

# SEXUAL HARASSMENT AMONG FEMALE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN BANGKOK, THAILAND

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## ABSTRACT:

**Background:** Sexual harassment has become a significant problem around the world. The recent survey report also showed the widespread existence of sexual harassment among Thai adolescents. This study was conducted to assess the perception, risk behavior, and occurrences of sexual harassment among female undergraduate students in Bangkok, Thailand and find the related factors to the occurrence of sexual harassment.

**Methods:** This cross-sectional study was conducted in one public and one private university. The 440 female undergraduate students were recruited by multistage sampling method and completed self-administered questionnaire with 4 main parts including socio-demographics, perception, risk behaviors, and occurrence of sexual harassment. Chi-square, Fisher's Exact test and multiple logistic regression were used to analyze the data.

**Results:** More than 70% of respondents had sexual harassment experience, and most of harassers were male students. The majority of students had high perception on sexual harassment with low risk behaviors. Grade Point Average (GPA), recreation, part-time job, and alcohol consumption were significantly positively associated with both perception level and risk behaviors while body image, part-time job, and alcohol consumption were significantly positively associated with sexual harassment occurrences ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $p = 0.003$ , and  $p = 0.001$ ), respectively.

**Conclusion:** The occurrence of sexual harassment in female students frequently found in the university even they had high perception on sexual harassment and conducted themselves appropriately to reduce risk. Thus, the universities should consider establishing regulations, and legal punishment should be imposed on the harassers.

**Keywords:** Sexual harassment, Perception, Risk behaviors, Female undergraduate students, Thailand

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## INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment phenomena constitute a violence form which has become the significant problems around the world [1]. The effect of sexual harassment can occur to the victims on physiological and psychological consequences as well as performance of their academic. Sexual harassment is decrease self-esteem of the victim, and may being diminish the valued as an individual [2]. Moreover, students may change their majors, drop a class, or quitting out of campus to escape from the harassers [3].

It is revealed that, in 1992, around 85% of

female in American face the problem on sexual harassment and 50% of female students had sexual harassment experienced [4]. In Asia, 22% of Japanese students had experienced in sexual harassment [5]. The study in Vietnam found most of students who had sexual harassment experienced kept quiet with no reaction [6]. Even in the Islamic country as Indonesia the sexual harassment also occurred among female students with the prevalence around 16.28% [7]. Recent survey report in Thailand showed the widespread existence of sexual harassment [8]. For the perception of Thai university students about sexual harassment, only 50% of them are more likely accept physical harassment as sexual harassment. Moreover, non-verbal and verbal harassment has not enough attention from academic

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**Table 1** Level of perception and risk behavior

Factors	Level		
	Low n (%)	Moderate n (%)	High n (%)
<b>Perception</b>			
Verbal harassment	3 (0.7)	164 (37.3)	273 (62.0)
Non-verbal harassment	5 (1.1)	175 (39.8)	260 (59.1)
Physical harassment	2 (0.4)	98 (22.3)	340 (77.3)
Quid pro quo	10 (2.3)	110 (25.0)	320 (72.7)
<b>Risk behavior</b>			
Wearing clothes	410 (93.2)	29 (6.6)	1 (0.2)
Life style	390 (88.6)	39 (8.8)	11 (2.5)
Social media	404 (91.9)	30 (6.8)	6 (1.3)

Low = <60% , Moderate = 60-80% , High = >80%

**Table 2** The incidence of different types of sexual harassment

Occurrence of sexual harassment	n (%)
<b>Type of sexual harassment</b>	
Verbal harassment	361 (82.0)
Non-verbal harassment	259 (58.2)
Physical harassment	301 (68.4)
Quid pro quo	235 (53.4)

authorities in order to overlooked as an insignificant issue [9]. Furthermore, 85% of undergraduate students had experienced at least one sort of sexual harassment [10].

Bangkok has a relatively moderate crime rate when compared to rural area [11]. For the magnitude of sexual harassment among adolescent group aged between 15 and 24 years old in Bangkok. It found that about 66 % of participants had sexual harassment experienced and 60% of female were sexually harassed by males [12]. Thus, this study tried to investigate the magnitude of sexual harassment among female undergraduate students, their perception and risk behavior related with the sexual harassment

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

A cross-sectional study was conducted in May 2015 to assess the occurrences of sexual harassment among female undergraduate students in Bangkok, Thailand. Multistage sampling method used to recruit 440 Thai female students (244 and 196 students from public and private university, respectively) aged between 18-24 years old, studies in first to fourth year of Thai-language program. The sample size was calculated from Yamane's formula [13] where the estimated female undergraduate students in Bangkok were 376,947 and the level of precision was 10%. The students were asked to answer the questionnaire which composed of socio-demographics, perception, risk behaviors, and sexual harassment experiences. The items of sexual

harassment asked in the questionnaire divided into four types; 1) verbal harassment: normally not aimed at sexual intercourse that convey insulting, degrading, and hostile attitude about females, 2) non-verbal harassment: consisted unwelcome staring, display pornography or suggestive materials, 3) physical harassment: defined as behavior that threatens, unwanted touch or attempted to have sex, and, 4) quid pro quo: exchange something for something that bribes for sexual favors. For the Cronbach's alpha test on perception was 0.966, risk behavior was 0.816 and sexual harassment experiences was 0.829. The ethical approval on 20 April, 2015 (061/58) was obtained from Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Research Subjects, Health Sciences Group, Chulalongkorn University. Data were cleaned and analyzed using SPSS version 17.0. Chi-square and Fisher's Exact test were used to find relationship between perception, risk behavior, occurrence of sexual harassment and socio-demographics of female students. Binary logistic regression were selected from variables with  $p < 0.20$  in bivariate analysis was used to find factors related to the occurrences of sexual harassment. The level of significant was set up at  $p$ -value 0.05.

## RESULTS

Majority of students had high perception (Table1) especially physical harassment (77.3%), the majority of students strongly agreed that touched on private parts; breasts or buttocks was sexual

**Table 3** Association between socio-demographic characteristics with total perception and total risk behavior

Socio-demographic characteristics	Perception		P-value	Risk behavior level		P-value
	Low and Moderate n (%)	High n (%)		Low n (%)	Moderate and High n (%)	
<b>GPA</b>						
1.51 to 2.50	34 (50.0)	34 (50.0)	0.001 <sup>a*</sup>	57 (83.8)	11 (16.2)	0.017 <sup>a*</sup>
2.51 to 3.50	87 (28.2)	222 (71.8)		279 (90.3)	30 (9.7)	
≥ 3.51	11 (17.5)	52 (82.5)		62 (98.4)	1 (1.6)	
<b>Living status</b>						
Stay with father or mother	15 (22.7)	51 (77.3)	0.028 <sup>a*</sup>	63 (95.5)	3 (4.5)	0.127 <sup>a</sup>
Stay with relatives	5 (21.7)	18 (78.3)		23 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	
Stay alone	46 (27.4)	122 (72.6)		151 (89.9)	17 (10.1)	
Stay with freind	66 (36.1)	117 (63.9)		161 (88.0)	22 (12.0)	
<b>Body image</b>						
Thin	25 (31.2)	55 (68.8)	0.584 <sup>a</sup>	61 (76.2)	19 (23.8)	<0.001 <sup>a*</sup>
Normal	54 (29.2)	131 (70.8)		163 (88.1%)	22 (11.9)	
Plump	39 (33.6)	77 (66.4)		116 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	
Overweight	14 (23.7)	45 (76.3)		58 (98.3)	1 (1.7)	
<b>Recreation</b>						
Shopping	13 (30.2)	30 (69.8)	0.022 <sup>a*</sup>	40 (93.0)	3 (7.0)	0.001 <sup>b*</sup>
Surfing the internet	60 (37.7)	99 (62.3)		132 (83.0)	27 (17.0)	
Listen music/watch movie	37 (24.5)	114 (75.5)		142 (94.0)	9 (6.0)	
Reading book	14 (22.6)	48 (77.4)		61 (98.4)	1 (1.6)	
Exercise	6 (26.1)	17 (73.9)		22 (95.7)	1 (4.3)	
Hanging out at nightlife	2 (100.0)	0 (0.0)		1 (50.0)	1 (50.0)	
<b>Alcohol consumption</b>						
Yes	90 (34.5)	171 (65.5)	0.013 <sup>a*</sup>	224 (85.8)	37 (14.2)	<0.001 <sup>a*</sup>
No	42 (23.5)	137 (76.5)		174 (97.2)	5 (2.8)	
<b>Addictive drug use</b>						
Yes	2 (66.7)	1 (33.3)	0.164 <sup>a</sup>	1 (33.3)	2 (66.7)	0.025 <sup>b*</sup>
No	130 (29.7)	307 (70.3)		397 (90.8)	40 (9.2)	

Analyzed with <sup>a</sup> Chi-square test, <sup>b</sup> Fisher's Exact test

\*Statistically significant association at p-value ≤ 0.05

harassment but did not have enough concern on touching on the other parts of the body, such as shoulder, hand, and arm. For quid pro quo, 72.7% of students had high perception. About 60% of students had high perception on verbal and non-verbal harassment. Regarding risk behaviors, most of students behaved themselves at low risk. In term of their lifestyle and communication, large number of students talked with a stranger in a friendly way and talked with opposite sex that revealed sexuality. For social media, most of respondents had low risk behavior, however, they usually posted or shared their photos and activities via social media and they chatted in Line or facebook about private or sexual matters. In term of dressing, most of them had low risk behavior (93.2%) (Table 1). Even most of students performed the low risk behavior regarding sexual harassment, more than 50% in each type of sexual harassment, the students ever had sexual harassment experience since they started studying in the university and they were more likely to be verbally harassed (82%) (Table 2). In physical harassment, there was no students had ever been

faced the unwanted attempts for having sexual relationship. Only small number of students felt uncomfortable on touching by their friends. One-fifth of female students were treated differently because of their gender. The sexual harassment type which less occurred among students was quid pro quo. For the sexual harassment occurrence, male and female friends, staff, and lecturers were identified to be harassers but male friends were most frequently identified as harassers.

The socio-demographic characteristics of the students i.e. GPA, living status, recreation, part-time job and alcohol consumption were significantly associated with the perception regarding sexual harassment. It was more likely that students who got high GPA had high perception. The respondents who lived with parents or guardians were had higher perception than those who lived with friends. The respondents who read book as their recreation had better perception than others. Regarding part-time job, tutors had the highest perception. The students who drink alcoholic beverage had lower perception than those who do not drink.

**Table 4** Multivariate analysis of factors associated with occurrence of sexual harassment

Variables	Adjusted Odd Ratio	P-value	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower	Upper
<b>Educational level</b>				
1 <sup>st</sup> year (Ref. group)				
2 <sup>nd</sup> year	1.28	0.381	0.73	2.25
3 <sup>rd</sup> year	0.91	0.764	0.52	1.60
4 <sup>th</sup> year	2.21	0.022	1.12	4.35
<b>GPA</b>				
1.51-2.50 (Ref. group)				
2.51-3.50	4.07	0.332	0.23	69.59
≥ 3.51	1.96	0.636	0.12	31.99
<b>Body image</b>				
Thin (Ref. group)				
Normal	1.61	0.003	1.17	2.22
Plump	1.10	0.645	0.72	1.66
Overweight	0.35	0.002	0.18	0.68
<b>Recreation</b>				
Shopping (Ref. group)				
Surfing the Internet	1.48	0.099	0.92	2.36
Listen music	1.20	0.327	0.83	1.72
Reading book	0.51	0.136	0.21	1.23
Exercise	0.81	0.609	0.36	1.79
Hanging out	3.18	0.160	0.63	15.97
<b>Part-time job</b>				
No (Ref. group)				
Brand presenter or model	2.64	0.003	1.28	3.20
Waitress or employee	2.02	0.311	0.40	17.31
Tutor	1.42	0.749	0.16	12.70
Salesman	2.09	0.464	0.28	15.19
<b>Alcohol consumption</b>				
No (Ref. group)				
Yes	2.13	0.001	1.38	3.28
<b>Perception</b>				
High perception (Ref. group)				
Moderate	1.18	0.775	0.36	3.86
Low	3.49	0.033	1.15	10.61
<b>Risk behavior</b>				
Low risk (Ref. group)				
Moderate risk	2.42	0.237	0.55	10.44
High risk	6.39	0.033	1.15	35.28

Ref: Reference group, \*statistically significant association at  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.05$

There were some socio-demographics characteristics of students significantly associated with risk behavior they performed i.e., GPA, body image, recreation, part-time job, alcohol consumption and addictive drug use. In contrast with perception, students who had good grade point performed low risk behavior regarding sexual harassment. Regarding the body image, the students with thin and normal shape had slightly higher risk behaviors than others. The respondents who reading book as their recreation had lowest risk behavior. For part-time job, we found that students with part-time job seemed to have higher risk behaviors than those without part-time job and brand presenter or model were the most who performed risky

behaviors. The students who did not consumed alcoholic beverage had lower risk behaviors than who consumed alcoholic beverage. Students who used addictive drug did the risky behavior more than those who did not use drug (Table 3).

The independent variables that had  $p$ -value less than 0.2 from bivariate analysis were analyzed using multivariate logistic regression and found that three variables maintained significant i.e., body image, part-time job and alcohol consumption. Body image of females in normal shape showed the significantly positive association ( $p = 0.003$ ) but, overweight revealed the significantly negative association with sexual harassment occurrence ( $p = 0.002$ ). Part-time job in type of brand presenter or model was

significant association with sexual harassment occurrences ( $p = 0.003$ ). Alcohol consumption found to be associated with sexual harassment occurrences ( $p = 0.001$ ). The adjusted odd ratio of this variable was 2.13, this meant that the respondents those who consumed alcoholic beverage had twice more likely to be sexually harassed. Interestingly, the students with low perception were 3.49 times more likely to be sexually harassed compare to students with high perception. Similarly, students with high risk behavior were 6.39 times more likely to had experience of sexual harassment compared to students with low risk behaviors with *p-value* 0.033. Moreover, The 4<sup>th</sup> year students were more likely to be harassed with *p-value* 0.022 (Table 4).

## DISCUSSION

Sexual harassment frequently occurred in university, female undergraduate student had experience of sexual harassment and most of their harassers were male friends. This finding was consistent with study of Muangman which found that the prevalence of sexual harassment among female students in university as high as 85% and they had direct experience at least one type of sexual harassment [10]. The high prevalence of sexual harassment also found in the western country like the United states, the American Association of University Women revealed that females were having experienced some form of sexual harassments at school or campus around 87% [14].

Most of students had high perception toward sexual harassment. This finding was consistent with Katz's study which showed that the students in Canada (65%) had high perception and most of student perceived physical harassment as sexual harassment [15]. Regarding their behaviors, it was found that the majority of the respondents performed risk behavior at low level, but some behaviors were frequently performed. Performing behavior that risk for sexual harassment may come from peer pressure. It is possible that the person does not actually wish to perform that behaviors, but compliance with group seems more important to them [16]. The risk behaviors may include consuming alcohol. The previous study revealed that the people who drinking alcohol were more likely to lost control of their brain and body, this may influence them to do some inappropriate behaviors [17].

The students with low perception more likely to be sexually harassed as same as the students with high risk behavior were more likely to had experience of sexual harassment. There were some socio-demographic characteristics of female

undergraduate students that influence the sexual harassment occurrences which are body image of students, part-time job that they did and alcohol consumption. The body image of students was very strong significantly associated with sexual harassment occurrence and the students who had normal shape were 1.61 times more sexually harassed compared with students who had thin shape while female students with overweight were 0.35 times less sexually harassed. In other words, the respondents who had sexual harassment experiences were in normal shape and the students with overweight had less experiences. The body attractiveness of the victims could be a stimulator to the harassers. Physical attractive females can stimulate sexual harassment occurrences. Absolutely, males would be tried to make sexual relationships with females, or give unwelcomed sexual attention. So, experience of sexual harassment will be occur to female who were more physical attractive compared to those who were less attractive [18].

Students who were brand presenters or models had 2.64 times more experiences of sexual harassment compared to those who did not do part-time job. This may cause by the personal character of them that were more likely talkative or outgoing person and most of them were drinking alcohol. Moreover, they had more chance to expose themselves to the strangers in an environment that lead to sexual harassment unlike students who had no part-time job. This is seemed to be the reason that the respondents without part-time job less likely to had sexually harassed. This finding was supported by Pina's study which found that the adolescents who had a job as salesman and brand presenters were more likely to had high risk behaviors and high experience of sexual harassment according to their characteristics and their behaviors to motivate the harassers [19].

Consuming alcoholic beverage influenced the sexual harassment for 2.13 times. This finding was similar to another study which found that the adolescents with alcohol consumption had higher experience of sexual harassment than those without alcohol consumption. This is because alcohol can make the victims lost control and conducted improper behaviors. Therefore, the harassers seemed to find the opportunity to do harassed when the victim got drunk [20].

## CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study was to assess the current situation of sexual harassment among female undergraduate students in Bangkok. The occurrence

of sexual harassment was 74.3%. The most prevalence of sexual harassment was verbal harassment by peers. For perception, the majority of students had high perception toward sexual harassment. Regarding the risk behavior, most of students performed their risk behavior in low level. Factors affecting to the occurrence of sexual harassment were body image, part-time job, and alcohol consumption. Thus, the academic institutions should be established regulations to prevent sexual harassment. Moreover, penalty or legal punishment should be conducted to harassers.

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