

## Perceptions of University Students' On Sexual Harassment/Assault in Turkey

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### Abstract

*Sexual harassment/assault is one of the mostly spoken matter in Turkey and around the World. Almost half of harassed or assaulted people are university students. This study aimed to find out college students' thoughts and experiences on sexual assault and harassment. In this study, quantitative method was used. Within the quantitative method descriptive survey model was used. This research is conducted in a state university in Turkey. Freshmen of Education Faculty were chosen as a sample of the study. 184 freshmen, 140 of them are female and 44 of them are male, were participated to the study. As a result of this study, the rate of sexual harassment/assault that university students are exposed to is high. Even though the rate is high, notifying to authorities' rate is low.*

**Keywords:** sexual harassment, assault, students, university, campus.

Every single day, we wake up with a new harassment/assault news. On March 2019, we witnessed one of these news. It says, college students wrote on toilet walls as "X professor harassed me" in İzmir, Turkey. After this note, many female students confessed that they have been also harassed by that professor. University administration closed the toilet for usage and started an investigation. On August 2019, a man was lynched by folks since he attempted to rape his own 10 years old niece. In recent years, sexual harassment, as in other countries, is often on the agenda and considered a widespread and serious ethical problem in Turkey (Durmuş, 2013).

Even though men are exposed to sexual harassment, generally victims of sexual harassment are women. College students, working in education sector, working in health sector and similarly working in other sector all women are exposed to sexual harassment occasionally (Bakıcı, 1998; Çakır, 2007; Güngör, 1999; Özmen, 1998; Sarmaşık, 2009). As stated above, it is possible that girls in childhood ages or in puberty ages can be exposed to sexual harassment. Regardless of life cycle, sexual harassment effects the whole life and causes traumatic results for the individual. Especially sensitive affects can be more destroyable and effective (Durmuş, 2013).

What is sexual harassment? A series of undesirable sexual activity accompany sexual harassment. These are unnecessary physical contact, touch or handling, suggestive utterances about appearance and unpleasant words, jokes and comments, indecent assault and demand for sexual intercourse (Hattatoğlu, 1995). Sexual harassment, which has been started to discuss and became a remain on the agenda intensively after 1970's Western countries, express sexual approach and verbal and physical pressure related to sexuality that one of the parties who have social interaction (Livingstone, 1982). Commonly, sexual harassment term includes all different kinds of sexual violence starting with verbal assault, a simple touching or fondling viewed and called as "harmless", extending toward force to sexual intercourse without individual's approval (İlkkaracan, Gülçür& Arın, 1996).

Along with the definition of sexual harassment it is useful to define types of sexual assault. Güngör (1999) expressed types of sexual assault as:

- Unnecessary touching and physical contact,
- Indirect and unwanted signs and jokes, commenting on appearance and conscious verbal humiliation,
- Behaving saucily,
- Using obscene pictures at workplace,
- Sexual approach requests,
- Physical molestation.

Similar to Güngör (1999), Emre (1997) also listed sexual assault situations as;

- Sexual opening,
- Requests related to sexuality,
- Sexual trade for pay increase or benefit related to work,
- Sexual adjectives,
- Verbal or written referring toward sexual behavior,
- Presentation of object, picture or caricature connotative sexual implications,
- Gossips about one's sexual activities or capacities,
- Repeated meeting requests,
- Snide glance, whistling or touching,
- Asking questions or making comments on another person's sexual life,
- Attacking or forcing sexual performance.

Broadly speaking, %35 of women are exposed to physical or sexual violence by their own sexual partners or another individual and %7 of women are exposed to sexual harassment by any individual (World Health Organization (WHO), 2013). In Turkey, % 15.4 women are exposed to sexual violence by their partners or their husbands in any time of their lives (KadınaYönelikŞiddetÇalışması, 2009). Sexual violence is not only a kind of violence caused by husband or partner. In report of DSÖ (2012), it was stated that sexual violence, including sexual harassment and sexual assault, can occur in schools which is perceived as "safe" by teachers or peers. Also, in different parts of the world such as Africa, Latin America, South Asia, it was stated that female students are exposed to sexual harassment or assault by their peers and teachers at labs, classrooms and dormitories within the campus (WHO, 2012). Even though rate of sexual harassment incidence is high, reporting these harassment incidences are low (American College Health Association (ACHA) 2008; Payne, 2008). In literature, the rate of college students' exposing sexual harassment is between % 15-25 (Gover, Kaukinen, & Fox, 2008; Shorey, Stuart, & Cornelius, 2011). Additionally, it was reported that women affected from sexual harassment or violence are mostly young adults aged 16-24 (Gross, Winslett, Roberts, Gohm, 2006).

Unfortunately, researches show that college students' exposing to sexual assault is common (Abbey, Ross, McDuffie & McAuslan, 1996). The rate of exposing to sexual assault of college students within one semester is about % 40-50, and it can be seen that this rate is higher within one academic year (Hill & Keal, 2011). Here is mounting evidence that sexual assault is a common and reoccurring problem among college women (Abbey, 2002; White & Smith, 2004). Men are also sexually assaulted, but the prevalence among women is believed to be considerably higher and is the focus of this study. Researchers have reported that between one-fifth to one-quarter of collegewomen are raped during the course of their college careers (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). Moreover, during an academic year, approximately 2-3% of college women experience forcible rape (Fisher, Cullen & Turner, 2000; Mohler-Kuo, Dowdall, Koss, & Wechsler, 2004).

Of the 5,446 women, 28.5% reported having experienced an attempted or completed sexual assault either before or since entering college. Nineteen percent of the women reported experiencing completed or attempted sexual assault since entering college, a slightly larger percentage than those experiencing such incidents before entering college. Nearly 5% of the total sample were forcibly sexually assaulted since college entry (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher & Martin, 2009). The results of Durmuş (2013)' study showed that % 78,9 college students, who are almost finishing their college education, are exposed to sexual assault in Turkey, that is to say this shows both female and male college students are exposed to sexual assault in higher education. Even though researches investigating sexual assault in different places are increasing, it can be said that researches investigating sexual assault within campus or universities are not enough.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault published a report in 2014 and made suggestions concerning preventing sexual assault and harassment at schools and providing necessary service to victims. In that report, they stated that first step is to identify the problem and do researches on campus environment, and the second step is to prevent sexual assault and providing necessary services within the privacy policy. As it was stated above there are limited studies on sexual assault or harassment at campus or university environment, this study aimed to determine the college students' thoughts and experiences on sexual assault and harassment. Research questions of the study as follows;

1. What are perceptions of university students on sexual harassment/assault?
2. What is the rate of sexual harassment/assault University students exposed?
3. What kind of reactions do university students show?
4. Is there any difference between male and female students about exposing to sexual harassment/assault?
5. Is there any difference between male and female students on reaction to sexual harassment/assault?

## **METHOD**

In this study, quantitative method was used. Within the quantitative method descriptive survey model was used. Data was gathered during 2018-2019 spring semester with freshmen at a university in Turkey. Analysis of the data was made by SPSS program. Participants, data collection tools, data collection process, and data analysis of the study will be presented.

### **Participants**

This research is conducted in a state university in Turkey. Population of the study is the whole students in Education Faculty of a university. It is apparent that the majority of women experienced sexual aggression very early in their time on campus" (Gross, Winslett, Roberts, & Ghom, 2006). Therefore, freshmen of Education Faculty were chosen as a sample of the study. 184 freshmen, 140 of them are female and 44 of them are male, were participated to the study. Departments of participants are as follow; 80 (%43) are studying at preschool teacher education, 39 (% 21,2) are at Turkish teacher education, 40 (%21,7) are at special education teaching, and 25 (%13,6) of them are studying at science education teaching department. The place where participants are living are added to this study. 51 (%27,7) of the participants are living at home with their family, 18 (%9,8) of them are living at home with a friend, 8 (%4,3) are living at home alone, 73 (% 39,7) of them are living at dormitory at campus, and 34 (%18, 5) of the participants are living at a private dormitory outside the campus.

### **Data Collection Tool, Process, and Analysis**

As a data collection tool a questionnaire developed by Eroğlu, Seven, AbalıÇetin and Önok(2017). The questionnaire includes 16 questions to investigate socio-demographic characteristics, opinions and experience of students regarding sexual abuse and harassment. In this study, some parts of the questionnaire were used according to aim of the study. In this study,

- Sex,
- Place they stay,
- Department,
- Thoughts about sexual harassment/ assault
- If exposed to sexual harassment/assault at university
- If exposed to, reaction to it were asked to students within the questionnaire.

To apply the questionnaire, necessary permission was obtained from Ethical Committee of the university that the study was carried out. Also, participants' permission was also obtained and students were informed about the study. They were assured that this study was based on voluntariness and their names will not be used in the study. Consent forms were obtained from the participants. Questionnaire was applied to the students after their classes finished. Application of the questionnaire took almost 20 minutes for a participant group. Application of the whole questionnaire was lasted almost two months.

Analysis of the data was made by SPSS program. For gender, department, place they live, and thoughts about sexual harassment/assault were analyzed by using frequency statistics and whether they exposed to sexual harassment/assault and reaction to sexual harassment/assault were analyzed by using independent t test.

## Findings

In this section, frequency results for the thoughts of students about sexual harassment/assault will be presented, later their being exposed to sexual harassment/assault and their reactions to this situation will be presented by using independent t test results.

**Table 1: Behaviors that Students Thought as a Sexual Harassment/Assault**

Behaviors Thought as a Sexual Harassment/Assault	Yes		No		Missing	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Making sexually explicit jokes	141	76,6	41	22,3	2	1,1
Giving compliments related to sex	154	83,7	30	16,3	0	0
Calling disturbingly(honey, sweetheart)	97	52,7	86	46,7	1	0,5
Asking persistent questions about your date	109	58,9	74	40	1	0,5
Asking questions about your sex life	152	82,2	30	16,2	1	0,5
Using sexual phrases about your body	162	87,6	21	11,4	1	0,5
Exposing persistent glances which imply sexuality	167	90,3	17	9,2	1	0,5
Disturbing with sexually explicit materials ( e-mail, pictures, text message, notes..)	169	91,4	15	8,1	1	0,5
Inviting persistently to go out, have dinner even if you refused before	131	70,8	52	28,1	1	0,5
Evoking or saying that if you accept sexually explicit offer, you will get advantages	171	92,4	11	5,9	2	1,1
Evoking or saying that if you don't accept sexually explicit offer, you will have trouble in your academic or work life	172	93	11	5,9	1	0,5
Touching, kissing or hugging without your permission	171	92,4	12	6,4	1	0,5
Forcing sexual intercourse (physically)	172	93	12	6,4	0	0

%52,7 of students think “calling disturbingly (honey, sweetheart)” and %58,9 of them think “asking persistent questions about your date” as sexual harassment/assault. These are the lowest rates from the participants. As higher rates, %93 of students think that “forcing sexual intercourse (physically)” and “evoking or saying that if you don't accept sexually explicit offer, you will have trouble in you academic or work life” as sexual harassment/assault. Also, %92,4 of them think that “evoking or saying that if you accept sexually explicit offer, you will get advantages” and “touching, kissing or hugging without your permission” as sexual harassment/assault (Table 1).

**Table 2: Exposing sexual harassment/assault condition of students**

Exposing to sexual harassment/assault	N	%
Exposed	43	23,4
Not Exposed	122	66,3
My Friend Exposed	19	10,3
Total	185	100

When we asked participants whether they have been exposed to any behaviors at Table 1, students stated that % 23,4 of them exposed to sexual harassment/assault, and % 66,3 of them not exposed to sexual harassment/assault. %10,3 of these students said that their friends were exposed to sexual harassment/assault (Table 2).

**Table 3: Reaction to sexual harassment/assault**

Reaction to sexual harassment/assault	n	%
Do nothing	6	3,3
Reacted	53	28,8
Go authority	1	0,5
Told someone	11	6
Missing	113	61,4
Total	185	100

In Table 3, students' reactions toward sexual harassment/ assault behaviors are presented. %3,3 students stated that they did nothing. %28,8 of them said that they reacted to sexual harassment/assault behavior. Only % 0,5 students went to authority. %6 of students told someone about exposing to sexual harassment/assault. % 61,4 of these students didn't responded this question since they haven't been exposed to sexual harassment/assault.

**Table 4: T test table of comparison on exposing to sexual harassment/assault according to gender**

Group	N	Mean	Std.	t	df	p
Deviation						
Female	136	1,81	0,615			
Male	40	2,03	0,357-1,41368,241		0,006	

According to the independent t test results done for comparison of female and male students being exposed to sexual harassment/assault, there are difference between groups. Sig. (2 Tailed) was found 0,006. Hereunder, level of male students being exposed to sexual harassment/assault ( $X = 2,03$ ) are higher than level of female students ( $X = 1,81$ ) (Table 4). Although table of independent t test results for comparison of female and male students on reaction to sexual harassment/assault weren't given here, according to the analysis there aren't any difference between groups. Sig. (2 Tailed) was found as 0,178.

### CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Sexual harassment includes verbal assault, toughing or founding which are called as "harmless" or all kinds of sexual violence types such as rape (İlkaracan, Gülçür, & Arın, 1996). Sexual harassment/assault is one of the mostly spoken matter in Turkey and around the World. At street, work, market, bus, in short it can be encountered in everywhere. This is most disturbing thing that a person can be sexually harassed or assaulted by someone that s/he will never see again in her/ his life, it is further disturbing that a person can be harassed or assaulted by a person with whom s/he spend time together such as at work, school, university, or neighborhood. Karayel (2006) stated that people' being exposed to sexual harassment/assault % 49,8 are college students. This shows that almost half of harassed or assaulted people are university students. Even though sexual harassment/assault is a hot topic around the World, studies emphasizes that students' sexual harassment/assault definition differs from country to country and even students don't know which behaviors are included in sexual harassment/assault definition (Paludi, Nydegger, Desouza, Nydegger, & Dicker, 2006). Thus, this study aimed to find out college students' thoughts and experiences on sexual assault and harassment.

According to the responses of participants thought that these behaviors called as sexual harassment/assault since the rates for each behavior is over %50. The lowest ones are as %52,7 "calling disturbingly (honey, sweetheart)" and %58,9 "asking persistent questions about your date" as sexual harassment/assault. The highest ones are %93 "forcing sexual intercourse (physically)" and "evoking or saying that if you don't accept sexually explicit offer, you will have trouble in you academic or work life" as sexual harassment/assault. Also, %92,4 "evoking or saying that if you accept sexually explicit offer, you will get advantages" and "touching, kissing or hugging without your permission" as sexual harassment/assault. Since each behavior's rate is over %50, it can be said that university students see all of these behaviors as a sexual harassment/assault.

Even though some of them don't see "calling disturbingly (honey, sweetheart) and "asking persistent questions about your date" as a sexual harassment/assault, it can be explained as these callings are common around university students and their chats are on their dates mostly. Thus, they don't see these as a sexual harassment/assault. Some studies support the results of this study. Eroğlu, Seven, AbalıÇetin, and Önok (2017)'s study results are similar to this study. According to that study almost half of the students don't see sexually explicit phrases (making sexually explicit jokes, asking persistent questions about your date and saying gendered discourse) as sexual harassment/assault.

Additionally, disturbing physical behaviors (touching, kissing or hugging without your permission, disturbing with sexual related materials and forcing sexual intercourse (physically)) are seen as sexual harassment/assault similar to this study.

Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski (1987), in the only national survey of sexual and physical assault among college and university students, found that 27.5% of undergraduate women reported a physically coercive sexual experience (rape or attempted rape); 11.9% were verbally coerced into sexual intercourse; and 14.4% were verbally intimidated into other forms of unwanted sexual contact. In Eroğlu, Seven, AbalıÇetin, and Önok (2017)'s study they reported that university students' % 28,9 is exposed oneself and % 7,4 stated that one of their friends exposed to. Similar to these studies, this study also found out that & 23,4 of university students are exposed themselves and %10,3 are stated that their friends are exposed to sexual harassment/assault. This shows us that almost once in every three university students are exposed to sexual harassment/assault. Payne (2008) is also similar to this result. Payne (2008) stated that almost once in every four university students are exposed to sexual harassment/assault.

In literature, it was stated that once in every three students, exposed to sexual harassment/assault, didn't tell this to others or didn't reported anyone including police (Boynton Health Service, 2010; Hill & Silva 2005). Similar to that Eroğlu, Seven, AbalıÇetin, and Önok (2017) explained that most of the students exposed to sexual harassment/assault didn't applied to legal authorities. This study's results support previous studies. In this study, only one student said that he went to authority after the harassment/assault. This shows that university students don't know whether what they should do or what they can do after harassment/assault or they are afraid to. Reasons why victims do not notify related institutions, in previous studies, are negative attitudes of people working in those institutions (insulting questioning, medical examination, attacks toward victims' personality by lawyers), fear of being accused oneself and society's approach, not relying on judicial authorities (Knight, 1995; Ledoux& Hazelwood 1995; Finkelson&Oswalt 1995). As a result of this study, 53 students told that they reacted to, 11 said that they told someone and 6 did nothing. It is striking that only one student went to the authority after harassment/assault. This indicates that university students are nonreactive after harassment/assault. Even though being nonreactive increases assault behaviors, it is seen that victims mostly remain unresponsive(Özçiçek, 2009; Karayel, 2006; Stockdale,1997).

According to the results of independent t tests, male students mean is higher than female students about being exposed to sexual harassment/assault. This can be interpreted in two ways. First of all, it can be concluded as male students are more exposed to sexual harassment/assault. Secondly, we can say that male students are more courage than female students about confessing about sexual harassment. As it was stated above, mostly sexual harassment/assault victims don't tell about it due to different reasons. When we look at the difference between male and female students about their reactions to sexual harassment, there isn't any difference between two groups. This means both male and female students react similar. As it was also stated above, most common reaction is only reacting to the person who harasses or assaults. Students mostly prefer whether doing nothing or only telling someone.

## **RECOMENDATIONS**

In this study, which aimed to determine the dimensions of sexual harassment/assault which is a serious problem for our society, it is an interesting result that the rate of sexual harassment/assault is high. Even though the rate is high, notifying to authorities' rate is the lowest. Being exposed to sexual harassment/assault level's being high and notifying to authorities' level is low show us to deal with sexual harassment/assault problem as sociologically, judicially and medically.

Since university campuses are one of the prior sexual harassment/assault environment, then these places can also be prior place to prevent it. Thus, it is recommended that preparing programs for students to create awareness about sexual harassment/assault, deal with the problem, and providing prevention programs by managers. This study was only done to determine the present situation about sexual harassment/assault within the campus, for future studies some prevention or awareness program application studies can be done to help solving the problem. Additionally, this study was done only with freshmen but final year undergraduate students can be added to the study, so that the difference can be seen if there is any between first and last year.

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