behaviors. But generally, such behaviors are not enough to be seen as sexual harassment. (PVS25, female, indirect victim, 2nd year student, HCMC).

In terms of gender differences in sexual harassment perception, in addition to recognizable forms of sexual harassment such as physical assaults, verbal harassment such as "whistling," "teasing," or "eyes signing" was frequently perceived as flirting or even a compliment. That concept was said by a female third-year student who was a direct victim of teasing and was currently staying at Di An – Binh Duong:

In the sub-consciousness of men, there will be thoughts like "it's natural for a man to stare at a nice woman. I feel it is normal to do that if I see such a girl. And being a girl, she should consider it a normal thing to also be stared at by a man. " I think that in the concept

of a man, he tends to set women in a lower position, and because of that, he probably looks down on her." (PVS01, female, direct victim, 3rd year student, Binh Duong)

Under the approach to gender interaction by Gardner (2015), such condemnable and punishable sexually harassing behaviors are considered normal and acceptable because the disparities in public space between men and women were caused by differences in power and status. And women were said to accept it as a concept of "making flowers for people to pick, being girls for people to tease" that still existed in Vietnamese society. From the students' opinions, we also saw that it seemed that the gender stereotypes that you received were not equal when men were less equipped with knowledge and understanding to respect their opposite sex.

3.2. Gender difference in perception of causes of sexual harassment

The general trend in perception of causes of sexual harassment shown in Table 2 showed that the three reasons with the highest agreement were "*lack of sufficient punishment for prevention*" (85%), "*the indifference of people around*" (70.1%), and "*due to a lack of understanding about sexual harassment in public*" (54.8%). It is said that the sanctions were not appropriate, which had been and was a cause of this problem. The sanctioning acts of sexual harassment in public places were prescribed in Article 5 of Decree 167/2013/ND-CP. Then acts of sexual harassment should be handled with a warning or a fine of between VND 100,000 and 300,000 for one of the following acts: "*conducting gestures or words that are rough, provocative, teasing, insulting to the honor and dignity of others*". In addition, the 2015 Penal Code considered rape and lewdness as crimes of a serious nature and associated them with strict sanctions, but there were no specific rules for harassment acts. The sanction of sexual harassment in public places, especially for verbal and non-verbal harassment, is still only sanctioned by administrative sanctions, which has not been resolved. The core issue was that any form of sexual violence must be severely punished.

The incident that took place in 2019 when a man groped a female student in an elevator and was then fined just 200,000 VND has attracted a lot of attention from the public and state agencies. In the talk show "*200k kiss: Justice or mockery*" by the Center for Research & Scientific Application on Gender, Family, Women and Adolescents (CSAGA) in March 2019, Khuat Thu Hong, Director of the Institute for Social Development Studies (ISDS), said that: "*The fact of harassing the girl in the elevator must be seen as a sexual attack, not just harassment or kissing by force as public opinion.*" *A superficial penalty, as we see it, is something funny and ridiculous against the virtue and humanity of women, which should be respected*".

In-depth interview materials from students also showed that they were very interested in this event and expressed their disagreement, such as the opinion of a third-year student who had witnessed sexual harassment in a public place:

"By the newspaper, I learned of the case of sexual harassment in an elevator, and the attacker was just fined 200,000 VND. For me, such a fine is like a joke in comparison to what the burden is on the girl's psychology. Everyone knows this fact, and she is the point of public focus while the man was just punished with 200.000. While the girl should be given with enthusiasm, the case became a funny story, a joke, among young people everywhere. The problem is bigger than just a case for a girl." (PVS18, male, witness, 3rd year student, Thu Duc city)

TABLE 2. Perceived causes of sexual harassment by gender (%)

		Gender			coefficient
		Male	Female	Total	Test
Lacking a reasonable punishment	Disagree	16.4	13.6	15.0	$X^2 = 6.122$
	Agree	83.4	86.4	85.0	p = .013
Indifference from people around	Disagree	23.6	18.4	20.9	$X^2 = 14.293$
	Agree	76.4	81.6	70.1	p = .000
Men attracted by women	Disagree	87.5	82	84.9	$X^2 = 20,483$
	Agree	12.5	18	15.1	p = .000
Due to the victim's sexy dress	Disagree	65.5	59.3	62.6	$X^2 = 14.170$
	Agree	34.5	40.7	37.4	p = .000
Due to the ideology of men-first.	Disagree	91.3	90	90.7	$X^2 = 1.653$
	Agree	8.7	10	9.3	p = 0.199
Unsafe public space	Disagree	58.5	66.7	62.4	$X^2 = 24,893$
	Agree	41.5	33.3	37.6	p = .000
Lacking understanding about sexual harassment in public places	Disagree	42.3	48.4	45.2	$X^2 = 13,125$
	Agree	57.7	51.6	54.8	p = .000

Source: Survey results of the project in August 2021

Data from table two also showed that there was a relationship between gender and perception of causes of sexual harassment in public when 6/7 results of Chi-squared test all had p-value less than 0.05.

When looking at the test results on the second most appreciated cause of "the apathy of people around", 81.6 percent of female students agree compared to 76.4 percent of male students, also showing a different though not much. This data is like the survey results of the report "Safe cities for women and girls" conducted by Action Aid Vietnam in 2014 (66 percent of women and girls interviewed did not have any reactive action and 65 percent of men and bystanders did not intervene). These results also partly showed that both sexes viewed this issue as normal and being "accepted" by most of the society. As for the victim, it was a sensitive issue and difficult to talk about

Research data also reflected that up to 40.7 percent of female students and male students believed that sexual harassment was caused by "*sexual dressing of the victim*". These were numbers that needed to be seen since it showed that the tendency to blame the victim for sexual harassment in public still existed among students. More importantly, the acceptance rate of the female students was higher. As Gardner (1995) mentioned, it was the gender interaction in the direction of inequality when men were considered to have greater power than women. Hence, when something happened, the cause was often on the weaker side – the women. This view was further confirmed by Lahsaeizadeh and Yousefinejad (2012) when these two authors argued that sexual harassment was not just an act experienced as an event but a structured process architecture. It is a lens through which women and girls face everyday existence. They are disturbed by the threat of violence – in their dorm rooms, on the street...and then bullied by their own sense of inner responsibility for the way others treat them.

3.3. Gender differences in perceptions of consequences of sexual harassment in public

The consequences of sexual harassment in public were very serious for victims, Mishra and Lamichhane (2018) when Research on students' experiences of sexual harassment on public transport in Kathmandu, Nepal has shown that the consequences that students suffer are physical, mental, and social disturbances and, therefore, it reduced ability to participate in educational and professional activities as well as in life in public places. The results of our research also showed the same thing when the three consequences that students thought they would face when they were sexually harassed were "*Feeling unsafe in public*" (87%); "*Feeling anxious all the time*" (85%); "*Loss of confidence in self-image*" (74.8%).

The feeling of being unsafe in public places also led to psychological fear and a refusal to use means of public transport. For example, in the case of a female student in investments, who had had experience on the bus:

Since being harassed, I've gotten scared of travelling by bus. I've almost given up taking buses in favor of riding motorcycles. I've even felt chilled every time I see a bus going by. Generally, I don't want to see such an experiment one more time." (PVS26, female, direct victim, 4th year, Thu Duc city)

When comparing men and women on the perception of consequences for victims affected by sexual harassment in public places, there was a difference in perception between male and female students, in which the percentage of consenting female students with profound consequences selected by both tended to be higher than that of male students. Because of "*always anxiety*", the approval rate for men was 84 percent, compared to 86 percent for women. As for the effect of "*ineffective learning*," there was a similar trend when the rate in men was 50.5 percent compared to 54.5 percent in women.

TABLE 3. Perception of consequences of sexual harassment by gender (%)

		Gender			coefficient
		Male	Female	Total	Test
Loss of confidence in self-image	Disagree	27.1	23.0	25.2	$X^2 = 7,932$ p = .005
	Agree	72.9	77.0	74.8	
Fear of interacting with the opposite sex	Disagree	26.7	28.7	27.7	$X^2 = 1,793$ p = 0.181
	Agree	73.3	71.3	72.3	
Feel physically weak	Disagree	55.2	51.5	53.5	$X^2 = 4,549$ p = .033
	Agree	44.8	48.5	46.5	
Decreased academic performance	Disagree	49.5	45.5	47.6	$X^2 = 5,502$ p = .019
	Agree	50.5	54.5	52.4	
Feel unsafe in public	Disagree	16.2	9.9	12.9	$X^2 = 30,654$ p = .000
	Agree	83.8	90.1	87.1	
Always feel anxious	Disagree	16.0	14.0	14.9	$X^2 = 2,915$ p = .088
	Agree	84.0	86.0	85.1	
Have guilt	Disagree	54.0	52.2	53.2	$X^2 = 1,118$ p = 0.290
	Agree	46.0	47.8	46.8	
Anger and distraction	Disagree	47.7	50.1	48.8	$X^2 = 1,842$ p = 0.175
	Agree	52.3	49.9	51.2	

Source: Survey results of the project in August 2021

However, there were consequences such as "fear of interacting with people of the opposite sex," "angry and distracted," and "having a guilty feeling," and the opinions of men and women were not statistically different. We also found that when researching sexual harassment in public, people often referred to female victims and explained this phenomenon by the view of gender interaction in the form of power structure according to the power structure towards gender inequality. However, we thought it was time to take a more objective view when men also suffered from sexual harassment and the consequences they faced were no different from women. The confession of a male friend after being sexually harassed showed the obsessions that you had been facing:

Inside me formed a fear of being touched by anyone, especially the area under my belly. Moreover, I am scared of even hand shaking with a man who I didn't know well. I don't know exactly what forms such feelings for me, the harassment which I experienced or my nature. Also, I am scared of closed spaces with a crowd inside, for example, a small room with about 20 people. In such a situation, I will find a way to leave. I'm afraid of body touching. (PVS15, male, direct victim, year 4, Ho Chi Minh City).

4. Conclusion

From the research results, there are gender differences in the awareness of students in the Southeast region about forms of sexual harassment. The causes and consequences of sexual harassment in public places show that female students are more fully awarded than male students in the Southeast region. This is evident in the perception of verbal and non-verbal forms of sexual harassment. Regarding the causes of sexual harassment, the research results show the problem of sanctions, whose main causes are the indifference of people around you and a lack of understanding about sexual harassment. For all three of these reasons, the approval rate of female students is higher than that of male students. The consequences of sexual harassment in public are almost identical. With the most chosen consequences for both sexes, the percentage of women who agree is always higher than that of men. However, the results of the in-depth interviews also reflect that when men are victims of sexual harassment in public, their consequences are no different than those of women, even more seriously when they are already labeled as the male sex.

Gardner's (1995) point of view is appropriate when explaining the difference in perceptions of the unequal gender stereotypes that students have received. However, we find it difficult to explain the cases in which male students are victims, and gender stereotyped labeling as the male gender further encourages men to speak up about issues. Their problem is not simple, and they themselves are suffering the heavy consequences of being sexually harassed in public. However, as with many other traditional gender approaches, Gardner's view rests on a dualistic basis that emphasizes the division of gender into two distinctly arranged or arranged poles, yet such a division itself is not discussed (Linstead and Brewis, 2004). Therefore, we believe that if the research on sexual harassment in public places only focuses on women in general and female students in general, it is not enough to consider this issue thoroughly. It is necessary to develop more comprehensive theoretical perspectives in the future to explain men's perceptions and problems because of this evil Butler's (2004) approach to de-expression should be considered carefully.

From the research results, we believe that solutions focusing on communication and activities to improve coping skills and prevent sexual harassment in public places need to be implemented in universities to raise students' awareness of sexual harassment in public and to gradually eliminate gender differences in awareness of this issue. Finally, the legalization and consideration of sexual harassment in public places are acts that need to be dealt with severely by the penal code and to be considered and promulgated soon as key measures to prevent and deal with this evil.

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