

Sexual Harassment and Self-Esteem in Female University Students of Hidalgo

Acoso Sexual y Autoestima en Estudiantes Universitarias Hidalguenses

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Abstract:

Sexual harassment is a worldwide problem that influences self-esteem and causes various emotions such as anger, sadness, fear, helplessness, and/or stress in women. For this reason, the objective of this research is focused on identifying the relationship between sexual harassment and self-esteem in female university students in the State of Hidalgo, Mexico. The design is non-experimental, with a correlational and cross-sectional type of study, (N = 120) female psychology undergraduate students, with an age range of 18 to 24 years old ($\bar{X} = 20.29$, $S.D. = 1.56$) were selected using a non-probabilistic sample, to which a battery of instruments was applied, including: *Coopersmith's Adult Self-Esteem Inventory*, *García's Sexual Harassment Scale* and a *Questionnaire (ex profeso designed) of sociodemographic*. The results show a significant negative mean relationship between the Physical Approaches factor of the Sexual Harassment Scale and the Level of Total Self-Esteem. It should be noted that physical, and sexual harassment is significantly related to self-esteem, which demonstrates the need to take measures to prevent and reduce this problem.

Keywords:

Sexual Harassment, Self-Esteem, University Students

Resumen:

El acoso sexual es una problemática a nivel mundial que influye en la autoestima y genera en las mujeres diversas emociones; tales como enojo, tristeza, miedo, impotencia, y/o estrés, entre otras. Por tanto, el objetivo de la presente investigación está centrado en identificar la relación entre el acoso sexual y la autoestima en estudiantes universitarias del estado de Hidalgo, México. El diseño es no experimental, con un tipo de estudio correlacional y de corte transversal, por medio de un muestreo no probabilístico se seleccionó a N = 120 mujeres estudiantes de licenciatura en psicología, con un rango de edad de 18 a 24 años ($\bar{X} = 20.29$, $D.E. = 1.56$), a las cuales se les aplicó una batería de instrumentos que incluye: el *Inventario de Autoestima para Adultos de Coopersmith*, la *Escala de Acoso Sexual de García* y un *Cuestionario (diseñado ex profeso) de datos sociodemográficos*. Los resultados muestran una relación negativa media y significativa entre el factor Acercamientos Físicos de la *Escala de Acoso Sexual* y el nivel de Autoestima total. Se puede señalar que el acoso sexual de tipo físico está relacionado de manera significativa con la autoestima, lo cual demuestra la necesidad de tomar medidas de prevención y disminución de dicha problemática.

Palabras Clave:

Acoso sexual, Autoestima, Estudiantes universitarias

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is an issue that significantly affects the world's population, particularly women (Alvarez et al., 2019). In this regard, the United Nations (NU, 2022), reported that globally 736 million women have been subjected to sexual violence and that in several countries

in North Africa and the Middle East, 60% of women have experienced sexual harassment on public roads, mainly reflected in sexual comments, persecution, follow-up, and fixed or leering.

In some countries of the American Continent, high percentages of women of different ages have been victims of sexual harassment, for example in the United

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States, 83% of women experienced some type of sexual harassment, and in Peru, 88% mentioned being afraid of suffering sexual aggression, in Chile, 99.3% reported having lived through various experiences of sexual harassment, in Argentina 97% were sexually harassed, many of them experienced this type of situation from the age of 13 and in Ecuador 32.7% were sexually violated. In Argentina, 97% were sexually harassed, many of them having experienced this type of situation since they were 13 years old, and in Ecuador 32.7% were sexually assaulted (Ardila & Correa, 2020; Fundación para el Estudio e Investigación de la Mujer [FEIM], 2022; Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos [INEC], 2019; Observatorio Contra el Acoso Chile [OCAC], 2020).

In Mexico, sexual harassment has become normalized because it is not addressed in a timely manner (Córdova et al., 2019). According to data obtained from the Encuesta Nacional sobre la Dinámica de las Relaciones en los Hogares (ENDIREH, 2022), conducted by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), about 49.7% of adolescent girls aged 15 and older women have suffered at least one event of sexual violence in their lifetime. In the same sense, the Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia (UNICEF, 2019) stated that nationally in Mexico at least 19.2 million women in the country experienced sexual harassment or intimidation at some point in their lives.

In the state of Hidalgo (where this study was conducted), INEGI (2017) indicated that 63.5% of 1.1 million women in Hidalgo aged 15 and over were victims of sexual harassment or any other type of violence, while 44.1% faced aggression from their intimate partner and 47.7% from an aggressor other than their partner.

Effects of sexual harassment on women's self-esteem
Women who experienced sexual harassment at very early ages by men regularly generate diverse emotional responses, such as sadness, stress, anger, fear or helplessness, feelings of invasion and shame, in addition to rejection and loss of interest towards certain activities, which in turn cause repercussions in their self-esteem, insecurity and instability (Correa et al., 2018; Escobar et al., 2019; Flores & Machuca, 2020; Zeladita et al., 2020). Self-esteem is of utmost importance in the life of any person, and particularly in female students, since having a high self-esteem can predict a higher life satisfaction, however, if it is damaged by some kind of sexual violence, such as harassment, the security and confidence of the victims will consequently be deconstructed, there will be significant repercussions, generating discomfort, as well as negative appraisals of life, which can lead in some cases to academic problems such as poor school performance, depressive symptoms and behaviors, like covering their body more because the perception is influenced by the offensive comments they received,

adopting alert attitudes and modifying the way they perceive other people (Izurrieta & Ocaña, 2019; Lira, 2022; Medina, 2019; Ruíz & Yáñez, 2018).

In a study conducted at a university in Guatemala, it was found that nine out of ten students have experienced sexual harassment by professors, classmates, administrative staff and even maintenance personnel, which has a negative impact on their self-esteem (Véliz-Escobar, 2020). In an investigation of the effects of street sexual harassment on self-esteem in women, the authors found a significant relationship between both variables (Arteaga & Diaz, 2021). In Lima, a study was conducted to establish the relationship between sexual harassment on the street and self-esteem among university students, it was found that among the consequences of having experienced sexual harassment are fear of public exposure, vulnerability, insecurity, low tolerance to frustration and low self-esteem (Fernández & Regalado, 2022). In Chile, research was conducted with the main objective of studying sexual harassment as a problem in the university context. The results confirmed that sexual harassment causes low self-esteem, shame, guilt, passivity, among other negative responses (Lizama & Quiñones, 2019). De la Casa Arboledas (2019), in the workplace found that sexual harassment affects job performance, also influences psychological aspects, such as emotional trauma, low self-esteem, depression and irritability.

In this sense, the objective of the present research was to identify the relationship between sexual harassment and self-esteem in female undergraduate students.

METHOD

Research design.

The present research had a nonexperimental, cross-sectional, correlational design (Hernández & Mendoza, 2018).

Participants

The students were invited to participate in the research voluntarily and anonymously, through the Google Forms platform. The inclusion criteria were the following: female university students between 18 and 24 years of age, who were studying for a degree in psychology, and who had experienced sexual harassment in the university environment or outside it, before or during university life.

On the other hand, exclusion criteria were set as follows: male students, students out of age range or from another university career, as well as students who have not experienced sexual harassment. A non-probabilistic convenience sample of female university students of the bachelor's degree in psychology was considered, which consisted of $N = 120$ women, with an age range of 18 to 24 years and an age $\bar{X} = 20.29$ ($S.D. = 1.56$). Of the total sample, $n=95$ (79.20%) live with their nuclear family and

n=25 (20.8%) are foreigners or live with another family member; n=76 (63.30%) are from Hidalgo and n=44 (36.7%) are from another state of the Mexican Republic; n=103 (85.80%) reside in the state of Hidalgo, while n=17 (34.2%) live in another state.

Instruments

Sociodemographic data questionnaire

Created by the authors of this research. It incorporates a list of nine questions, whose function was to obtain data from the participants such as: age, place of birth, place of residence, people they are living with or if they live alone, the semester they are currently in, if they have experienced sexual harassment, the type of sexual harassment they experienced, and where they experienced it.

Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory for Adults

Developed by Coopersmith (1967), validated in Mexico by Cantú et. al. (1993). It consists of 25 items with dichotomous answers (yes or no). It is divided into three dimensions: General Self, Social and Family. It has a total internal consistency of Cronbach's Alpha of $\alpha=0.81$. The maximum score is equivalent to 100 points, each response has a value of one point, considering that the general self-esteem score should result from multiplying by four the total sum of the subscales.

Sexual Harassment Scale

Developed and validated in Mexico by García (1998). It evaluates explicit behaviors related to Sexual Harassment. It consists of 24 Likert-type statements, where the number "1" represents the lowest rating and the number "5" the highest rating. It is divided into three main dimensions: indirect approaches, sexual bribery, and physical approaches. The tool has a total internal consistency of Cronbach's Alpha of $\alpha = 0.95$.

Informed consent

For this, the Declaration of Helsinki 1964, Article 16 and Article 17 of the Regulations of the General Health Law on Health Research (2014) and Article 23 of the Psychologist's Code of Ethics were considered.

Procedure

Female students from a public institution of higher education of the State of Hidalgo were invited to voluntarily participate in this research. The students received an invitation through their professor in charge, after which they were provided with a link to access a Google form. The form was divided into two filling phases; the first phase began with the informed consent, the objective of the research and the sociodemographic data questionnaire, the second consisted of filling out the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory for Adults, followed

by the Sexual Harassment Scale. The forms were answered in an average time of twenty minutes and the response acceptance period ended two weeks after the invitation was shared.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to obtain measures of central tendency and dispersion of the factors of the *Self-Esteem Inventory*, the level of self-esteem of the sample and the factors of the *Sexual Harassment Scale*, as well as other variables considered in the *Sociodemographic Data Questionnaire*. In addition, a Pearson's r correlation was performed to identify the degree of relationship between sexual harassment and self-esteem using IBM-SPSS statistical software for Windows, version 23 in Spanish.

RESULTS

Participants were asked how often they experienced sexual harassment, n=73 students (60.80%) were harassed from one to five times, while n=24 students (20%) were harassed more than ten times and n=23 of them (19.20%) from five to 10 occasions.

It was observed that more than half of the sample, n=67 female university students (55.80%), were sexually harassed most frequently on public roads, while n=53 (44.2%) in various places (e.g., home, public transportation, university, work, parties, nightclubs, social networks or strangers' homes).

Regarding the type of harassment experienced by the students, one third n=44 (36.7%), claimed to have experienced physical, verbal and non-verbal sexual harassment; n=39 (32.5%) only verbal sexual harassment, while n=19 (15.80%) non-verbal sexual harassment, and n=18 (15%) physical sexual harassment. Table 1 presents the results obtained from the application of the Coopersmith Self Esteem Inventory for adults in the sample.

Table 1.

Results of the self-esteem assessment.

Level of self-esteem	Frequency	Percentage
Low	14	11.7
Medium low	30	25
Medium high	51	42.5
High	25	20.8
Total	120	100

Note. The score ranges for each level of self-esteem are: 0 to 24 low, 25 to 49 medium low, 50 to 74 medium high and 75 to 100 high.

The results showed that, n=51 female university students (42.5%) reported a medium-high level of self-esteem; n=30 (25%) a medium-low level of self-esteem; n=25 (20.8%) a high level of self-esteem and n=14 (11.7%) a low level of self-esteem.

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the variable sexual harassment.

Table 2.

Descriptive statistics of the variable sexual harassment.

Types of sexual harassment	Mean	Desviation Estandard
1.- Petitions, proposals or verbal insinuations	2.26	.84
2.- Sexual expressions or remarks	1.29	.68
3.- Physical approaches	.40	.20

In the first form of petitions, proposals or verbal insinuations, the results showed a mean of 2.26 and SD= of .84, which indicates that from the score of the scale ranging from 1 to 5, the sample N=120 female university students are slightly above the theoretical average between the options “it has rarely happened to me” and “it has happened to me quite often”. While in sexual harassment through sexual expressions or remarks, a mean of 1.29 and .68 were obtained between the options o "it has happened to me at some point"e" and it “has happened to me quite often”. Finally, in the harassment by physical approaches, the mean was .40 and SD= .20 in the option “it has never happened to me”.

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the self-esteem variable.

Table 3.

Descriptive statistics of the variable self-esteem.

Factors	Median
1. Itself	28.0
2. Social	12.0
3. Family	12.0
Total	52.0

The results indicate that the sample N=120 female university students have a medium high level of self-esteem. The note in Table 1 shows the intervals for each self-esteem factor for the purpose of comparing the total median self-esteem with the level of self-esteem

presented by the sample N=120 university students with the highest frequency.

On the other hand, the relationship between the variables sexual harassment and each of its factors (petitions, proposals or verbal insinuations, sexual expressions or remarks and physical approaches), with the factors of self-esteem (itself, social and family) and the total score of the level of self-esteem of the sample was sought. For this purpose, the Pearson's r moment product correlation test was performed. Therefore, it was found that there is a medium negative and significant correlation between the itself factor and the physical approaches factor ($r = -.71, p < .001$), in addition a medium negative and significant correlation was found between the social factor and the physical approaches factor ($r = -.54, p < .001$). A significant negative medium correlation was also found between the family factor and the physical approaches factor ($r = -.59, p < .001$). Likewise, a significant negative medium correlation was found between the level of total self-esteem obtained in the sample and the factor physical approaches ($r = -.77, p < .001$). Finally, a significant low negative correlation was found between the family factor and verbal petitions, proposals or verbal insinuations ($r = -.24, p < .05$). For the remaining factors, no significant correlations were found. See Table 5.

Table 5.

Correlations between the factors of the instruments used and the total self-esteem level of the sample.

	AF	EOS	PPIV
SMG	-.713***	.086	.003
S	-.549***	.077	.081
F	-.592***	-.003	-.241***
AT	-.768***	.073	-.051

** $p < .001$

SMG= Itself; S=Social; F=Family; AT=Total Self-Esteem; AF=Physical Approaches; EOS=Expressions or Sexual Observations; PPIV=Petitions, Proposals and Verbal Insinuations.

DISCUSSION

The present report was based on an evaluation of female students of a public institution of higher education in the state of Hidalgo, Mexico, using a *Sociodemographic Data Questionnaire*, the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory for Adults* and the *Sexual Harassment Scale*.

In general, the results obtained indicate that 60.8% of university women were sexually harassed from one to five times in their lifetime, 55.8% of the sample were sexually harassed more frequently in public places,

36.7% experienced physical, verbal and non-verbal sexual harassment; results similar to those published in the ENDIREH (2022), which reports that more than 45.6% of Mexican women have been subjected to this type of sexual violence, whether physical, verbal or non-verbal, on public roads. The age range of this national survey was 15 years old and over, while the average age in this research was 20.29 (S.D. = 1.56), which leads to infer that in the following years there will be a reported increase in the level of sexual harassment in the adult population.

On the other hand, with regard to the category of self-esteem that stands out in the sample, 42.5% presented a medium high level of self-esteem based on the experiences of sexual harassment in general; however, no research with similar results was found.

Finally, a significant negative correlation was identified between the factor Physical Approaches of the Sexual Harassment Scale and the factors Itself, Social and Family of the Self-Esteem Inventory, and total self-esteem, respectively. This indicates that the greater the experience of physical sexual harassment, the lower the self-esteem. In addition, a significant negative correlation was found between the Family factor and the petitions, proposals, and verbal insinuations factor, which indicates that the greater the experience of physical sexual harassment, the lower the self-esteem. Several investigations dedicated to identifying the relationship between sexual harassment and self-esteem confirm the results obtained in the present study. In this regard, Arteaga & Díaz, (2021) in a study on women, found that they show low levels of self-esteem as a consequence of having experienced some type of sexual harassment. In the same line, Fernández & Regalado, (2022) also identified that the greater the experiences of physical sexual harassment, the lower the self-esteem in women. In another study, sexual harassment was evaluated as a problem in the university context, in which the authors confirmed that sexual harassment has an impact on self-esteem (Lizama & Quiñones, 2019). Véliz-Escobar, (2020), found that self-esteem decreased by 16%, by the increase of one point of sexual harassment, which indicates that the greater the harassment, the lower the self-esteem. Although significant correlations were found between self-esteem and sexual harassment, there are other factors that can influence the self-esteem of female university students, such as: psychological violence or physical aggression by their intimate partner, bullying, academic performance, family functionality, sense of life, social networks, beauty stereotypes, among other risk factors (de Albuquerque & Fragelli, 2022; Muñoz, 2021; Reyes et al., 2021; Vázquez et al., 2020; Velázquez et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

The results obtained in the present investigation showed a high prevalence of sexual harassment, with 60.8% of the participants surveyed having experienced sexual harassment at some point in their lives. This data is important because it highlights the magnitude of the problem in the student context, which suggests the need to address this problem effectively. The data also reveal that most cases of sexual harassment occur on public places and that one third of the respondents experienced physical, verbal and non-verbal sexual harassment.

These data provide insight into where and how this phenomenon occurs, which can help design more targeted prevention strategies.

Regarding the relationship between sexual harassment and self-esteem, the study identifies a significant negative correlation between both variables, the results show that sexual harassment is associated with lower levels of self-esteem. This relationship underscores the importance of addressing both the psychological and social impact of sexual harassment on victims.

However, in terms of implications and recommendations, the need to implement prevention and intervention measures to address sexual harassment in the school environment is emphasized through the implementation of inclusive programs, intervention workshops and counselling services to support affected students. These recommendations are relevant to promote a safe and supportive environment in educational institutions.

It should be noted that the research has limitations, one of which is the sample, given that it was carried out on female students exclusively from the psychology degree program, therefore the results cannot be generalised to the student population as a whole. However, it is considered elementary to identify whether the present results are like those of men and the other academic areas. Another limitation is the lack of information about the *Sexual Harassment Scale of Garcia (1998)*.

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