

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT UNIVERSITIES IN NORTH MACEDONIA: VICTIMIZATION, STRAIN AND NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

Original scientific paper

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Sažetak

Universities being autonomous should be able to guarantee free speech, and everyone should feel safe from any type of harm there. But as every area of social life, also academia is not immune to criminal acts, including sexual harassment. During 2021 and 2022 the authors have conducted research about sexual harassment at Macedonian universities. This paper discusses the third part (victimization and negative emotions) of that research. The research included 330 students from public and private universities in North Macedonia. The goal of the research was to analyze whether students know what sexual harassment is, whether they can recognize it, and if and how often sexual harassment happens at Macedonian universities. The results have shown that sexual harassment is happening at Macedonian universities, victims choose not to report it to authorities, but they talk about their experience to their parents or friends. And that in most cases has happened in professors' offices and in the lecture halls.

Ključne riječi

North Macedonia, students, sexual harassment, universities

INTRODUCTION

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention) defines all the forms of gender-based violence, promotes protection of women from all forms of violence, forms that are discriminatory, and promotes gender equality, but also help and protection of victims of gender-based violence on international level. What is even more important is the fact that the Convention recognized gender-based violence because of the non-equal relations and positions of power between

men and women, which furthermore results in male dominance and discrimination of females. That situation plus the gender roles, patriarchal social relations, and toxic masculinity, result in many serious forms of gender-based violence such as domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, forced marriages, genital mutilation, stalking, crimes connected with “honor”, etc.

Sexual harassment as defined in the Istanbul Convention includes any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment (art. 40, Istanbul Convention). Defined in this way, sexual harassment can happen as an individual criminal act or as part of a combination with other acts which are or *per se* are not crimes, such as rape or stalking (Sheridan et al., 2001; Stanojoska & Aslimoski, 2019).

In many countries, for decades sexual harassment is treated as a form of discrimination, and violence based on gender. Even after a long history of existence of this problem, still there is a problem to find a definition which includes all the forms of manifestation of this phenomenon. These elements are the most common for all definitions:

- The victims feel uncomfortable, when the harassment is happening;
- The behavior of the offender has the intention to emotionally injure the victim or to create unfriendly atmosphere in the surrounding of the victim or victims;
- Emotional injury that is in connection with sexuality and the victim/s’ gender;
- The victim is in a subordinate position in relation to the offender or is in a position where she/he cannot give informed consent.

Sexual harassment is not courtship, sexual liking or sexual attraction, because the victim does not wish it. It means that the sexual harassment has a sexual character, it is unpleasant for the victim and/or she does not wish for it, or the uncomfortableness is expected, or the victim is a child and cannot give a consent.

Sexual harassment at universities is generally defined as any unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that interferes with an individual’s ability to participate in or benefit from educational programs or activities. It can manifest in various forms and can involve students, faculty, staff, or other individuals within the university community. The definition often encompasses a range of behaviors and is typically based on principles of consent, power dynamics, and the creation of a hostile or intimidating environment. It’s important to note that definitions may vary across institutions, and legal frameworks in different jurisdictions might also influence how sexual harassment is defined and addressed.

Almost six out of ten of the world’s countries lack adequate laws against sexual harassment in higher education and schools. When considering specific types of sexual harassment, the number of adult women not protected under the law increases. For sexual harassment in education, 1.5 billion women are not protected (55% of the population) (Tavares & Wodon, 2018).

The focus of exposure to sexual harassment in academia has traditionally been on student exposure, in particular in USA, where also most of the research into sexual harassment has been conducted. The prevalence of sexual assaults on students (primarily women) at universities in USA is well-documented. Data suggest 22% of college women have experienced dating violence and nearly 20% have experienced completed or attempted sexual assault since entering college. Sexual violence victimization is very common among college and university students in

the USA. Research estimates that 20–25% of female undergraduates experience attempted or completed rape during their college careers (Bondestram & Lundqvist, 2020).

In a survey of sexual harassment at a Spanish public universities on a sample of 1521 students, the results show that 15.9% of the students had experienced at least one episode of sexual blackmail behavior and 17.1% of the students had experienced at least one episode of verbal sexual harassment (Ferrer-Pérez & Bosch-Fiol, 2020).

In a sample of university students in Italy, the frequency of harassment was 38.3% among men and 44.2% among women, with a minority of students exposed to harassment in 2/3 domains, with few gender differences. Harassment was related to mental distress for both women and men, although the symptoms were different in the two genders. Male students with harassment exposure more often perceived their health as „not good“ and reported symptoms of depression, whereas women reported panic symptoms, even after adjustment for social factors and previous sexual violence (Bastiani at all, 2018).

New types of exposure are established in studies, and they relate in particular to online sexual harassment, where prevalence is alarmingly high in studies that analyze this within the research field as a whole. Among college students, 43% report some experience receiving harassing messages. Across the entire sample, 34% of participants reported feeling anxious and 37% of participants reported feeling depressed as a result of an online interaction (Lindsay at all, 2016, p. 9).

In the Balkan region, the newest research is the one conducted by the Victimology Society of Serbia, published in 2022. The research results have shown that most frequent forms of sexual violence are verbal or non-verbal sexual harassment with 75.3% and 35%. They are followed with online sexual harassment, sextortion and attempted rape (Nikolic-Ristanovic & Copic, 2022).

In the Republic of North Macedonia as we know, there are no other scientific researches focused on sexual harassment at the universities, but there are some researches that are focused on the phenomenon happening in other social areas and other public spaces.

Namely, we could mention the research about sexual harassment in the public spaces in Skopje undertaken by Female free zone in 2020. The results have shown that the most common form of sexual harassment is whistling, then swiping and staring, but also touching and grabbing, showing of genitals and masturbation (Velinova & Zdravevska, 2020).

Furthermore, the Coalition Margins conducted research in 2019 at the territory of the city of Tetovo. The results of this research have shown that the most common forms of sexual harassment are whistling, staring, sexist comments, following and obstructing the road (Cvetkovic et al., 2019).

In 2014 the Association for Emancipation, Solidarity and Equality of Women researched the emotional and sexual harassment at workplaces. The sample included 809 females, and around 17% of them were victims of sexual harassment at their workplace (Association for Emancipation, Solidarity and Equality of Women, 2014). And also, the one in 2017, from the National Network to End Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence in which 86% from the women in the sample, and 83% from men, have acknowledged sexual harassment as a type of sexual violence. The respondents have identified the unwanted touches as the most common form of sexual harassment (National Network to End Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, 2017).

Having in mind the specific circumstances at the universities, we need to develop specific institutional mechanisms to regulate and sanction sexual harassment. An important segment of it are the ethic codes of universities, which are rare in North Macedonia.

The paper's aim is to analyze the students' perceptions of sexual harassment, the level of their knowledge and understanding of the scope of the problem, but also, their personal experience and victimization.

Our paper in the following section elaborates the methodology of the research, an executive summary of the results, and a more complex analysis of the questions connected to victimization, negative emotions, and reaction to students who have been victims to sexual harassment during their studies at their faculties.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research aim

The aim of the research was to find out how often does sexual harassment happens at Macedonian universities, and to analyze do students recognize certain forms of sexual harassment, and the phenomenon in general.

Data collection

The data has been gathered in two intervals – from June until the beginning of September, and from the end of September to the end of December.

Measurement Instrument(s)

The main technique for gathering data was an online survey, because of the pandemic. For the data gathering we've used Qualtrics as platform, and the sample included 330 students. For this type of research, the research team has chosen stratified and snowball sampling.

The questionnaire had 31 (thirty-one) open and semi-open questions, which were divided into five parts (demographic information, questions regarding recognizing of sexual harassment, questions about the experience of victims, about their negative emotions, and questions about their reaction). The questionnaire did not include a definition of sexual harassment, as one of the hypotheses was to check the level of knowledge of participants about sexual harassment in general. The data has been analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS.

Sample

The sample included 330 students from nine universities in North Macedonia (University "Ss Cyril and Methodius" – Skopje, University "St. Kliment Ohridski" – Bitola, University "Goce Delcev" – Shtip, University "Mother Teresa" – Skopje, University of South East Europe – Kronje, American University of Europe – FON – Skopje, MIT University – Skopje, International Balkan University – Skopje). The age range of the sample is between 19 and 23 years, the majority of the sample consisted of females (58.5%) while males were 18.5%. The gender distribution is in accordance with gender structure of universities, with 54% of student females (State Statistical Office of North Macedonia). The ethnic distribution of the sample is the following: 65.5% - Macedonian, 5.8% - Albanian, and the other 5.8% are from other ethnic groups (Turks, Roma, Serbian, Bosnian).

The sample's structure according to their year of studies is the following: 3.6% - first

year, 30.3% - second year, 13.9% - third year, 17.9% - fourth year, 2.2% - fifth year, 0.6% - sixth year, 3.3% - master studies, 1.5% - PhD studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this part from the questionnaire, the students responded on questions about their personal experience, the victimization process, the forms of the sexual harassment, the negative emotions and the coping mechanism.

Also, this part includes questions about their model of reaction during their primary victimization, but also in cases where they have witnessed a sexual harassment.

Table 1. *Have you ever been victim to sexual harassment at your university?*

	<i>f</i>	%
Yes	9	2.7
No	198	60.0
I don't know	4	1.2
No response	119	36.1
Total	330	100,0

In the sample, from 211 students who gave an answer to the question *Have you ever been a victim of sexual harassment at the University?* only 9 answered that they have been victimized. At the same question, four students (one male, three females) have answered that they don't know if they have ever been victimized, which is the result of the difficulties and the low level of knowledge about this phenomenon among students.

Regarding the forms in which sexual harassment happens at universities, the most common were the comments with sexual content given by colleagues, professors and administrative and technical personnel. Then as a sexual offer, and very rarely as a condition for subject's material, higher grade or passing an exam.

Students, have also, pointed out the verbal harassment of sexual nature, jokes about sex, sexual orientation and other sex characteristics, more often by other students.

Unwanted touching or physical contact are rare in comparison to unwanted courtship. Also, very rare is unwanted online communication with explicit photos, e-mails or messages, and pressure for sexual relations.

Until the day of the data gathering, no one from the respondents have seen or been victimized by someone with showing his/her intimate body parts, but contrary, most of them were with sex comments, stories and phantasies, in most cases by other students, but also by professors.

In research in the Republic of Serbia (Nikolic - Ristanovic & Copic, 2022, p.: 69) about sexual violence in an academic context, students who have been victimized, in the last case have answered that most often type is the verbal sexual harassment, and then nonverbal, and the online sexual harassment.

Verbal sexual harassment includes comments about physical appearance, clothing, marriage, intimate relationships, sex life, sexual orientation. In most of the cases the comments have

been directed towards female students, and rarely towards male students (Nikolic - Ristanovic & Copic, 2022, p. 75). Nonverbal harassment with sexual nature includes unpleasant looks and staring, gifting improper gifts, movement that imitates sex acts and showing intimate parts of the body (Nikolic - Ristanovic & Copic, 2022, p. 81).

On the other hand, during a physical contact, offenders were using physical contacts, hugging and attempt for hugging, kissing and attempts, touching. Most common victims were when students are the offenders, are other students, and to professors, female students (Nikolic - Ristanovic & Copic, 2022, p. 83).

Online sexual harassment, in most cases includes victimization over social media, communication applications (such as Viber or WhatsApp), SMS messaging, and via e-mail. In these cases, the offenders were looking for sexual relations, they were threatening, sending disinformation about their sex life, but also, photos and messages with sexual content, and taking photos and recording the victims without their consent (Nikolic - Ristanovic & Copic, 2022, p.: 88). When it comes to the offenders, the same research has shown that the most common offenders are other students, in not matter what types or places. For example, students in most cases harass other students (Nikolic - Ristanovic & Copic, 2022, p. 71).

Table 2. *Where did the sexual harassment happen?*

	<i>f</i>	%
In the professor's office	4	1.2
In the office of the administration/technical personnel	2	0.6
In the lecture hall	4	1.2
In the hallway	4	1.2
In the toilet	1	0.3
On campus	3	0.9
In public spaces out of the campus	1	0.3
At international conference	1	0.3

The most common places where sexual harassments happen in an academic context in North Macedonia are professors' offices, administration or technical personnel, the lecture halls and hallways. There were also cases, when students were victimized outside of the campus, on public places, but also during international scientific conferences.

The situation is similar in the Republic of Serbia, where the students responded that sexual violence happens most often in the faculty's buildings, the lecture halls, and the offices of professors' where especially sextortion happens (Nikolic - Ristanovic & Copic, 2022, p. 74).

The coping mechanism with strain is a technique for neutralization of the stress (Girdano et al., 1990) or acts with which people try to protect themselves from psychological or emotional injury (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

Lazar & Folkmann (1984) identify two coping mechanisms to strain: coping focused to problems, and coping focused to emotions. The first coping mechanism includes strategies directed to finding a solution to the problem and the source of strain, and the second coping mechanism is directed towards an emotional reaction to stressful situations.

The one and the other type of reaction help victims to cope with the source of strain, but each one of them results in certain consequences. For an example, the direct solving of the problem, without reporting it to the police, can result in additional problems (for an example, at workplace), while when emotions are the tool, the danger of revictimization is increased (Iverson et al., 2013), especially in cases of violent intimate relationships.

In the real life, every individual experience one or more types of strain, but if and which illegal activity will or could happen is in direct connection to individual interpretation of strain which is the determinate factor. Strain results in negative emotions such as anger, frustration and/or depression, and they are the source of illegal activities to cope with the strain (Brown et al., 2013). Different types of strain result in different emotions. When the individual reacts to strain with other emotions, than anger, it shows that there is a significant increase in the legal coping to strain, and significant decrease in criminal activities (Broidy, 2001; Stanojoska & Aslimoski, 2019, p. 312).

The answers to the question of what the victims have felt, results have shown that there has been the presence of negative emotions as a result of the strain and the victimization, such as strain, depression, and panic attacks.

Other research about sexual violence at universities in the world have shown that there are a lot of consequences to victims as result to the victimization. So, students have had consequences to their physical and emotional health, such as fear, emotional stress resulting in anxiety, depression, irritability, impulsiveness, anger, acute insomnia, lack of self-esteem, lack of confidence, reliving the act of victimization through dreams, thoughts, withdrawal and isolation, use of alcohol and narcotic drugs, and other consequences (Ogbonnata et al., 2011; Taiwo et al., 2014; Mishna et al., 2018).

In the research in the Republic of Serbia (Nikolic - Ristanovic & Copic, 2022) the results have shown that victims have consequences from emotional, social, and physical nature. Thus, they indicated that they felt rage and anger, degradation and humiliation, fear, feelings of being etiquette by others. But also, that they blamed themselves for what happened to them, they lacked self-respect and self-confidence, they needed self-isolation. Some of them indicated that they lost motivation to study and had problems with concentration, stopped their studies or irregularly fulfilled their university obligations, as well as that they started using alcohol and psychoactive substances, that is, medicines and narcotic drugs. Those respondents who indicated that they experienced a certain negative emotion, reported their victimization to the Dean, told their colleagues, parents or friends.

However, according to the research conducted by Norman et al. (2012), students in case of victimization very rarely turn to seek help, and when they do, they share their experience with someone outside the faculty, most often it is their parents, partner or friends.

Table 3. *What action did you take regarding sexual harassment?*

	F	%
I didn't tell anyone	1	0.3
I reported to the Police	/	/
I reported it at the Rectorate	/	/
I reported to the Dean	1	0.3
I reported to the Students' Parliament	/	/
I told to my colleagues	3	0.9
I told to my parents	3	0.9
I told to my friends	6	1.8
Other (I reported it to an NGO)	1	0.3

The results from the answers on the question whether the victims have told somebody about their victimization are encouraging, especially because the dark figure of sexual crimes, including sexual harassment is high. However, we must mention that only in one case the sexual harassment was reported to the Dean of the faculty, which either indicates a lack of confidence in a positive outcome of the process, and the potential report opens up a new problem related to the absence of a legal procedure when reporting such a case at the universities in the Republic of North Macedonia.

Table 4. *How will you act if you witness sexual harassment?*

	F	%
I will report to the police	140	42.4
I will report at the Faculty	99	30.0
I will try to point out to the perpetrators that they are behaving unacceptable	61	18.5
I will ignore the case	2	0.6
I don't know	34	10.3

They would face the same problem if one of the respondents witnessed sexual harassment, because most of them would report the same to the police or to the authorities of the faculty. Regarding the report to the police, we would like to point out that sexual harassment is criminalized as a crime in the Criminal Code of North Macedonia since February, 2023, while - the Macedonian universities included in the research do not have Regulations for handling cases of sexual harassment in the academic environment. However, the fact that many of the respondents will try to point out the unacceptable behavior to the perpetrator is also encouraging, and also encouraging is the fact that only two would ignore the case.

CONCLUSION

The general goal of the research was to provide a scientific description and explanation of sexual harassment at universities in the Macedonian democratic society, and especially the

perceptions of students, i.e., how much they understand and recognize sexual harassment and their personal experience and victimization.

Also, the goals of this research were directed towards the promotion and improvement of preventive mechanisms for protection against sexual harassment in universities. What deserves significant attention is how to encourage students to report sexual harassment. The safety and well-being of students and staff who discover or report sexual harassment should be a priority for universities.

We could conclude that:

- Universities in the Republic of North Macedonia do not have a legal procedure for reporting sexual harassment. Some of the universities have partially provided for it in the ethical codes, and unfortunately other universities have either not regulated it at all in their acts or such acts are not publicly available;
- In addition to taking timely measures when there are cases of sexual harassment, universities should take preventive measures to minimize sexual assaults and sexual harassment, including through violence prevention programs and campaigns;
- The research showed that a small number of the respondents in the sample were victimized in the universities, which is either the real situation or it is a matter of lack of recognition or sexual harassment has a high dark number;
- Sexual harassment in universities exists in all forms known so far, but most often it appears in the form of comments with sexual content, jokes of a sexual nature, but also in the form of a sexual offer;
- The most common places where sexual harassment occurs in the academic environment are professors' offices, lecture halls and faculty corridors;
- The victimized students turned to their loved ones about the sexual harassment, but what is worrying is that they did not turn to the university or college authorities;
- The research includes several recommendations, of which several are in connection to the victimization in academic context. They are the following:
- Establishing and improving the work of the support team for victims of sexual harassment and, if possible, hiring professionals as part of the support team;

It is necessary for employees and students to adopt the basic principles of communication with persons who have been victims of sexual harassment, and in the education of the members of the support team, in addition to the above, a special emphasis must be placed on the transfer of especially sensitive personal data, documenting the experience of sexual harassment, as well as the concept of providing support itself. These stakeholders should not only be familiar with the inter-institutional procedure but should also be familiar with the competence of the relevant services, as well as governmental and non-governmental organizations that provide psychological and legal support to persons who have suffered sexual harassment, how they could refer to the relevant actors.

- Creating a safe environment at the faculties;

It is necessary to ensure better supervision/control over the work of faculty employees. Some states provide for the introduction of video surveillance to detect sexual harassment. From a preventive point of view, it can also be the obligation for the presence of third parties during the exam/consultations, as well as the obligation to keep the door of the office/classroom open during the exam/consultations.

- Creating and nurturing an atmosphere of security and trust among all members of the academic community.

Recommendations for the prevention of sexual harassment imply more closely defined concepts of sexual harassment, prohibition of such behavior, preventive measures and procedures for the protection of persons from sexual harassment, all with the aim of building and preserving the principles of academic freedom, equal opportunities and study conditions, respecting the integrity and human dignity of all participants in the higher education process.

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