Sexual harassment of higher education female students in Afghanistan: A case study

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This study investigates what behaviours female students considered harassing and to what extent they experienced them. It also explores perpetrators and locations of harassment, effects on students, coping strategies, and reasons for not reporting harassment. A questionnaire was used to collect data from 317 female students at Takhar University. The findings showed that female students experienced a wide range of harassing acts to varying extent. A stranger, taxi driver and students other than classmates were reported to be the most frequent harassers. Female students were frequently harassed on online platforms, corridors, walkways and on the way to and from university. Harassment had a variety of effects on female students, and they used passive and self-centred strategies (e.g., intentionally wearing dresses thought to draw less attention of perpetrators) to deal with harassment. Moreover, they did not report their harassment experiences for various reasons. The study suggests revisiting the existing policy on harassment and prescribing sanctions against perpetrators.

Introduction

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world where violence against women is very prevalent. On a brief to the Security Council on the situation in Afghanistan in September 2020, the Secretary General's Special Representative for Afghanistan stated that Afghanistan was one of the worst places in the world to be a woman, though the country made significant progress in the last 20 years (*Ariana News*, 2020). There is an estimation that 87.2% of Afghanistan women experienced at least one form of sexual, physical or psychological violence and 60% of them experienced multiple forms of violence (Manjoo, 2015). Chauhan and Jungari (2021) studied spousal violence against women in Afghanistan using the data from the 2015 Afghanistan Demographic and Health Survey. The sample was 20,827 married women aged 15 to 49 years. They reported that 52% of women experienced some form of spousal violence. Furthermore, gender inequality is very widespread in many areas including education (Orfan, 2021a; Noori & Orfan, 2021), which has been negatively impacted by conflicts and political instabilities (Noori et al., 2022). Gender inequality is embedded in the educational materials used by schools and universities. For instance, Orfan (2021b) found that women were substantially under-represented and associated with very few social roles in high school English textbooks.

Sexual harassment has been addressed in various laws aimed to fight violence against women in Afghanistan. Law on Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) considers harassment as an act of violence against women, but it does not provide a definition (MoJ, 2009). However, Law on Prohibiting of Harassment against Women and Children defines harassment as a physical contact, illegitimate demands, verbal and nonverbal abuse or any act that causes psychological, physical harm and insult to the

human dignity of women and children (MoJ, 2018). These two laws oblige the Ministry of Higher Education to provide a safe learning environment for women, and include harassment issues and their consequences in the curriculum. Furthermore, the Ministry is required to conduct seminars, workshops, and conferences on harassment for students, teaching and staff members of both public and private universities. They are also required to take preventive measures against harassment of women at universities.

Enforced by Law on Elimination of Violence against Women and in the light of the findings of the study by GSI (2010), the Ministry developed a policy "Non-Discrimination and Anti-Harassment Policy in Higher Education Institutions" in 2015 to address discrimination and harassment issues at the universities, though the policy has misreported the findings of the study. For instance, the policy reported that 110 female students out of 200 female participants experienced some form of sexual harassment and discrimination while only 120 participants of the GSI study were female students and others (80) were male students and staff members. The policy describes sexual harassment and discrimination as behaviours that violate Islamic values and the constitution of Afghanistan. It obliges the Ministry, universities and other stakeholders to fight against sexual harassment and discrimination on campuses.

The public universities have taken certain measures to implement the policy. For instance, the Directorate of Gender in each university is assigned with dealing with and reporting harassment incidents to authorities. Complaints committees have been established in each university and complaints boxes have been installed in various places on campuses. The universities have conducted a few awareness programs with the financial support of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). For example, they have posted the Non-Discrimination and Anti-Harassment Policy in faculty buildings on larger banners. Although harassment is widespread on campuses, very few cases of harassment are reported to the Gender Directorates of universities and complaints committees. Complaint boxes receive very few or almost no complaints of sexual harassment. Lack of trust is the major reason why the vast majority of harassment cases go unreported. The current research studies Afghanistan undergraduate female students' views of sexual harassment.

Literature review

There is not a consensus on the definition of sexual harassment, and it is interpreted differently in different contexts (Popoola, 2008; Joseph, 2015). However, one definition is frequently cited in the literature: sexual harassment is any unconsented, unwelcome sexual advances and sexual requests. It is similar to the definition presented by Afghanistan Law on Prohibiting of Harassment against Women and Children. It can be physical (e.g., touching), verbal (e.g., calling pet names) and nonverbal (e.g. winking). It can take place offline and online (Galdi & Guizzo, 2021; Willness et al., 2007; Steineger, 2001; Aluede, 2000). It can include unwelcome touching, kissing, hugging, sexual comments and gestures, intrusive questions about someone's private life, repeated phone calls, sending sexual messages and many more (Pierce, 2003). Sexual harassment can be placed on a

continuum that ranges from fairly mild behaviours such as ogling, sexist comments to severe ones, e.g., a direct demand for sexual favours, sexual assault (Popoola, 2008).

Studies have found various perpetrators of sexual harassment. Sivertsen et al. (2019) reported that someone outside the university committed most of harassment incidents followed by fellow students. Wood et al. (2021) and Clodfelter et al. (2010) concluded that the harassers were more likely to be male while Cantor et al. (2015) and Kearney and Gilbert (2012) found that the victims' classmates were more likely to be the perpetrators. Kelly and Parsons (2000) reported that undergraduate or graduate students mostly harassed female undergraduate students while a faculty member harassed most graduate female students. Wood et al. (2021) and Huerta et al. (2006) found that university teaching and staff members harassed female students. Furthermore, various researchers (Hill & Silva, 2005; Clodfelter et al., 2001) showed that harassment took place in a variety of locations, e.g., dorms, classrooms, labs, gym, outside a classroom, lecture halls.

Sexual harassment has various educational, psychological, and social effects on female students (Shi & Zheng, 2021; Glass et al., 2020; Sojo et al., 2016). It leads to loss of trust and concentration in studies (Pina & Gannon, 2012; Hill & Silva, 2005). Jordan et al. (2014) argued that sexual harassment could result in students' disinterest in studies and poor academic performance, which in turn may lead to students withdrawing from the university. It leads female students to feel depressed, lose their self-esteem and confidence and suffer from trauma (Shumba & Matina, 2002). Comer (2013) and Ryckman (2008) reported that experience of sexual harassment could be traumatic for female students and may cause them develop a fear of men. Balick (2004) concluded that sexual harassment made female students feel embarrassed, frightened, isolated, lonely and reserved. According to Quist-Arcton (2003), other students may start gossiping about the victims if their cases become known, which results in their isolation. Consequently, they may abandon their higher education. Muasya (2014) and Mama (2009) found that sexual harassment made it difficult for some female students to have access to residence halls, library and cafeteria and prevented them from moving around on campus. Other studies (e.g., Wasti et al., 2000) found that their participants experienced headaches, sleeping and eating disorders.

Research has shown that female students used various strategies to cope with harassment on campuses, that may be classified into two categories: external and internal. An external approach involves strategies such as confronting the perpetrators and reporting the harassment while an internal approach focuses on managing the victims' emotions (Vohlídalová, 2015). Sigal et al. (2003) classified coping mechanisms into active (direct) and passive (indirect) categories. Active responses involve strategies that confront the perpetrators (e.g., reacting verbally or physically), whereas passive mechanisms include responses that are self-focused (e.g., avoiding eye contact). Vohlídalová (2015) reported that avoiding the perpetrator and silence were common strategies students used to cope with harassment. Popoola (2008) found that female students used a number of strategies such as avoiding and ignoring the perpetrator, confronting the harasser and resorting to prayers to deal with harassment. Numerous researches (e.g., Hill & Silva, 2005; Kelley &

Parsons, 2000) have found that a small number of students took a formal action and reported to the university authorities.

Various reasons can account for why the harassed are reluctant to report their victimisation. Lack of trust is the main factor why female students do not report harassment cases and seek support from relevant offices (Akpotor, 2013; GSI, 2010; Lonsway et al., 2008). Some victims do not report their harassment cases as they believe that the authorities do not take any actions against the harassers. Some victims do not report their harassment cases because male students blame them for provocative dressing (Leach, 2013; Cortina & Magley, 2003). GSI (2010) reported that students, in particular females, did not report harassment cases because they believed that universities authorities would blame them. They would be prevented from obtaining their higher education if their family members learned about it, and they feared the consequences of reporting, e.g., the harasser's threat.

A study (GSI, 2010) investigated gender-based violence in three public universities in Afghanistan. It found that gender-based violence was a challenge on university campuses although there was a tendency to deny its existence on campuses. Students and staff members, particularly men, were reported to be the perpetrators of gender-based violence. Orfan (2022) studied students' perspectives about faculty incivility in Afghanistan higher education institutions. His findings revealed that faculty members sometimes harassed students based on their gender. Kakar (2018) reported that sexual harassment was widespread on university campuses. He reported the case of a female student in one of the private universities in Jalalabad, an eastern city in Afghanistan. The female student could not speak to her lecturers because if she did, all male students started ogling her. He also reported that female students did not feel safe on university campuses because their male counterparts regarded them as prostitutes, and attempted to have affairs with them for the fact that they were not at home. The author reported an account of another female student in Jalalabad who had to abandon her higher education due to harassment from one of her lecturers. She recounted that one of her university lecturers managed to find her phone number and called her regularly. The lecturer made immoral and sexual advances and she had to leave university to save her family's honour.

Purpose of the study

The current study investigates undergraduate female students' views of sexual harassment. It addresses the following research questions.

1. What behaviours do female students consider harassing and to what extent have they experienced them?
2. Who are the frequent sexual harassers and where has harassment frequently taken place?
3. What are the effects of harassment on female students?
4. What coping strategies have they used to deal with harassment?
5. What are the major reasons for not reporting harassment?

6. Is there a significant relationship between students' experience and impact of sexual harassment?

Methods

Participants

Participants in the current research were 317 female students who were majoring in various fields including the engineering, economics, education, language and literature, agriculture, law and political science and Sharia faculties of Takhar University, based in Taloqan, a city in the Northeast of Afghanistan. They were between 18 to 25 years old at the time of the study. Around 12% (n=38) of the participants were first year students while around 37% (117) were sophomores. Juniors (81) and seniors (81) made up 51% of the participants.

Instrument

The authors conducted focus group discussions (FGD) to identify items for the questionnaire, as Stork and Hartely (2009) considered a focus group a means of developing questionnaire items for a study. Five female students were randomly selected from Takhar University for the FGD which the authors conducted in a prearranged time and place on campus. The participants were required to sign a consent letter that ensured them of their voluntary participation and that their responses would be kept confidential. The authors used these and follow-up questions in the FGD.

- What are the harassing acts?
- Who were you harassed by?
- Where did you get harassed?
- How did harassment affect you?
- What strategies did you use to deal with harassment?
- What were your reasons for not reporting harassment incidents?

One of the authors took notes while the participants were discussing the questions. The authors developed 41 questionnaire items from the output of the FGD. They adapted 34 items from other studies (Sivertsen et al., 2019; Imonikhe et al., 2011; Imonikhe et al., 2012; Steineger, 2001; White, 2000; Wilson, 2000). It is noteworthy that the authors purposely excluded severe forms of sexual harassment (e.g., touching) for their safety since it is a very sensitive issue in Afghanistan.

The questionnaire comprised eight sections. The first part sought the participants' demographic information, i.e., class and gender. The second and third parts each with 20 items elicited the participants' responses about harassing behaviours and their experience of harassment. The fourth and fifth parts each containing 10 items aimed to seek students' views about perpetrators and location of harassment. The sixth and seventh parts with 12 and 13 items elicited responses about effects of harassment and coping strategies. The last section with 10 items sought responses about reasons for not reporting harassment.

Validity and reliability

The questionnaire was content validated by three experts. The problematic items were identified and revised based on their comments. The questionnaire was translated into Farsi (the lingua franca of Afghanistan) since English is a foreign language in Afghanistan and many cannot speak English (Orfan et al., 2021). The Farsi questionnaire was read by three Farsi editors to ensure its comprehensibility and clarity. A pilot test was carried out to ensure the consistency and reliability of the questionnaire items. The pilot test was administered with 18 randomly selected female students from Takhar University. The authors entered the data in an *Excel* spread sheet, and they were imported to *SPSS version 26.0* for further analysis. They ran the reliability test showing that the value of the Cronbach's alpha was over 0.75 for each category (Table 1). Thus, we concluded the questionnaire items showed higher internal consistency, which were appropriate for the study.

Table 1: Reliability value of questionnaire items

Category	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
Harassing acts	20	0.918
Harassment experience	20	0.893
Perpetrators	10	0.759
Locations	10	0.763
Effects	12	0.871
Strategies	13	0.753
Reasons for not reporting	10	0.879

Procedure

The authors used simple random sampling technique to choose 350 participants. The population of the research was 1837 female students at the time of the study (MoHE, 2020). They obtained a list of classes of each faculty, wrote their names in small pieces of paper and placed them in a container. After shuffling, they selected four classes from each faculty from which they chose every other female student on the roll sheet. They selected 50 participants from each faculty. Some faculties, e.g., engineering had fewer than 50 students. Therefore, the authors selected more participants from other faculties.

The authors reached out to lecturers who were teaching a course in the selected classes. After explaining the research and its purpose, they agreed to help with the administration of the questionnaire in their classes. The authors showed up to the faculty on a prearranged time. They explained the research and its purpose to the participants in seven sessions and handed them a copy of the questionnaire along with a consent letter. The participants were required to sign a consent letter that aimed to ensure them of the confidentiality of their responses and that their participation was totally voluntary. They were requested to read the instructions for each section and complete it accordingly. The authors encouraged the participants to ask about any vague or ambiguous items in the questionnaire. A total of 21 students from all sessions dropped out of the study, though

the questionnaire did not seek any personal information that could identify them. The data were collected from 12 to 26 May 2021. Since the fall of the country to the Taliban 2.0 in August 2021, the University has been open for some administrative activities (including revising this manuscript, 22 February 2022), though all learning and teaching activities were shut down at the time. The Taliban Ministry of Higher Education has announced that the University would resume its learning and teaching activities in March 2022. They have been stubborn about segregating female and male classes at the universities, which requires more budget, resources and facilities. In some instances, university female students have not been allowed to speak to their male professors face to face, and a chaperone is required when female students want to talk to their male professors in person. Similar to Taliban 1.0, they have continued to restrict women's social life since their rise to power in August 2021. Among many restrictions, they have stripped of teenage girls from going to secondary schools, required women to cover from head to toe in public and fired or suspended all women from civil service positions except those that cannot be replaced with men (e.g., midwife).

Analysis

After data collection, the questionnaires were thoroughly examined to ensure that they were completed appropriately. The researchers removed 12 questionnaires from the analysis as they were inappropriately completed. They numerically coded the data in an *Excel* spread sheet and imported them to *SPSS version 26.0* for further analysis. They used descriptive statistics to determine the frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation of the data. They also utilised regression analysis to explore for significant relationship between students' experience of sexual harassment and its effects on students.

Results

Harassing acts and female students' experience of harassment

The authors used descriptive statistics to answer the first research question "What behaviours do female students consider harassing and to what extent have they experienced them?" As Table 2 shows, female students rated 20 acts harassing to a various extent. Eight acts (i.e., physical contact, blocking, winking, calling a pet name, following, getting attention or phone number, following, whistling, inappropriate advances online) received a mean score of over 2.50, which indicates that students considered them very harassing. 12 other items received a mean score of between 2.41 and 2.07, which means that students rated these acts harassing. In addition, students experienced these harassing acts to varying degree. Four acts such as unwanted phone calls, unwanted talking, excessive staring and smiling and talking in a discomforting manner received a mean score of over 2.10, which indicates that female students frequently experienced these harassing acts. Moreover, 16 other items received a mean score of between 1.78 and 1.34, which means that female students sometimes experienced these behaviours.

Table 2: Students' views of harassing acts and their experiences of harassment (N = 317)

No	Items	Harassing acts		Experience	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1	Excessive staring	2.27	0.680	2.17	0.664
2	Comments and jokes	2.10	0.713	1.65	0.647
3	Intrusive questions about my private life	2.27	0.749	1.60	0.675
4	Questions about when I would get married	2.26	0.806	1.78	0.817
5	Unwelcome talking	2.07	0.706	2.22	0.646
6	Repeated or inappropriate advances on email, social networking sites or Internet chatrooms	2.47	0.731	1.70	0.776
7	Smiling or talking to you in a way that is uncomfortable	2.46	0.658	2.11	0.755
8	Whistling at you	2.59	0.653	1.67	0.756
9	Calling you a pet name, e.g., sweetie, honey	2.67	0.656	1.50	0.714
10	Trying to get your attention or get your phone number	2.64	0.614	1.72	0.729
11	Making a comment about your appearance	2.36	0.731	1.64	0.681
12	Following you	2.66	0.610	1.67	0.729
13	Intentionally blocking your path	2.71	0.614	1.48	0.692
14	A girl talking to me about marriage on behalf of another person (man)	2.21	0.746	1.41	0.643
15	Inappropriate physical contact	2.75	0.604	1.34	0.653
16	Winking	2.69	0.625	1.55	0.690
17	Unwanted phone calls	2.27	0.718	2.23	0.896
18	Unwanted text messages	2.31	0.741	1.74	0.694
19	Unwanted letters	2.40	0.755	1.44	0.680
20	Unwanted email	2.31	0.753	1.47	0.705

Harassing behaviours on a three-point Likert-style scale: Not harassing=1; Harassing=2; Very harassing=3.
Experience of harassment on a three-point Likert-style scale: Never=1; Sometimes=2; Frequently=3)

Perpetrators and locations of harassment

Descriptive analysis was used to examine the second research question "Who are the frequent sexual harassers and where has harassment frequently taken place?" As Table 3 shows, various individuals harassed female students to varying degree. A stranger, taxi driver and students other than classmates received a mean score of over 2.10, which indicates that they were the most frequent harassers. The mean score for other individuals (i.e., classmates, university's staff, and cafeteria workers) is between 1.44 and 1.17, which indicates that they sometimes harassed female students. Librarians, University guards and lecturers with a mean score of less than 1.2 are reported to be the least frequent harassers. Furthermore, the results of descriptive analysis show that female students experienced harassment in various locations. Online platforms, corridors, on the way to and from university and university walkways received a means score of over 2.10 (Table 3), which

indicates that female students frequently experienced harassment in these places. Moreover, other locations (i.e., classrooms, lounge, dorm, library, cafeteria and offices) received a mean score of less than 1.40, which means that female students sometimes experienced harassment in these places.

Table 3: Students' view of perpetrators and location of harassment (N = 317)

No	Perpetrators Items	Mean	No	Locations Items	Mean
1	A stranger/no one I knew	2.23	1	Online platforms (e.g., social media)	2.29
2	Taxi driver	2.19	2	Corridors	2.22
3	A student other than my classmates	2.16	3	On the way to and from university	2.19
4	My classmates	1.44	4	University walkways	2.13
5	University's staff	1.40	5	Classrooms	1.36
6	Cafeteria workers	1.24	6	Lounge	1.27
7	Faculty's staff	1.17	7	University residence (dorm)	1.19
8	Librarians	1.10	8	University Libraries	1.19
9	University guards	1.10	9	Cafeteria	1.18
10	My lecturers	1.09	10	University offices	1.16

Perpetrators and locations of harassment on a three-point Likert style scale:
Never = 1; Sometimes = 2; Frequently = 3

Effects of harassment

The authors used descriptive analysis to answer the third research question "What are the effects of harassment on female students?" As Table 4 shows, harassment had various effects on female students.

Table 4: Female students' views of effects of harassment (N = 317)

No	Items	Mean	% A and SA
1	I had an indignant feeling towards men	2.95	66.6
2	I felt anxious	2.81	59.9
3	I felt depressed	2.77	59.6
4	I found it hard to study or pay attention in class	2.64	55.5
5	I did not go to university when I was alone	2.62	53.6
6	I lost my motivation to study	2.59	53.0
7	I had trouble sleeping	2.03	30.9
8	I felt lonely	2.01	30.0
9	I did not actively participate as much in class	1.98	27.8
10	I stopped attending a particular activity	1.88	24.7
11	I lost my appetite/not interested in eating	1.93	23.7
12	I lost my self-confidence	1.81	21.8

Effects of harassment on a four-point Likert style scale: Strongly agree (SA) = 1;
Agree (A) = 2; Disagree =3; Strongly disagree = 4

Around 67% stated that they felt indignant towards men. Almost 60% expressed that they felt anxious and depressed. Over 50% also reported that they lost concentration and motivation for study, and they did not go to university when they were alone. Over 27% stated that they had trouble sleeping, felt lonely and did not actively participate in the class. However, fewer than 25% stated that they did not attend a particular activity, lost their appetite and self-confidence.

Coping strategies

The authors used descriptive statistics to address the fourth research question "What strategies have they used to cope with harassment?" As Table 5 shows, the participants made use of a wide number of strategies. Over 68% of the participants avoided eye contact, intentionally wore dresses they thought they were less attractive and avoided being alone. Over 50% reported that they constantly assessed their surroundings, changed group of friends and ignored harassment. Furthermore, around 48% and 36% stated that they stayed away from particular places and escaped from place where harassment took place. Less than 30% reported that they expressed anger by facial gestures, requested help from others, reported to the university's gender directorate and responded verbally and physically.

Table 5: Female students' use of strategies to deal with harassment (N = 317)

No	Items	Mean	% of O and F
1	I avoid eye contact	3.26	75.7
2	I Intentionally wear clothes I think will attract less attention	3.17	72.6
3	I avoid being a alone	3.16	68.8
4	I constantly assess my surroundings	2.86	60.3
5	I change my group of friends	2.70	53.0
6	I ignore the harassment	2.72	51.0
7	I stay away from particular places on campus	2.48	47.6
8	I escape from the place where harassment happens	2.14	36.0
9	I express anger and distress by using facial expressions	2.09	28.3
10	I respond verbally	2.04	27.0
11	I report to university's gender directorate	1.93	23.0
12	I request for help from others (university guards, or bystanders)	1.86	21.8
13	I respond physically	1.37	9.8

Coping strategies on a four-point Likert style scale: Never = 1; Sometimes = 2; Often = 3; Frequently = 4

Reasons for not reporting harassment

Descriptive statistics were used to answer the fifth research question "What are the major reasons for not reporting harassment?" As Table 6 demonstrates, victims did not report harassment incidents for various reasons. Around 73% did not report harassment incidents because they did not want to get into trouble. Over 60% believed that they did not know who to seek support from at the university, they would not be believed, too hard to prove the case and the reporting would not be kept confidential. Around 56% did

not report harassment cases since they were too scared and that they did not think there was an office on campus to support the victims. Moreover, around 50% did not believe that support was provided for victims of harassment on campus and that there was not a policy in place to address harassment. Almost 48% stated that harassment was widespread where they lived.

Table 6: Students' views of reasons for not reporting harassment (N = 317)

No	Items	Mean	% A and SA
1	I did not want to get into trouble	2.86	72.9
2	I didn't know who could provide me with support at the university	2.68	65
3	I was worried I might not be believed	2.66	64.4
4	I thought it would be too hard to prove	2.60	61.5
5	I didn't think the incident would be kept confidential	2.60	60.6
6	I was too scared to report it	2.53	55.8
7	There is not an office on campus to provide support for those being harassed	2.57	55.6
8	No support is provided for those who experience harassment on campus	2.46	49.8
9	The university did not have any policy with regard to harassment	2.41	49.7
10	Harassment is common where I live Women experience these incidents all the time	2.35	47.9

Reasons for not reporting harassment on a four-point Likert style Scale: Strongly agree = 1; Agree = 2; Disagree =3; Strongly disagree = 4

Relationship between students' experience and impact of sexual harassment

The authors conducted regression analysis to answer the sixth research questions "Is there a significant relationship between students' experience and impact of sexual harassment?" As Table 7 shows, the results revealed that the p-value (0.000) is less than the alpha level (0.05), which indicates significance. Thus, it is concluded that students' experience and impact of sexual harassment are significantly related.

Table 7: Regression analysis

Model		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	5.408	1	5.408	14.418	.000
	Residual	118.154	315	0.375		
	Total	123.562	316			

a. Dependent Variable: Impact of sexual harassment
b. Predictors: (Constant), Students' experience of sexual harassment

Discussion

The results of the study showed that female students rated 20 behaviours harassing to varying degrees. They considered eight behaviours very harassing (e.g., physical contact, blocking, winking, calling a pet name, following, getting attention or phone number). They

experienced these behaviours to various extents. They frequently experienced less severe forms of harassment (e.g., unwanted phone calls, unwanted talking, excessive staring and smiling and talking in an uncomfortable way). However, they sometimes experienced more severe forms of harassment (e.g., inappropriate physical contact, intentionally blocking their way). It can be accounted for by the fact that the victims do not take less severe forms of harassment seriously and do not confront the perpetrators. Furthermore, many female students especially first-year students do not know what to do or where to seek support when they are harassed. Consequently, the harassers go unpunished and get more courage to harass female students in the future. On the other hand, female students may confront the perpetrators when they experience more severe forms of harassment, e.g., touching. It is on a par with the findings of the studies by Farahat et al. (2017) and Suhaila and Rampal (2012), who reported that most of their participants frequently experienced less severe forms of harassment while a small number of them experienced more severe forms of harassment.

The findings showed that various individuals harassed female students to varying degrees. They believed that a stranger (someone they did not know), taxi drivers and students other than their classmates were the most frequent perpetrators. The authors believe the victims may not have confronted these perpetrators since they did not know them, and they were afraid that they would seek more retaliation against the victims compared to the harassers they knew, e.g., their classmates. Furthermore, these perpetrators are transient and constantly moving around, which makes it almost impossible for the victims to identify them if they want to file a complaint against them. This accords with the finding by Sivertsen et al. (2019) that most of the harassment incidents were committed by someone outside the university.

Female students were sometimes harassed by their classmates, administrative staff and cafeteria workers. Librarians, guards and lecturers were believed to be the least frequent harassers. It can be explained by the fact that these individuals usually work in the same place and if they try to harass a female student, they can be easily identified if the victim files a complaint against them. The finding is consistent with that of the study by Wood et al. (2021) who reported that female students were harassed less frequently by faculty and administrative staff. However, it contradicts the findings of the studies by Hill and Silva (2005) and Huerta et al. (2006), who reported that lecturers were one of the most common harassers. Furthermore, female students experienced harassment in various locations, and they frequently experienced harassment in online platforms, corridors, university walkways and on the way to and from university. They sometimes experienced harassment in other locations, e.g., classrooms, lounge, which aligns with the findings by Clodfelter et al. (2001).

Female students reported that harassment had a number of effects on them. Harassment made them feel anxious and depressed, develop indignation towards men, lose their concentration and motivation to study and escaped classes when they were alone. Some female students reported that they had trouble sleeping, lost self-confidence, appetite, felt lonely and did not actively participate in the class. The authors believe that many female students particularly first-years and those coming from rural areas have barely interacted

with their male counterparts before their admission to the university, because interaction between girls and boys is considered taboo in Afghanistan, especially in remote areas. Therefore, they lack the basic skills to deal with the harassment and the harassers. Consequently, they end up being significantly impacted, even by less severe forms of harassment. It is in line with the findings by Farahat et al. (2017), Imonikhe et al. (2011), Imonikhe et al. (2012), and Huerta et al. (2006), who reported that their participants felt uncomfortable, anxious, sad, sleeping disturbance and wanting to cry as a result of experiencing sexual harassment.

Female students used a number of coping strategies. The majority of victims used passive and self-focused responses (i.e., avoiding eye contact, intentionally wearing dresses considered not to attract the harassers and avoiding being alone). The authors believe that the victims preferred indirect strategies since they did not want to make a scene of the event that may deteriorate the situation and put them at increased risk. Furthermore, they did not want anyone to know about the incident because most of the time individuals start blaming women for the incidents rather than the perpetrators. It is in line with the studies by Gaba (2010), Bonnie (2009) and Sigal et al. (2003), who reported that the victims prevented direct responses because they feared retaliation by the perpetrators. It also corroborates the findings by Vohlídalová (2015) and Popoola (2008) who reported that female students frequently used passive mechanisms to handle harassment. A small number of female students used strategies that would confront the perpetrators (e.g., verbally responding to the perpetrators). Similarly, a small fraction of the victims attempted to seek support from by-standers and take formal actions against the perpetrators. It supports the findings of the studies by Hill and Silva (2005) and Kelley and Parsons (2000).

The findings also showed that getting into further trouble, no support on campus, not being believed, proving and confidentiality issues were the major reasons why the victims did not report harassment cases. These findings support those by Vohlídalová (2015) and Bonnie (2009) who found the victims did not report their harassment experiences because they thought reporting could lead to further problems, such as retaliation, not being believed, and being blamed. It can be accounted for by the fact that there is not a specific office on Afghanistan public university campuses to handle harassment cases and provide the victims with the necessary support. There is a gender directorate in each public university with very few employees that deals with gender issues, e.g., gender inequality and discrimination. More recently it is assigned with handling harassment. Furthermore, female students do not report harassment incidents because talking about sexual harassment is considered a taboo especially when the listener is a stranger, e.g., director of gender office. Furthermore, there is not a system or mechanism in place to ensure the victims' confidentiality; therefore, female students do not report harassment.

Around half of the participants believed that there was not a policy to address harassment on campus. This is in line with the study by Bonnie (2009) who argued that victims of harassment were unfamiliar with university policies on harassment. There is a policy issued by the Ministry of Higher Education, which obliges every public university to address harassment on campuses. However, the universities have failed to educate faculty

members, students and other stakeholders about the policy. The authors of the current study did not notice the policy until they initiated the research. Moreover, the victims did not report harassment incidents because harassment was very widespread where they were living; and therefore, they did not take harassment incidents on campus seriously. It is explained by the fact that harassment of girls and women is very common in Afghanistan. Women and girls experience harassment on a daily basis when they leave home. Thus, female students do not take it very seriously when they experience it on campus. In addition, the results showed that there is a significant relationship between students' experience of sexual harassment and its impacts on students.

Conclusion

The current study revealed that various individuals harassed female students to varying degrees in different locations on campus. Female students made use of a number of strategies to handle harassment, and as most of them were passive and self-focused, they did not report their harassment experiences for various reasons. This study recommends the Ministry of Higher Education to revisit the policy on sexual harassment and prescribe sanctions against perpetrators in order to reduce the occurrence of harassment on campuses. Universities should raise awareness about sexual harassment and its negative effects on the victims in particular and society in general through conducting workshops for faculty members, students, administrative staff and those involved. Student unions should be encouraged and supported to run campaigns against sexual harassment on campuses periodically. The universities should also facilitate the establishment of support groups on their campuses, which may encourage victims of sexual harassment to safely tell their stories and seek support.

The major limitation is that hopes for a research-informed, equitable and professional approach to sexual harassment on campus may be fading, and follow up actions and further research may be impossible. It remains to be seen whether the Taliban's application of a tribal and restrictive interpretation of Sharia law in education will advantage, or disadvantage, women who are victimised on campus. Nevertheless, the authors hope that their findings will provide a baseline or benchmark that recognises the need "to listen to the voices of women" for their safety, the authors intentionally excluded severe forms of sexual harassment (e.g., touching, hugging) because sexual harassment is a sensitive topic in Afghanistan. Future studies (if possible) should take these into considerations.

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Appendix: Questionnaire
Sexual harassment of female students in higher education of Afghanistan

Section 1: Demographic profile

Please choose the most appropriate response.

1. Age   ☐ 18-22   ☐ 23-27   ☐ 28-32   ☐ 33+
2. Year of study   ☐ Freshman   ☐ Sophomore   ☐ Junior   ☐ Senior

Section 2: Harassing acts

To what extent do you consider these acts harassing? Please tick (√) the option that best represents your view.

No	Items	Not harassing	Somewhat harassing	Very harassing
1	Excessive staring			
2	Comments and jokes			
3	Intrusive questions about my private life			
4	Questions about when I would get married			
5	Unwelcome talking			
6	Repeated or inappropriate advances on email, social networking sites or Internet chatrooms			
7	Smiling or talking to you in a way that is uncomfortable			
8	Whistling at you			
9	Calling you a pet name, e.g., sweetie, honey			
10	Trying to get your attention or get your phone number			

11	Making a comment about your appearance			
12	Following you			
13	Intentionally blocking your path			
14	Talking someone (like girl, teacher) with me about marriage on behalf of someone else (man)			
15	Inappropriate physical contact			
16	Winking			
17	Unwanted phone calls			
18	Unwanted text messages			
19	Unwanted letters			
20	Unwanted email			

Section 3: Female students' experience of harassing acts

How often have you experienced these harassing acts? Please tick (√) the option that best represents your experience.

No	Items	Never	Some-times	Frequ-ently
1	Excessive staring			
2	Comments and jokes			
3	Intrusive questions about my private life			
4	Questions about when I would get married			
5	Unwelcome talking			
6	Repeated or inappropriate advances on email, social networking sites or Internet chatrooms			
7	Smiling or talking to you in a way that is uncomfortable			
8	Whistling at you			
9	Calling you a pet name, e.g., sweetie, honey			
10	Trying to get your attention or get your phone number			
11	Making a comment about your appearance			
12	Following you			
13	Intentionally blocking your path			
14	Talking someone (like girl, teacher) with me about marriage on behalf of someone else (man)			
15	Inappropriate physical contact			
16	Winking			
17	Unwanted phone calls			
18	Unwanted text messages			
19	Unwanted letters			
20	Unwanted email			

Section 4: Perpetrators of harassment

Who has frequently harassed you? Please read the tick (√) the option that best represents your experience.

No	Items	Never	Some-times	Frequ-ently
1	My classmates			
2	My lecturers			
3	Faculty's staff			
4	A student other than my classmates			
5	University's staff			
6	A stranger/no one I knew			
7	Cafeteria workers			
8	Librarian			
9	Taxi driver			
10	University guards			

Section 5: Place of harassment

Where have you frequently experienced harassment? Please tick (√) the choice that best represents your experience.

No	Items	Never	Some-times	Frequ-ently
1	University walkways			
2	Classrooms			
3	University Libraries			
4	Cafeteria			
5	University offices			
6	University residence (dorm)			
7	On the way to and from university			
8	Lounge			
9	Corridors			
10	Online (e.g., social media)			

Section 6: Effects of harassment

To what extent do you agree or disagree with these statements? Please tick (√) the choice that best represents your view.

No.	Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	I found it hard to study or pay attention in class				
2	I had trouble sleeping.				
3	I lost my appetite/not interested in eating.				

4	I did not actively participate as much in class.				
5	I stopped attending a particular activity.				
6	I did not go to university when I was alone.				
7	I felt anxious.				
8	I felt depressed.				
9	I lost my motivation to study.				
10	I felt lonely.				
11	I had an indignant feeling towards the opposite sex				
12	I lost my self-confidence.				

Section 7: Coping strategies

How often have you used these strategies to deal with harassment incidents? do you use these strategies to deal with harassment? Please check (√) the response that best represents your experience.

No	Items	Never	Some-times	Often	Frequ-ently
1	I express anger and distress by using facial expressions.				
2	I ignore harassment.				
3	I escape from the place where harassment happens.				
4	I request for help from others (university guards, one close or by standers-by)				
5	I respond verbally.				
6	I report to university's gender directorate.				
7	I avoid eye contact.				
8	I stay away from particular places on campus.				
9	I change my group of friends.				
10	I constantly assess my surroundings.				
11	I avoid being alone.				
12	I respond physically.				
13	I Intentionally wear clothes I think will attract less attention.				

Section 8: Reasons for not reporting harassment

To what extent do you agree or disagree with these statements? Please check (√) the choice that best represents your experience.

No	Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	I didn't know who could provide me with support at the university				
2	I thought it would be too hard to prove				
3	I didn't think the incident would be kept confidential				
4	I was worried I might not be believed				

5	I did not want to get into trouble				
6	I was too scared to report it				
7	Harassment is common where I live Women experience these incidents all the time				
8	The university did not have any policy with regard to harassment				
9	No support is provided for those who experience harassment				
10	There is not an office on campus to provide support for those being harassed				

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