

Sexual harassment on public transport: a survey study of Rawalpindi, Pakistan

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Abstract

The study was conducted to examine prevalence of sexual harassment, its nature, and its consequences on women during traveling on public transport. A survey research method was used to collect the information. A sample of 105 women using the purposive sampling technique was selected from three different bus stops in Rawalpindi city of Pakistan. Routine Activity Theory of Cohen and Felson (1979) was applied to analyse data about the victimization of women passengers. The findings revealed that women participated in the study, 41% were students, 34% were working women and 25% were housewives. 75% of women travelled on a daily basis while the rest once a week or occasionally. The women faced different forms of harassment and 46% of them faced it sometimes while 36% faced it most of the time during traveling. The findings revealed types of offenders and among them, 64% were passengers, 24% were bus helpers and 12% were drivers. 89% participants considered it a serious matter and 52% of women took action in some way from verbal retaliation, informing the family members, to physical retaliation. It is recommended to develop a mechanism to implement the existing laws to make travelling safe for women.

Keywords: women passengers, sexual harassment, harassment in transport, victimization of women, harassment offenders, urban passengers.

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1. Introduction

Sexual harassment has serious implications on women who go out and use public transport on daily basis. Mostly, people in developing countries use public transport for a daily commute and at the same time, more women in urban centres are coming out for professional and educational purposes. Violence against women is not a new phenomenon (Plan International, 2020) and 70-90% of women faced partner violence highlighted in the advocacy brief of the Government of Punjab (UNODC, 2020). As they are not safe in the domestic sphere, women are more vulnerable in the public places. Jagori and UN Women (2011) conducted a benchmark survey in Chhatisgarh India and reported that almost 50% of women faced harassment during public transport.

A recent study conducted by Valan (2020) in India reported that 35% of all young women were harassed in the last six months during travelling by public transport. Another study conducted in Nepal by Gautam *et al.* (2019) with university female students reported that females who lived far away from campus and travelled daily are more likely to face harassment as compared to those female students who lived near campus and travel sometimes. Action-aid (2019) conducted a study in Bangladesh and reported that 84% of women experienced sexual harassment during travelling. A study conducted in Karachi, Pakistan by the Asian Development Bank (2014) on women travelling in public transport reported cases of sexual harassment in 85% of working women, 82% of students and 67% of homemakers. In the South Asian context, these kinds of research help to better understand the situation. In Pakistan, for the last two decades, studies were carried out on sexual harassment at the workplace to see the prevalence, causes, and effects on victims but sexual harassment in public places and especially during travelling in public transport was rarely studied. This study was an attempt to find out its prevalence, nature and women's reaction to it.

To what extent, does sexual harassment against women during travelling on public transport prevail in the city? Do women retaliate against sexual harassment during travelling on public transport? What are the constraints that restrict women not to retaliate against sexual harassment during travelling on public transport?

2. Literature review

A lot of literature is available on sexual harassment with working women, university young women and home workers (Apaak & Sarpong, 2015) but few studies have been conducted on sexual harassment during travelling on public transportation (Korn, 2018). Due to the environmental factors, people are in favour of using public transport for commute and a sizable number of women are public transport users in the urban context at the global level (Ceccato, 2017). In general, women use public transport more than men across the globe. In the USA, almost 64% of women are bus users in New York City, while this is 62% in Chicago City and 60% in Washington City (Goodyear, 2015). Moreover, in Sweden, women have less access to cars (Lundkvist, 1998) as well as women take shorter but varied trips at different times (Kunieda & Ganlhier, 2007).

Transit victimization is gendered (Ceccato, 2017) and men are more crime victims than women on public transport (Morgan & Smith, 2006) but women are more fearful than men during travelling on public transport (travelling-Sideris, 2016; Ceccato, 2017). A study conducted in

India reported that almost 50% of women faced sexual harassment during travelling on public transport (Jagori and UN Women, 2011)). Another study conducted in Nepal mentioned that 35% of all college going students during traveling on the bus faced harassment within six months (Gautam *et al.*, 2019). A study on Bangladesh conducted by Action-aid (2019) reported that 84% of women during traveling experienced harassment on public transport. These victimization patterns of sexual harassment are important as they may help in preventing crime victimization against women (Smith, 2008).

Violence is an under-reported crime and a study by Loukaitou-Sideris (2016) argued that 60-80 % of sexual harassment cases are not reported to the police due to the fear of repeated victimization both by people around them and the criminal justice system. It has an effect on the life of the person being harassed and created a negative impact on women (Mazumber & Pokharel, 2019). National level crime surveys are conducted in the West to manage the crime rate and for better policing. Although law exists in Pakistan to deal with harassment in public spaces and public transport. Section 509 of the Pakistan Penal Code related “insulting modesty and causing sexual harassment” and it’s a punishable offence in public spaces including public transport. It includes imprisonment which may extend for three years with a fine of Rs. 500,000 or both for those who conduct these acts. Women never reported these cases anywhere due to a number of reasons.

3. Theoretical framework

Sexual harassment of women in public transport can be viewed from victimization perspectives in two ways. The first was developed by Cohen and Felson in 1979 known as Routine Activity Theory (RAT) and the other is Fattah’s five factors of target selection. According to RAT, crime is a result of a combination of three factors, the availability of a suitable target and the second is the absence of a capable guardian and the third is the presence of a motivated offender. As far as harassment against women is concerned in public transport, it is evident in Pakistan that overcrowded buses during morning and evening working hours might provide the opportunity for the perpetrators to indulge in these crimes against women. The lack of reporting of these crimes instigates offenders to choose their potential victims as targets. The absence of a capable guardian increases the vulnerability of the victims and in the case of women harassment on public transport, this capable guardian is a police enforcement agency which is turn out strangers to become perpetrators. Combining with the RAT, Fattah’s (1991) five target selection factors of victimization such as proximity attractiveness, accessibility, manageability and risk are included to explain the victimization of sexually harassing young women especially on the public transport.

4. Research methodology

This study is quantitative in nature and uses a survey method to get answer to the research questions. Following is the detail of the participant selection technique, instrument development and procedures used. The data was collected from women who travel through public transport from three public bus stops in Rawalpindi namely 22 Number Chongi, Sadder and Katchery bus stops and approximately, 500 women travellers of three public bus stops were approached using the purposive sampling technique and only 105 women participated in the study voluntarily.

The data was collected by developing a self-structured questionnaire on a nominal scale. The extent of harassment was measured by using three response categories and nature of harassment was measured through six items from the existing review of literature and women's retaliation was measured on two items by using yes and no response categories and then further inquired about if yes and how to retaliate on three response categories and if not, then the response was measured through five categories. The last measure was about the information to the family on two categories of yes and no and if yes then what was their reaction was measured on four categories.

On the prescribed questionnaire, data were collected of two weeks from Monday to Friday standing out at bus stops on two timings: morning at 7:00-8:00 a.m. and in the evening between 4:00-5:00 p.m. during their catch time to bus. A team of three members of data collectors was trained to get the information. They were trained to get permission and if they were willing to participate in the study voluntarily, then they were given the questionnaire. It was also asked to get the questionnaire the next day if they were unable to complete it at the same time. Almost 200 questionnaires were distributed and only 105 participants filled the questionnaire. Data were analyzed through calculated frequencies and percentages. There were no names used in the questionnaire to keep their confidentiality. This paper only discusses the victimization perspective of sexual harassment in the context of female city bus users. The study can be expanded by including more perspective and geographical areas.

5. Results and analysis

Table-1 shows the results of participants' age, status and frequency of traveling on public transport. 42 % of women travellers belong to the 16-25 age category while 44% of women travellers belong to the 26-35 age group. With regard to the status of the participants, 41% of women travellers are students while 31% are working women and 28% are homemakers. The frequency of travelling of the 46% of participants is on daily basis, 18% of participants travel on a weekly basis while 19% travel twice a week and the rest 17% travel monthly or bi-monthly basis. The offenders are 64% passengers, 24% bus conductors, and 12% bus drivers.

Table-1: Socio-demographic characteristics

| Socio-demographic characteristic | Response categories | N | % |
|--|---------------------|----|----|
| Age of the participants | 16-25 | 44 | 42 |
| | 26-35 | 46 | 44 |
| | 36-45 | 13 | 13 |
| | 46-55 | 2 | 01 |
| Status of the participants | Female students | 43 | 41 |
| | Working women | 33 | 31 |
| | Female homemakers | 29 | 28 |
| Frequency of traveling on public transport | Daily | 48 | 46 |
| | Once a week | 19 | 18 |
| | Twice a week | 20 | 19 |
| | Bi-monthly | 11 | 10 |
| | Monthly | 7 | 07 |
| Offender's profile | Drivers | 13 | 12 |
| | Conductors | 25 | 24 |
| | Passengers | 67 | 64 |

Table-2 shows the experience and extent of the harassment in public transport as well as the profile of the offenders. 89% of women travellers respond to experiencing harassment during traveling in public transport. 36% of women travellers experienced harassment many times while 46% experienced sometimes and 11% experienced it once. The majority of the women travellers faced repeated victimization. The prevalence of sexual harassment during travelling is 89% in the city and these results are a bit higher conducted in 2014 by ADB in Karachi, Pakistan which was 85% shows an alarming situation with regard to women's safety.

Table-2: Experience and extent of the harassment

| Experience and extent of harassment | Response categories | N | % |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------|----|----|
| Experience harassment | Yes | 93 | 89 |
| | No | 12 | 11 |
| | Once | 12 | 11 |
| Extent of harassment | Sometimes | 48 | 46 |
| | Many times | 38 | 36 |
| | Never | 7 | 07 |

Table-3 shows that 86% of women travellers faced staring, 75% reported causal touch, 61% mentioned slang comments, 58% faced suggestive songs with closed lips while following and whistling was reported 32% and 26% respectively by the women travellers in public transport. Sexual harassment is a punishable offence in public spaces in Pakistan under PPC section 509. The prevalence of different types of sexual harassment shows clear negligence on the part of the government in public transport during traveling.

Table-3: Nature of the harassment

| Nature of harassment | Response categories | N | % |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|----|----|
| Staring | Yes | 90 | 86 |
| | No | 15 | 14 |
| Whistling | Yes | 27 | 26 |
| | No | 78 | 74 |
| Following | Yes | 34 | 32 |
| | No | 71 | 68 |
| Causal touch | Yes | 79 | 75 |
| | No | 29 | 39 |
| Slang comments | Yes | 64 | 61 |
| | No | 41 | 39 |
| Suggestive songs with closed lips | Yes | 61 | 58 |
| | No | 44 | 42 |

Table-4 shows women's retaliation against women and 52% of women travellers retaliated against these acts. Out of this 52% of women travellers, 82% retaliated verbally while 9% physically hit the person and another 9% asked for others to hit the person. This medium percentage of women's retaliation is due to their vulnerability for a number of reasons, difficulty to recognize the offender, and non-availability of police personnel during travelling. While asking other 48% of women travellers, why they did not respond and 8% mentioned that it is not considered a serious crime while other 10% mentioned that they are not given punishment and another 12% reported that this kind of act is difficult to prove and another 24% mentioned that they will be blamed for it so the remaining 46% said that it will dishonour the family. On asking women travellers about informing the incidents to the family, 62% informed

their families and the reaction of the families was imposing restrictions on 43% of women not to move alone in public and 25% restricted to use public transport while 11% were asked to stop the study/job. The remaining 21% of family members motivate the participants to face the situation and respond to the culprit. This low percentage of family support restricts women not to informing them because instead of finding any mechanism, they put restrictions on women.

Table-4: Women's retaliation against harassment

| Women's retaliation | Response categories | F | % |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----|----|
| Retaliation to harassment | Yes | 55 | 52 |
| | No | 50 | 48 |
| Types of retaliation | Verbal | 45 | 82 |
| | Physical | 05 | 09 |
| | Asked others for help | 05 | 09 |
| | Difficult to prove | 06 | 12 |
| Why not retaliation | Dishonour for the family | 23 | 46 |
| | Victim blaming | 12 | 24 |
| | No strict punishment for the culprit | 5 | 10 |
| Informed to the family | Not a serious issue to take action | 4 | 8 |
| | Yes | 65 | 62 |
| | No | 40 | 38 |
| If yes, what's the family's response | Restriction to use public transport | 16 | 25 |
| | Restrict to go out alone | 28 | 43 |
| | Asked to leave the job/study | 7 | 11 |
| | Motivate to face and response to it | 14 | 21 |

6. Discussion and findings

The study investigated sexual harassment, its prevalence, nature of harassment, and women's retaliation against these acts in the public transport of Rawalpindi city. Table 1 describes the basic demographic profile of the participants and offenders. It was found that 42 % of women travellers belong to the 16-25 age category while 44% of women travellers belong to the 26-35 age group. It was noted that 86% of women who commute to public transport have an average age of 25 years. With regard to the status of the participants, it was found that 41% of women travellers were students while 31% were working women and the rest of the women (28%) who commute to public transport were homemakers. In terms of their traveling frequency to public transport, 46% of participants reported that they travel on daily basis. 18% of participants reported that they travel on a weekly basis while 19% travel twice a week and the rest 17% travel monthly or bi-monthly basis. While asking the question from participants about the offenders, they reported that most of the time (64%) were passengers while they reported 24% of offenders as bus conductors and they also mentioned 12% of bus drivers as offenders.

With regard to the extent and experience of harassment in the public transport. It was found that 89% of women travellers reported experiencing harassment during traveling in public transport. These results are very similar to the study conducted in Pakistan by ADB (2014) that 85% of working women were harassed during traveling. It was also found that 36% of women travellers experienced harassment many times and this is consistent with the study results conducted by Valan (2020) that highlighted that 35% of young women faced harassment during the last six months in public transport. The current study also found that 46% of young women

experienced harassment sometimes during traveling in public transport and these results were similar to the report by Jagori and UN Women (2011) that 50 % of women experienced harassment in public transport in Chennai, India. The study also found that sexual harassment during public transport is not one time issue, it is a matter of repeated victimization and the majority of women travellers in this study highlighted repeated victimization. Gautam *et al.* (2019) highlighted in their report that women who travel on daily basis are sexually harassed more than the women who occasionally travel to public transport.

In terms of the nature of harassment women faced during a commute to public transport, it was reported that 86% of women travellers faced staring, 75% reported causal touch, 61% mentioned slang comments, 58% faced suggestive songs with closed lips while following and whistling was reported 32% and 26% respectively by the women travellers on public transport. The results clearly indicate that young women during traveling faced sexual harassment in Pakistan which is alarming to the government. It is pertinent to mention that section 509 of PPC deals with sexual harassment at public transport and public spaces and is a punishable offence.

With regard to asking participants about their reaction after the incidents only 52% of women travellers retaliated against these acts other went away quietly. Out of these 52% women travellers, 82% retaliated verbally while 9% physically hit the person and another 9% asked for others to hit the person. Although young women do not ready to bear these kinds of acts, they retaliated verbally, physically and are aware of the law but lack of police personnel at public transport or bus stops, it is difficult for them to report against strangers.

While asking about 48% of women travellers, who did not retaliate and out of this 48%, 8% mentioned that it is not a serious thing to report while other 10% mentioned that the criminals will not be punished and another 12% said that this kind of act is difficult to prove and another 24% mentioned that they will be blamed for it so the remaining 46% said that it will dishonour for the family. Violence is an under-reported crime and a study by Loukaitou-Sideris (2014) argued that 60-80 % of sexual harassment cases are not reported to the police due to the fear of repeated victimization both by people around them and the criminal justice system and society. On asking women travellers about informing the incidents to the family, 62% informed their families and the reaction of the families was imposing restrictions on 43% of women not to move alone in public and 25% restricted to use public transport while 11% were asked to stop the study/job. The remaining 21% of family members motivate the participants to face the situation and respond to the culprit.

As explained Routine Activity Theory by Cohen and Felson, earlier in the theoretical frame, the results of the study can be applied to sexual harassment in public transportation. The three factors of RAT: (i) targeting potential victim; (ii) presence of offender; and (iii) absence of guardian best explained sexual harassment in the public transport. The 46% of single young women travelling in this study on overcrowded public transport for education or work-related tasks on daily basis in the morning and evening are the easy target and when the victims and offenders are strangers (64%) for each other and thus an opportunity for offenders to perpetrate sexual harassment. Furthermore, lack of implementation mechanism of reporting a crime to the police instigate offenders to choose potential victims as targets. The absence of capable guardian and in this case, this is police personnel which is not present at bus stop or during travelling.

Besides these three factors, there are other factors (proximity, accessibility, attractiveness, and manageability) of the selection of the target by the offenders which are mentioned by Fattah (1991). For committing a crime in public transport, instead of maintaining a distance from females, the offender tries to settle near to the target (proximity). On public transport, victims are rarely known their offenders (64% strangers) which helps offenders to be confident and commit a crime without any fear (accessibility). Further, the age of the victims 42% (age group 16-25) and 46% (age group 26-35) show that vulnerability attracts the offenders with no reporting of these offences as well as social-cultural factors enable offenders to get away with the offences. The study is limited to the victim's perspective and it can be studied from the offender's perspective as well.

7. Conclusion

Sexual harassment in public transport is a daily routine and the young women who used public transport on daily basis are students and working women and the majority of them faced different types of teasing like staring, slang comments, casual touching, and whistling during traveling. Women are not ready to bear these acts and almost half of them verbalized and reacted immediately. Although there is a law against sexual harassment however, the young women who did not retaliate due to their family socialization, fear of discontinuation of their activities, and lack of sanctions put on offenders. It is recommended to develop an implementation mechanism to deal with this crime which has serious implications on the lives of young women.

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