



## The level of harassment among female students in Kirkuk University; a cross sectional study

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### Abstract:

**Background:** Sexual harassment is a concerning phenomenon that has shown a surge in occurrence in recent years in Arabic countries.

**Aim:** This study aims to assess the level of harassment and the relationship between sociodemographic characteristics and incidence of sexual harassment among female students in Kirkuk university.

**Methods:** A cross sectional study design was conducted using a survey to assess the psychological distress as resultant from harassment among female students in different faculties in Kirkuk university.

**Results:** From a total 707 female students with mean age  $21.8 \pm 2.8$  from different faculties in Kirkuk university with majority of College of Sciences (21.6%, n= 153), and the highest percentage of female students is from fourth grade as reported among 30.6%, female students are exposed to low exposure of sexual harassment experience as reported by 74% of them ( $M \pm SD = 16.40 \pm 12.991$ ), to note that 74% of female students are associated with low exposure to sexual harassment experience.

**Conclusion:** The level of harassment among female students in Kirkuk university is moderate.

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### Introduction:

Sexual harassment is a multifaceted and intricate matter that affects individuals across the academic community (1), manifesting itself inside the academic environment (2). The problem presents

notable difficulties, especially in terms of devising effective strategies to tackle and mitigate its repercussions (3) or physical in nature (4,5), that possess a sexual connotation (6). These actions are

considered to violate an individual's sense of worth, especially when they contribute to the establishment of an atmosphere that is seen as menacing (7), antagonistic, demeaning, humiliating, or objectionable (8-10).

Despite the absence of a universally acknowledged delineation (11), sexual harassment is frequently characterized as unsolicited and undesirable sexual conduct occurring inside a professional or educational milieu (12), leading to detrimental consequences for an individual's physical and psychological welfare (13). There are three distinct forms of communication by which this can be recognized: verbal, physiological, and nonverbal modalities (14-16). The prevalence of sexual harassment has had a significant impact on the physical and psychological well-being of female students (17). A surprising finding was made regarding a significant percentage of female students who encountered psychosocial distress, resulting in a major decline in their academic performance (18).

The incidence of sexual harassment among female undergraduate students is a matter of considerable importance that warrants major attention (19). The prevalence of harassment has been documented at high levels, suggesting a widespread issue that negatively impacts the overall welfare and educational achievements of female students<sup>13</sup>. Comprehending the magnitude of this matter is crucial to develop efficacious measures for prevention and intervention (7,11).

Scholarly research suggests that individuals, particularly students, who are enrolled in higher education have severe negative consequences to their general well-being because of sexual violence<sup>13</sup> and harassment. These negative consequences are evident through an increased vulnerability to psychological distress (9), substance misuse problems, symptoms of depression, emotions of rage, reduced life satisfaction, and physical health difficulties<sup>18-21</sup>. Additionally, it is frequently seen that students who have been victims of sexual abuse often exhibit decreased levels of engagement in academic activities, lower academic achievements, and an

overarching sense of vulnerability within the context of higher education institutions (14).

In Iraq, according to a recent poll performed by a students' rights organization, it was found that 38.8 percent of students in Iraq reported experiencing incidents of physical sexual harassment, while 30.6 percent reported instances of verbal harassment (6). Approximately 14.9 percent of individuals surveyed reported instances of subtle sexual harassment, which including unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, and innuendos (14,21,22). Therefore, this study aimed to assess level of harassment and the relationship between sociodemographic characteristics and incidence of sexual harassment among female students.

## **Methodology:**

### **Study Design and Setting**

A cross-sectional correlation study was conducted in various faculties in the University of Kirkuk in Iraq.

### **Population and sample size**

A Convenience sampling technique was used to select the participants female students and based on the Richard Geiger equation. The total student's population in university is 21972 students with 12595 female students as a gender distribution and to ensure an adequate sample size, a calculation is performed resulting in total sample size of 707 female students.

### **Inclusion criteria:**

#### **All female students in Kirkuk university.**

Psychological with an education period more than 2 months to assure their psychological impacts would be referred from their actual experience in this university.

Students who are talking in either Arabic, Kurdish, or Turkmen languages only.

### **Exclusion criteria are:**

Students who are absent during this study.

Students who are not willing to participate in this study.

## The measurement tools

The questionnaire was obtained from Spencer et al. (23), using the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ) is a model of sexual harassment (SH) that is characterized by three dimensions: gender harassment (5 items), sexual coercion (5 items), and unwelcome sexual attention (7 items), the scale included questions with 5-likert scale to define their responses starting from None of the time= 1, A little of the time= 2, Some of the time= 3, Most of the time= 4, and All the time = 5, then adapted and translated Arabic to be reliable and their regions where the sample population,

## Data collection procedure

A participant's consent was obtained written on the first page of the online form of a questionnaire. After getting the IRB approval from the university, the survey questionnaires were distributed via online social media applications such as telegram and WhatsApp using an online google form was for many reasons, first of all it assured the security and privacy of students' information, as it is not easy and applicable for females to report the harassment. All questionnaires were sent to private groups for these female students without any spams to their privacy too, each department head for each faculty had received the google form link and send it to their groups to respond privately. The period of data collection was from 13<sup>th</sup> January 2024 till 29<sup>th</sup> February 2024. After that, the data was extracted and analyzed using suitable statistical tests.

## Data Validity and Reliability

A pilot study was conducted to determine the feasibility of implementing a certain method in a broader research project and to assess the willingness of individuals to adopt it on a total of 20 students. Reliability was determined using the internal consistency, which was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, to report that the reliability was 0.912 meaning that the questionnaires had adequate level of internal consistency and equivalence measurability.

## Ethical Consideration

The anonymity of all students is maintained, and all their data is kept secret, giving an option to not

write their names in the questionnaires. Approval was obtained from University of Baghdad College of Nursing Research Ethics Committee before conducting with IRB number at year of 2023. In addition, personal consent was obtained from the department head for each faculty and the heading form at the start of questionnaire for respondent to assure that all their information for research purposes would be secret. Prior to collecting the samples, a meeting was arranged with the department coordinators to ensure smooth access to the classrooms and provide an explanation of the questionnaire that were sent to the female students via a link.

## Data analysis

The data were analyzed and interpreted through use of the application of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 26.0 the descriptive data were analyzed using Frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviations while the inferential data were analyzed using simple Linear Regression, spearman's rank correlation coefficient, and point Biserial Correlation.

## Results:

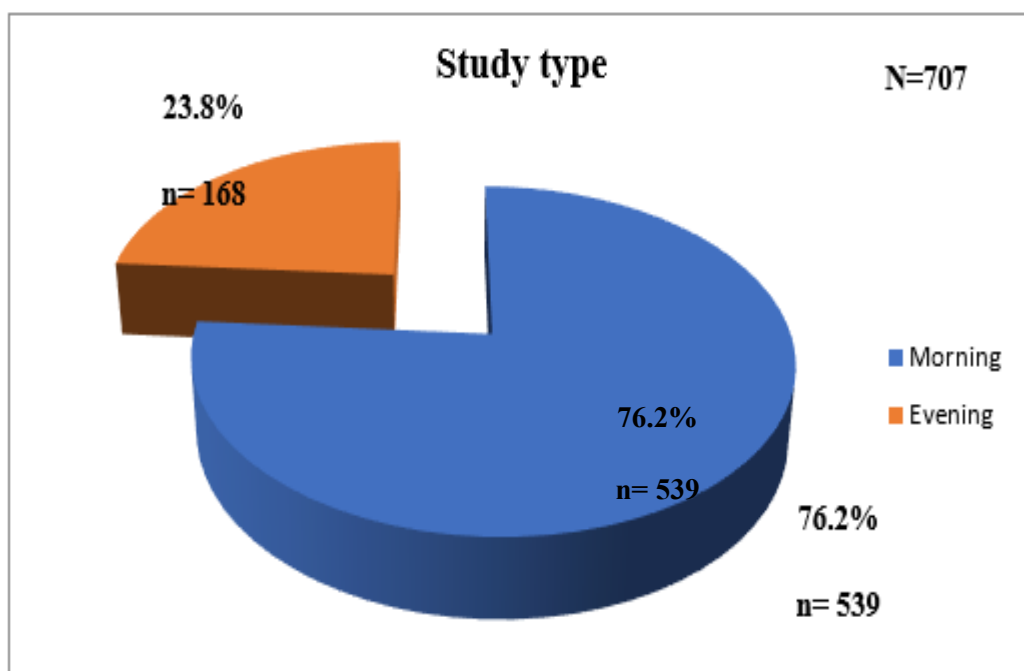
The total responses for the google form was 2764 but only 707 who completed the questionnaire with majority of age groups was from 20 to 23 years old, average for female students is  $21.8 \pm 2.8$  years, in which more than half of them are seen with age group of 20 – less than 23 year (58.8%) and the highest percentage of female students is from fourth grade as reported among 30.6% followed by third grade (28.4%), and second grade (21.2%) and 76.2% of students are from morning studies and 23.8% of them from evening studies, as well, 79% of students are resident in urban while 21% of them are resident in rural regions, regarding the marital status, it was observed that 86% of female students are still unmarried and 12.4% of them are married. According to the distribution of students among faculties in the university, the highest percentage refers to College of Sciences (21.6%, n= 153), followed by College of Education for Pure Sciences (16.4%, n= 116), and College of Education for Human Sciences (15.1, n= 102) (Tables 1,2,3,4, and 5) and Figures (1 and 2).

**Table 1 Distribution of Female Students according to their Age**

Age group	F (%)	M±SD
17 – less than 20 year	93 (13.2)	21.8 ± 2.8
20 – less than 23 year	416 (58.8)	
23 – less than 26 year	159 (22.5)	
26 year and more	39 (5.5)	
Total	707 (100)	

**Table 2 Distribution of Female Students according to Scholastic Grade**

Scholastic grade	F (%)
First grade	122 (17.3)
Second grade	150 (21.2)
Third grade	201 (27.4)
Fourth grade	216 (30.6)
Fifth grade	14 (2)
Sixth Grade	4 (0.6)
Total	707 (100)



**Figure 1 Distribution of Female Students according to Study Type**

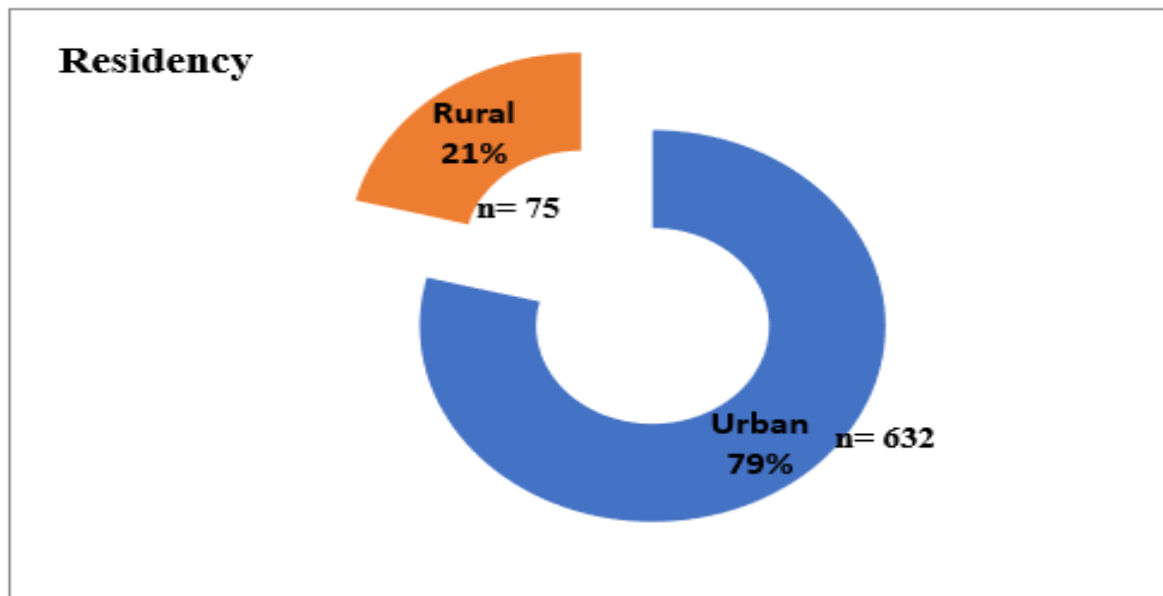


Figure 2 Distribution of Female Students according to their Residency

Table 3 Distribution of Female Students according to Measures Taken against Harassment

Measures	F (%)
Keep silent	271 (38.3)
Inform a colleague	86 (12.2)
Inform a family member/friend	154 (21.8)
Confrontation	196 (27.7)
Total	707 (100)

The table presents that the highest percentage of female students keeping silent when exposure to sexual harassment (38.3%), 27.7% of them using

confrontation, 12.8% inform a family member or friend out of university, and 12.2% inform a colleague.

Table 4 Overall Assessment of Sexual Harassment Experience among Female Students

Sexual harassment	f	%	M± SD	Ass.
Low	523	74	16.40±12.991	Low
Moderate	155	21.9		
High	29	4.1		
Total	707	100		

M: Mean for total score, SD: Standard Deviation for total score, Ass: Assessment  
 Low= 0 – 22.66, Moderate= 22.67 – 45.33, High= 45.34 – 68

About 74% of female students are associated with low exposure to sexual harassment experience and this table manifests that female students are exposed to low exposure of sexual harassment

experience as reported by 74% of them ( $M \pm SD = 16.40 \pm 12.991$ ), but 21.9% are exposed moderately exposed to sexual harassment experience.

**Table 5 Assessment of Sexual Harassment Experience among Female Students (N=707)**

Item	Sexual harassment experience	M	SD	Assessment
1	Told you a joke or storyline with unwanted sexual content or tell it in your presence	.94	1.155	Low
2	Said crude sexual things to you or in front of you	.69	1.087	Low
3	Displayed or distributed images or videos with inappropriate content	.37	.890	Low
4	Referred to you in an overly familiar way (e.g. my love or moon)	1.49	1.329	Moderate
5	Spread lies or sexual rumours about you	.43	.956	Low
6	Made gestures or used body language of an unwanted sexual nature	.94	1.182	Low
7	Comment on your looks or your dress in a sexual way that made you uncomfortable	1.30	1.342	Low
8	Looked at you in an uncomfortable way	2.33	1.339	Moderate
9	Continued to ask to go out with you on dates even after you refused	.80	1.234	Low
10	Made unwanted attempts to establish a relationship with you despite your efforts to discourage it	.88	1.294	Low
11	Bump into or touch you in a way that makes you feel Uncomfortable	1.15	1.377	Low
12	Touched you on parts of your body when you didn't want it	.79	1.162	Low
13	Grabbed or pinched you in an unwanted way	1.35	1.334	Moderate
14	Pursued, stalked, or tracked you	1.06	1.239	Low
15	Blocked your way or cornered you in an unwanted way	1.14	1.262	Low
16	Whistled, made remarks, or comments of an unwanted nature at you that made you Uncomfortable	.32	.841	Low
17	Threatened you with negative consequences if you didn't cooperate sexually	.42	.952	Low

Low= 1 – 1.33, Moderate= 1.34 – 2.66, High= 2.67 – 4

This table reveals that female students have low experience of sexual harassment among all items except items (Referred to you in an overly familiar way), (Comment on your looks or your dress in a sexual way that made you uncomfortable) and (Grabbed or pinched you in an unwanted way) that associated with moderate experience.

The difference between the sociodemographic data and the level of harassment, it was noted that there

is no significant difference in exposure to sexual harassment among female students with regard to their age group and study type, residency, marital status, and college they studied in, while there is significant difference in exposure to sexual harassment among female students with regard to their grade at  $p$ -value= .046 for those in fourth grade as indicated by multiple comparison test (Table 6).

**Table 6 Significant Difference in Sexual harassment Experience among Female Students with regard to their sociodemographic data (N=707)**

Sociodemographic Data	Age	Grade	Study Type	Residency	Marital Status	College
Sexual Harassment	<i>p</i> -value					
	.287	0.034	0.438	.991	0.55	.643

**Discussion:**

The prevalence of sexual harassment in Arabic countries has experienced a notable increase in recent years, which is a matter of worry (23). The aim of this study is to evaluate the extent of harassment and examine the correlation between sociodemographic factors and the occurrence of sexual harassment among female students at Kirkuk University. This study involved the participation of 707 female students, who exhibited diverse demographic features. The findings indicate that a significant proportion of the participants fell into the age range of 20 to 22 years old, which is the prevailing age group among university students (24). The majority of these pupils are in the third and fourth grades, with the aim of becoming adults and developing an understanding of the significance and consequences of harassment (25). Less than 25% of these students engage in nocturnal studying, hence increasing their vulnerability to harassment compared to those who study during the morning (8). The majority of these students reside in urban areas, where they possess a distinct understanding

and cultural background compared to rural areas in terms of ethics and other forms of violence (26).

In relation to the diversity of faculties among the students included in this study, it was observed that three faculties, namely sciences, education for pure sciences, and human sciences, were the most prevalent among the participants. However, other faculties were also included in the study, however with a balanced distribution to mitigate potential bias in the findings (27). In relation to the prevalence of harassment among these students, the findings of the study indicate that female students have a relatively low incidence of sexual harassment experiences. This aligns with the research conducted by Farahat et al. (28), which reported a sexual harassment incidence of 65.3% among the entire sample population. Specifically, the incidence was found to be 64.6% among practical faculties and 65.9% among theoretical faculties ( $P = 0.548$ ). These findings indicate that harassment is prevalent in Menoufia Governorate and carries substantial repercussions. In a study conducted by Athanasiades et al. (29), it was found that the incidence of harassment was minimal. The

main types of sexual harassment experienced by female students were offensive sexual remarks, jokes, and narratives, inappropriate comments about their body, appearance, or sexual activity, as well as lewd staring, indecent gestures, and the exposure of body parts, which caused distress.

In contrast to the findings of Farouk Mahmoud and Auerbach et al. (30), who reported an incidence rate of 87.7% for sexual harassment among students, encompassing various forms of harassment. Out of the various kinds examined, gazing or leering emerged as the most widespread, constituting 439 instances (51.7%). The prevalence rate of sexual harassment in the transportation sector is the highest, representing 65.1% of reported incidents. Moreover, the predominant outcome of sexual harassment in this industry is a sense of unease and bewilderment, as expressed by 54.7% of individuals who have experienced it. Moreover, the predominant approach to addressing harassment was to maintain silence, including 51.7% of instances. Furthermore, it was shown that a significant proportion of the harassment experienced by females, specifically 68.0% of the cases, may be related to a deficiency in religious belief. Moreover, a substantial majority of participants, specifically 69.7%, have a limited comprehension of the definition, different manifestations, and suitable measures to deal with individuals involved in harassment, as well as the legislation concerning this matter in Egypt (31).

The preservation of religious notions and ethics in Islamic and Arabic countries has been seen (32). Various measures can be implemented to address harassment. In this study, the majority of students express a preference for remaining silent, which contradicts the findings of Bloom et al. (2021), who observed that students choose to remain silent in cases of harassment. In conclusion, through the integration of graduate students' perspectives, we bring forth suggestions on how institutions might improve the campus atmosphere and strengthen the accessibility of services aimed at addressing harassment among graduate students (33).

According to DeGue et al. (34), a certain percentage of individuals advise their family to take action, which is seen as the most effective and

appropriate approach to address these acts. The act of confrontation was found to be a prevalent behavior among students, aligning with the findings of Crowley's (35) research. Crowley's study indicated that individuals who predominantly engage in sexual harassment, particularly males, aimed to reinforce their perceived superiority over their female victims both during and after such confrontations. Their objective was to reinstate the normal operation of economic activities, even far after the confrontations had occurred (36). The study findings indicate that female students have a low incidence of sexual harassment, which reported that around 20-50% of participants experienced different types of harassment. Furthermore, these studies found significant correlations between experiencing any form of sexual expression and factors such as gender and other reasons (37).

Furthermore, the findings of this study indicate that there is no statistically significant correlation between the psychological distress experienced by female students and their sociodemographic characteristics. This finding contradicts the results reported by Johnson et al. (38), who found that 66% of women had engaged in sexual activity prior to entering college, and 43.0% of them held the belief that they were susceptible to sexual harassment. The analysis of the data revealed a significant positive association between the educational attainment of students and the prevalence of sexual harassment ( $p$ -value  $<0.00$ ) as well as the perception of sexual harassment as a prevalent issue among students ( $p$ -value  $<0.01$ ). The statistical study demonstrated a statistically significant correlation ( $p$ -value  $<0.02$ ) between the marital partnerships of female students and their perception of sexual harassment as a concern within the college setting.

### Conclusion:

Harassment is a pervasive problem that is associated with increasing educational and social challenges, as well as adverse mental health consequences, for female students in Iraq. Labor force with a university education. The prevalence of harassment among female students enrolled in several faculties at Kirkuk University is

categorized as low to moderate, it is recommended to control harassment as it is a big deal by some many regulations from the government, also, supportive programs must be done to students and the population to break their fear and inform about any incidence of harassment in addition to an awareness programs must be done among population to raise the awareness and reduce their negativity and manners to others.

#### Declarations:

#### Availability of data and material:

All data available upon request.

#### Competing interests:

Authors declare no competing of interests.

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This research did not get fund and all study' procedures were self-funded by authors.

#### Authors' contributions:

..... put the research idea, wrote the first draft and discussion, .... manage the results and abstract, and wrote the conclusion and final draft, .... made all statistics for the whole study, and .... wrote the introduction and aided in writing the first draft, all authors are aiding in finalizing the manuscript and approved to publish the paper.

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