

Breaking the Silence: Experiencing and Witnessing Sexual Harassment at UNRWA Schools in Bethlehem City, Palestine

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Abstract: Sexual harassment is a pervasive problem affecting nearly half of all students over the course of their academic lives. Far less is known about the past experience and witness of students being subjected to Sexual harassment. The aim of the study was to assess the student's past witness and experience with different forms of sexual harassment at UNRWA schools in Bethlehem city. A descriptive cross-sectional design was adopted in this study. Four UNRWA schools (two males and two female schools) were selected randomly from Bethlehem City. A sample of 241 students from 7th through 9th grade at the four schools were included in the study. The study tool was a pre-designed questionnaire containing questions on past exposure to 19 items and witness to 25 items covering three forms of sexual harassment (physical, verbal and visual). Results revealed that, the vast majority of middle school students are both SH targets and witnesses, where the most frequent type of SH was visual/verbal SH, followed by physical SH. The results also indicated a significant association between gender of the participant and SH. Witnessing and experiencing SH has a negative impact on school aged children's physical, social, cognitive and emotional development. Students who have been exposed to SH need to be helped to go over the abuse and empowered with safety plans to take when they next encounter similar situations. The study calls for holding anti- harassment awareness campaigns to raise the awareness of students on sexual harassment in Palestine.

Key words: Sexual harassment • Witnessing • Middle school • Palestine

INTRODUCTION

Despite that sexual harassment (SH) has been taking place in the schools for decades, only recently has it begun to get the attention it deserves. Some have called such attention an overreaction to normal adolescent behavior, but sexual harassment can inflict deep psychological damage on young people. Furthermore, SH has been considered a growing public health concern that is garnering increased attention from researchers, practitioners and policymakers. Though previously conceptualized as an adult phenomena occurring in the workplace environment and on college campuses, research has highlighted the widespread prevalence of peer sexual harassment (PSH) in schools and its impact on adolescents [1-4]. This problem is more common than you might think because many students are scared or too embarrassed to report sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment emerged as a topic of empirical research in the 1970s, most notably since the publication of the study by the American Association of University Women [5]. This report revealed a high prevalence of sexual harassment among high school students [6-8]. Approximately 75 to 80% of students experience direct SH, defined as any unwanted sexual behavior that interferes with a student's life, prior to graduating high school [5, 9-11]. SH come in all shapes and sizes, but according to AAUW, it ranges from name calling to unwanted touching and 58% of harassed youth report that they experience it "often" or "occasionally" [5, 9].

As a result of sexual violence perpetration, adolescents report myriad negative outcomes, including academic, health and psychological problems. Negative academic outcomes resulting from sexual harassment include school absenteeism [1, 5, 6], as well as concentration problems and decreased class participation

[5, 12- 13]. Other studies have found that victims' overall school performance was negatively affected [1, 14] and victims reported feeling unsafe at school [15]. Victims may take measures to avoid perpetrators, including skipping or withdrawing from classes which would in turn affect academic outcomes [1, 6].

Victims may also experience physical problems and psychosomatic symptoms as a result of sexual harassment. These include sleep problems [5, 6], appetite problems [5, 15] and substance use [15]. Sexual harassment does not just affect the victim during its occurrence, but its effects may continue into the future. For instance, Chiodo *et al.* [15] found that ninth grade girls who were sexually harassed in school later experienced emotional and delinquency problems in 11th grade. These girls were also more likely to be victims of dating violence and physical violence from other peers later in life. Students in Hill and Kearn's study reported experiencing sleeping problems after the time that the sexual harassment occurred [6].

The literature on this issue indicates an increasing amount of research [16-20] showing that an important percentage of secondary students have been experiencing unwelcome behavior that could be known as peer sexual harassment. Despite this growing interest in the study of peer sexual harassment, researchers vary in their definitions of sexual harassment. The lack of a single definition for this phenomenon has posed measurement problems and contributed to disparity in incidence and prevalence rates [21-24].

Peer sexual harassment in adolescence has been defined as "an unwanted and unwelcome sexual behavior because sexual harassment cause distress and discomfort to the victims, which can interfere with the normal life of students in schools. SH includes different behaviors such as name-calling, rumors, sexual comments, looks, gestures, attempts at personal contacts and physical attacks" [25].

Available researches on peer SH among adolescents on schools focus exclusively on the frequency of direct sexual harassment [5] or types of direct sexual harassment experienced and its consequences on students [5, 26-27], but not on the experience and impact of witnessing the SH of another student. The vast majority of adolescents' harassment occurs in public spaces such as hallways, classrooms and cafeterias [5, 6] making this a highly visible form of peer victimization. Given the high proportion of adolescents that are victimized, it is possible that many young people are both directly targeted by SH and witness the victimization of others.

In light of what has been discussed so far, this study sought to increase our understanding of middle school students' SH experiences by answering the following research questions: (a) What are middle school students' experiences of direct sexual harassment? (b) What are middle school students' experiences of witnessing sexual harassment? Students completed a survey that assessed their SH experiences and grades as well as a detailed incident report describing a single instance of SH they witnessed. It was hypothesized that higher levels of SH would be significantly related to gender.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design: Guided by the aim of exploring students' experiences of direct and witnessing SH, a descriptive quantitative cross sectional research design was used.

Sampling Methodology: A stratified sampling method (proportional allocation) was utilized to obtain the required sample size. Stratification of students was done based on gender and grades. A list of the number of classes in each strata, the number of students in each class, was obtained from registration offices in the mentioned schools. From the three grades of each school, one class was chosen by simple random sampling methodology.

Sample: A total of 241 students from 7th through 9th grades at the four schools were included in the study. There were three classes from each grade; each class had around 40 students. Sample size was determined by being calculated based on previous related study done by Lichty and Campbell [28].

Ethical Consideration: The participants were from the four UNRWA middle school (Grades 7 through 9) in the Bethlehem City of Palestine with a combined total of almost 1,500 students. An official permission for the study was obtained from the relevant UNRWA school authorities. After school permission was obtained, the study was explained in classes verbally by the research team. Parents of students in Grades 7 and 9 were contacted. Informed consent was obtained from both student participants and parents. Assurances about the confidentiality of the data were given, as were assurances that no individual would be identifiable in any publication of the data. Participant's privacy was protected by allowing for anonymous and voluntary participation. Participants were also told verbally that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Regarding gender

Students participated in the study (girls 49.8% and boys 50.2%). The age range was between 13 and 16 years (average age =13.39; SD = 1.02).

Tools for Data Collection

Direct SH: The Sexual Experiences Questionnaire-High School version (SEQ-HS) was used to measure direct SH experiences [29]. Items reflect a broad range of unwanted, sexual, or gender-focused inappropriate behaviors. The 29-item modified SEQ-HS asked participants to report the frequency (i.e., “0” meaning never to “2+” meaning twice or more) at which they experienced a variety of SH behaviors during the current school year. The reliability was obtained through cronbach’s alpha which was (cronbach is $\alpha = 0.82$) before collecting the original data.

Witnessing SH: The SEQ-HS was adapted to measure witnessing SH experiences.

For example, one item measuring direct victimization read “has any other student pulled your clothing down or off.” This item was changed to read “have you witnessed any other student pulling another student’s clothing down or off.” Items that could not be witnessed were excluded from the measure.

Tools Validity: Tools were submitted to a panel of five experts in the field of public health nursing and community health nursing to test the content validity. Modification was carried out according to the panel's judgment on clarity of sentences and appropriateness of content.

Pilot Study: It was carried out on 20 % of the total sample to test the applicability, clarify and the feasibility of the study tools and to estimate the needed time to complete the tools. Pilot sample was excluded from the research. Cronbach’s alpha = 0.82, it was done before collecting the original data.

Statistical Analysis: Statistical analysis was done using the SPSS version 23 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). The data were expressed as frequencies and percentages. Chi square test was used as indicated. P value was considered significant at level<0.05.

RESULTS

The final analysis was conducted with 241 participants comprising 121 (50.2%) males and 120 (49.8%) females. Of the 241 participants, 83 (34.4%) were 7th graders, 80 (33.2%) were 8th graders and 78 (32.4%) were 9th graders (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of the studied sample according to their Socio-demographic data (n = 241)

Characteristics	No. of respondents (n)	(%)
Age (years)		
12	53	22.0
13	79	32.8
14	75	31.1
15	29	12.0
16	5	2.1
Gender		
Male	121	50.2
Female	120	49.8
Grades		
7 th	83	34.4
8 th	80	33.2
9 th	78	32.4

What Are Middle School Students’ Experiences of Direct Sexual Harassment (SH)?

Table 2 presents the 10 most frequent direct SH behaviors in order from highest to lowest frequency (i.e., percentage of participants reporting experiencing the behavior at least once). The most frequently reported items were primarily forms of visual/verbal harassment (e.g., name-calling and commenting on a student’s body or looks) and fell into the gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention subsets of SH. The least frequently reported items were insulting others by calling a student a name for a homosexual such as “fag” or “dyke”.

Table 3 shows the association between gender (male and female) and the experience of direct sexual harassment among students, where the results indicated a significant association between gender and experience of direct sexual harassment. Male students were more frequently subjected to direct sexual harassment than were females (40.5% vs. 15.0%, respectively, $P = <0.001$). The most frequent sexual harassment behavior among males compared to females was more physical in nature and reflected unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion.

And least frequently reported item showing, using, or handing out sexual pictures, stories or cartoons to other student and fell into the gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention subsets of sexual harassment. Male students were more frequently subjected to direct sexual harassment than were females (17.4% vs. 1.7%, respectively, $P = <0.001$).

What Are Middle School Students’ Experiences of Witnessing Sexual Harassment?

Table 2: Most Frequently Reported Sexual Harassment Experiences

Item Scale	Number and Percentages		
	Never	Once	Twice or more
Direct sexual harassment			
calling a student bad names (for example, “bitch”)	93(38.6)	46(19.1)	102(42.3)
calling a student sexual names (for example, “slut,” “tease,” “whore”)	122(50.6)	43(17.8)	76(31.5)
touching a student (for example, put an arm around his or her shoulder) in a way that it was clear made him or her uncomfortable	122 (50.6)	46(19.1)	73(30.3)
saying hurtful things about a student body or how (s)he looked (e.g., calling a student “fat,” “ugly,” or “flat chested”)	126(52.3)	47(19.5)	68(28.2)
staring at a student or parts of a student’s body	119 (49.4)	55(22.8)	67(27.8)
making sexual or obscene gestures at a student	126 (52.3)	48(19.9)	67(27.8)
making sexual remarks about a student to others (e.g., saying to others that a student has a “hot body”)	127(52.7)	52(21.6)	62(25.7)
giving a student any sexual attention (s)he did not want	142 (58.9)	37(15.4)	62(25.7)
giving a student sexual notes or letters that (s)he didn’t want	131 (54.4)	52(21.6)	58(24.1)
calling a student a name for a homosexual (e.g., “fag” or “dyke”) to insult him/her	142(58.9)	48(19.9)	51(21.2)

Table 3: Prevalence and type of students’ Direct Sexual Harassment Experiences, Comparison between male and female respondents (male = 121, female = 120)

Scale Items	Gender	Never	Once	Two or more	P value
		No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)	
making sexual or obscene gestures at a student	Male	46(38.0)	26(21.5)	49(40.5)	<0.001
	Female	80(66.7)	22(18.3)	18(15.0)	
touching a student (e.g., put an arm around his or her shoulder) in a way that it was clear made him or her uncomfortable	Male	48(39.7)	28(23.1)	45(37.2)	0.003
	Female	74(61.7)	18(15.0)	28(23.3)	
pulling a student’s clothing down or off	Male	53(43.8)	24(19.8)	44(36.4)	<0.001
	Female	109(90.8)	9(7.5)	2(1.7)	
giving a student any sexual attention(s)he did not want	Male	54(44.6)	25(20.7)	42(34.7)	<0.001
	Female	88(73.3)	12(10.0)	20(16.7)	
calling a student a name for a homosexual (e.g., “fag” or “dyke”) to insult him/her	Male	56(46.3)	28(23.1)	37(30.6)	<0.001
	Female	86(71.7)	20(16.7)	14(11.7)	
making sexual remarks about a student to others (e.g., saying to others that a student has a “hot body”)	Male	54(44.6)	30(24.8)	37(30.6)	0.041
	Female	73(60.8)	22(18.3)	25(20.8)	
kissing or hugging a student when (s)he did not want it	Male	73(60.3)	17(14.0)	31(25.6)	<0.001
	Female	101(84.2)	9(7.5)	10(8.3)	
saying sexually explicit things about a student body or how(s)he looked (e.g., “Nice butt” or “I want your body”)	Male	64(52.9)	26(21.5)	31(25.6)	0.034
	Female	76(63.3)	29(24.2)	15(12.5)	
wearing T-shirts or hats that had sexually explicit words or	Male	75(62.0)	25(20.7)	21(17.4)	0.003
	Female	98(81.7)	12(10.0)	10(8.3)	
showing, using, or handing out sexual pictures, stories or cartoons to other student	Male	84(69.4)	16(13.2)	21(17.4)	<0.001
	Female	102(85.0)	16(13.3)	2(1.7)	

Table 4: Most Frequently Reported Sexual Harassment Experiences

Item Scale	Number and Percentages		
	Never	Once	Twice or more
Witnessing Sexual Harassment			
told sexual stories or jokes to you that you didn’t want to hear	130(53.9)	56(23.2)	55(22.8)
called a student bad name (for example, “bitch”)	168(69.7)	34(14.1)	39(16.2)
said hurtful things about your body or how you looked (for example, “fat,” “ugly”)	159(66.0)	43(17.8)	39(16.2)
made sexual remarks about you to others (for example, told others you have; “hot body”)	174(72.2)	35(14.5)	31(12.9)
called you sexual names (e.g., “slut,” “tease,” “whore”)	184(76.3)	29(12.0)	28(11.6)
stared at student or parts of his/her body	192(79.7)	21(8.7)	28(11.6)
cornered, leaned over or followed you	182(75.5)	32(13.3)	27(11.2)
made sexual or obscene gestures to you	186(77.2)	28(11.6)	27(11.2)
giving a student sexual notes or letters that (s)he didn’t want	179(74.3)	36(14.9)	26(10.8)
showed, used, or handed sexual pictures stories or cartoons to you	159(80.9)	21(8.7)	25(10.4)

Table 5: Prevalence and type of students' witnessing sexual harassment experiences, Comparison between male and female respondents (male = 121, female = 120)

Scale Items	Gender	Never	Once	Two or more	P value
		No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)	
told sexual stories or jokes to a student that (s)he didn't want to hear	Male	57(47.1)	27(22.3)	37(30.6)	0.014
	Female	73(60.8)	29(24.2)	18(15.0)	
called a student bad name (e.g., "bitch")	Male	70(57.9)	18(14.9)	33(27.3)	<0.001
	Female	98(81.7)	16(13.3)	6(5.0)	
called you sexual names (e.g., "slut," "tease," "whore")	Male	78(64.5)	18(14.9)	25(20.7)	<0.001
	Female	106(88.3)	11(9.2)	3(2.5)	
giving a student any sexual attention he did not want	Male	81(66.9)	19(15.7)	21(17.4)	0.003
	Female	98(81.7)	17(14.2)	5(4.2)	
made sexual or obscene gestures to other students	Male	84(69.4)	16(13.2)	21(17.4)	0.005
	Female	102(85.0)	12(10.0)	6(5.0)	
showed, used, or handed sexual pictures stories or cartoons to you	Male	87(71.9)	14(11.6)	20(16.5)	0.001
	Female	108(90.0)	7(5.8)	5(4.2)	
made fun of you for not acting like enough of a boy/girl (e.g., called you a "tomboy," "fag," "sissy")	Male	82(67.8)	20(16.5)	19(15.7)	<0.001
	Female	110(91.7)	8(6.7)	2(1.7)	
Is one person removing his clothes in front of you	Male	91(75.2)	15(12.4)	15(12.4)	<0.001
	Female	115(95.8)	4(3.3)	1(0.8)	
made forceful attempts to have sex with a student	Male	99(81.8)	7(8.8)	15(12.4)	<0.001
	Female	118(98.30)	1(0.8)	1(0.8)	
sexually assaulted a student	Male	101(83.5)	6(5.0)	14(11.6)	0.038
	Female	112(93.3)	4(3.3)	4(3.3)	

Table 4 presents the 10 most frequent direct SH behaviors in order from highest to lowest frequency (i.e., percentage of participants reporting experiences of witnessing the behavior at least once). The most frequently reported items were primarily forms of verbal harassment (e.g., name-calling and commenting on a student's body or looks) and fell into the gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention subsets of SH. The least frequently reported items were insulting others by calling a student a name for a homosexual such as "fag" or "dyke".

Table 5 indicates that there were significant differences between boys and girls on 10 of the 24 witnessing SH behaviors. Table 5 lists the 10 most frequently witnessed forms of SH in order from highest to lowest frequency (i.e., percentage of participants reporting experiencing the behavior at least once). Similar to direct SH, verbal harassment (e.g., told sexual stories, name-calling) was the most frequently witnessed behavior. The least frequently witnessed forms of SH were more physical in nature and reflected unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion (e.g., made forceful attempts to have sex, sexually assaulted a student).

DISCUSSION

This study nurtured the developing literature on adolescent SH by exploring middle school students'

experiences of direct SH and witnessing SH. Findings from this study indicate that middle school students both witness and are directly targeted by peer SH, with direct harassment occurring at higher rates. An important finding from this study was that sexual harassment is a very common occurrence in Bethlehem UNRWA middle schools. Sexual harassment was apparently a common experience among the seventh to ninth graders in this study. Some students go through direct physical sexual harassment and some endured visual/verbal sexual harassment, where verbal harassment was more commonly reported by both male and female students.

Our results documented the pervasiveness of unwanted sexual attention among adolescents, because almost the vast majority of surveyed students perpetrated at least one form of harassment in the previous school year in a school setting. Our results are inconsistent with the results of previous research which has found that approximately 80% of students experienced direct SH at least once prior to graduating high school, whereas 94% of the middle school students surveyed in that study were directly harassed in the previous school year [5-9].

This shocking finding is not new; rather, it confirms descriptive information reported elsewhere [30]. In comparison to foreign countries, the prevalence of different forms of physical harassment in our study is lower than that revealed from a study done in Pennsylvania [31].

Witness; this kind of harassment was also common, according to this study results. An important percentage of girls and boys said they'd observed at least one incident in the 2015-16 school year. Overall, these findings highlight the importance of attending to students' experiences witnessing SH and the potentially detrimental effects on individuals and overall school climate.

Further comparison showed significant differences in the frequency of witnessing SH based on gender. Our results are similar to the previous study results that have found gender differences in SH frequency [1, 26, 32].

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study showed shocking results of a high prevalence of all forms of sexual harassment among the studied middle school students. This call for holding anti-harassment awareness campaigns to raise the awareness of students on definition, forms and laws of sexual harassment. If harassment continues, students need to seek help from teachers, counselors and administrators. Students are often embarrassed to report sexual harassment because of its degrading nature. They need to know that the harassment is not their fault, nor is it a reflection on them. They need to keep asking for help until the harassment stops; it may take two or three interventions before the behavior is modified. That students continue to seek help is in the best interests of all: unresolved conflicts can emotionally damage the victim, harden the consciousness of the perpetrator and possibly lead to lawsuits for the school system.

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