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Experiences of Sexual Harassment among Young Women in Rural Bankura: A Sociological Analysis of Sarenga Block

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Abstract: One important type of gender-based violence that has an impact on women's independence, safety, and dignity in society is sexual harassment. The experiences of young women in Sarenga Block in the Bankura district of West Bengal with regard to sexual harassment are being investigated. Understanding the nature, prevalence, awareness, and sociocultural aspects of sexual harassment in rural settings is the study's primary goal. The study is based on primary data that was gathered through structured interviews and surveys from fifty respondents. The results show that the most frequent types of harassment that young women encounter are verbal abuse and inappropriate gestures, which are followed by physical contact and internet harassment. The most common places for harassment to occur are public transportation, marketplaces, and educational institutions. Additionally, the survey shows that respondents' knowledge of legal rights and support networks such as police assistance, helplines, and non-governmental organizations is comparatively poor. Additionally, a number of social, cultural, and economic factors—such as patriarchal societal norms, lack of education, economic dependence, insufficient security in public places, and fear of social stigma—have an impact on the prevalence and underreporting of sexual harassment. According to the study's findings, tackling sexual harassment in rural areas necessitates raising awareness, bolstering institutional support, enhancing public safety protocols, and advancing gender equality. Such programs are necessary to guarantee that young women in rural communities live in a more secure and encouraging environment.

Key-words: Gender-Based Violence; Patriarchal Social Norms; Sexual Harassment; Social Stigma.

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1. Introduction

Sexual harassment is widely acknowledged as one of the most prevalent types of gender-based violence impacting women worldwide. It means any unwanted sexual behaviour, like inappropriate comments, gestures, words, or physical touch that hurts someone's dignity, safety, or personal space.

This kind of harassment happens in many places, such as schools, businesses, public places, and neighbourhoods. These events make many women feel unsafe and scared all the time. This not only hurts their health but also limits their freedom of movement, ability to go to school, and chances of getting a job. Consequently, sexual harassment must not be perceived solely as an individual concern but as a pervasive societal issue fundamentally entrenched in gender inequity, patriarchal social norms, and power imbalances. Many women have ongoing feelings of fear and insecurity as a result of these events, which not only negatively impacts their psychological wellbeing but also limits their options for employment, education, and freedom of movement. Because of this, sexual harassment should not be seen as a personal issue but rather as a larger social problem with roots in patriarchal social norms, gender inequality, and unequal power dynamics between men and women. Crimes against women have been a major concern in India for several years. According to official data released by the National Crime Records Bureau, there has been a notable rise in the number of reported incidents of violence against women during the last ten years. These figures do not accurately reflect the extent of sexual harassment in society, despite the fact that they show the issue's increasing prominence. Due to societal stigma, fear of victim-blaming, ignorance of legal rights, and fear of reprisals from offenders, many occurrences go unreported. This is especially true in rural areas, where women are frequently discouraged from speaking candidly about their experiences due to conventional social standards, economic dependence, and limited access to institutional help.

Due to their comparatively lower social status and reliance on family or community structures, young women—particularly teenagers and those in their early adult years—are frequently more susceptible to harassment. In rural areas, where socioeconomic disadvantages, low literacy rates, and insufficient institutional processes exacerbate women's susceptibility, the problem becomes even more complicated.

Bankura, a district in West Bengal, is an example of a rural setting. Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities make up a significant portion of the region's population, which is primarily rural. Research on the experiences of sexual harassment among young women in this neighbourhoods is scarce, despite these socioeconomic circumstances. In this regard, the Sarenga Block becomes a crucial research focus. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the type, frequency, and effects of sexual harassment that young women in Sarenga Block encounter. The study aims to produce

insights that could help enhance policies, awareness campaigns, and protective mechanisms for women in rural communities by looking at their experiences, awareness levels, reporting behaviour, and the sociocultural factors impacting such incidences.

2. Concept of Sexual Harassment

In sociology, gender studies, and law, sexual harassment is a significant topic of discussion. It describes unwelcome sexual behaviour that makes someone feel intimidated, aggressive, or offended. Sexual harassment has been defined by numerous academics and organizations from a variety of angles, including power dynamics, gender inequity, workplace dynamics, and social control. Catharine A. MacKinnon (1979) was one of the first and most significant academics to conceive sexual harassment. She maintained that in patriarchal countries, power and gender inequality are more important factors in sexual harassment than just sexual desire. Sexual harassment, according to MacKinnon, happens when women are the target of unwanted sexual approaches, requests for sexual favours, or other sexually suggestive verbal or physical behaviour, especially in environments where males are in positions of authority. She underlined that such actions uphold women's social subordination and male dominance. MacKinnon went on to say that since sexual harassment prevents women from participating equally in the workforce and in public life, it should be viewed as a type of sex discrimination. Louise Fitzgerald et al. (1995) made a substantial contribution to the organizational and psychological research into sexual harassment. According to their definition, sexual harassment is any unwelcome sex-related action that hinders an individual's ability to perform their job or fosters a hostile or frightening work environment. Fitzgerald also developed a widely used classification of sexual harassment that includes:

- **Gender harassment** – sexist remarks and hostile attitudes toward women
- **Unwanted sexual attention** – unwelcome touching, comments or advances
- **Sexual coercion** – pressure for sexual cooperation in exchange for job benefits

Her work highlights the psychological impact of sexual harassment on victims, including stress, anxiety and reduced job satisfaction. In the 1970s, Lin Farley (1978) is credited with popularizing the term "sexual harassment." Sexual harassment, according to her definition, is when men force unwelcome

sexual attention on women at work. According to Farley, this kind of behaviour is a part of a larger pattern of gender-based power relations rather than individual episodes. She underlined that many women are forced to quit their jobs or put up with humiliation in order to continue working due to sexual harassment. Farley emphasized that sexual harassment serves as a tool to restrict women's employment opportunities. According to the UN, sexual harassment is a type of violence and discrimination based on gender. Sexual harassment is defined as any unwanted sexual approach, solicitation for sexual favours, or any sexual verbal or physical behaviour that interferes with employment, education, or fosters hostility. The UN emphasizes that unequal power dynamics between men and women in society are reflected in sexual harassment. According to some academics, sexual harassment is not just an isolated incident but also a systemic problem that stems from power disparities and gender inequality. Sexual harassment, according to academics like MacKinnon, Fitzgerald, and Farley is a reflection of larger institutional and social trends that uphold patriarchal authority over women. As a result, combating sexual harassment calls for legislative actions, corporate guidelines, and increased social consciousness.

3. Impact of Sexual Harassment on Young Women

A widespread societal problem that impacts young women's lives in many nations and social contexts is sexual harassment. Any unwanted sexual activity that creates an uncomfortable, intimidating, or hostile environment is referred to, including verbal remarks, physical approaches, gestures, and other behaviours. The International Labor Organization claims that sexual harassment compromises equality, safety, and dignity in public and professional settings. Young women are especially susceptible to these kinds of encounters, particularly those who are enrolled in school and in the early phases of their employment. Sexual harassment has long-term effects on victims' psychological, social, and economic well-being.

Psychological and emotional damage is one of the most important effects of sexual harassment. Anxiety, despair, dread, and a lack of confidence are common symptoms among young women who are harassed. Long-term emotional suffering may result from the sense of helplessness and humiliation. According to Barbara A. Gutek's research, sexual harassment in social and professional settings causes women to experience severe psychological strain, which has an impact on their general wellbeing and mental health (Gutek, 1985). Additionally, victims may exhibit symptoms like

emotional disengagement, sleep difficulties, and stress.

The limitation of freedom and mobility is another significant effect. In public places like streets, public transportation, marketplaces, and educational institutions, young women who experience harassment often become insecure. They frequently have to limit their regular activities or avoid particular locations due to this phobia. Their social engagement consequently declines. Sociologists contend that these limitations contribute to women's marginalization in public life and perpetuate current gender disparities.

Additionally, sexual harassment has detrimental effects on career and educational prospects. Harassment in schools can create a dangerous atmosphere that impairs focus, academic achievement, and engagement in learning activities. Due to persistent harassment or fear of being victimized again, some young women may even decide to drop out of school. In a similar vein, harassment at work can result in lower job satisfaction, lower productivity, and higher absenteeism. Vicki J. Magley claims that sexual harassment has a detrimental effect on women employees' job attitudes and psychological well-being, frequently causing them to leave the workplace (Marley, Hulin, Fitzgerald, & DeNardo, 1999).

Silence and social stigma are two more significant effects. Sexual harassment victims in many traditional civilizations are blamed, criticized, or judged by others. Communities sometimes criticize the victim's behaviour or character rather than offering support. Because of this victim-blaming culture, young women are discouraged from reporting instances to the police or taking legal action. As a result, many harassment incidents go unreported, allowing offenders to carry on with their actions without facing consequences.

Personal safety and physical well-being are also impacted by sexual harassment. Stress-related health issues like headaches, exhaustion, and sleep disturbances might result from a persistent dread of harassment. When harassment gets really bad, it might turn into physical assault or other gender-based violence. Young women's quality of life is severely impacted by this ongoing feeling of uncertainty, which also makes it more difficult for them to freely engage in society.

In summary, young women who experience sexual harassment suffer significant psychological, social, educational, and financial consequences. It has an impact on their mental health, limits their freedom,

interferes with their goals for education and employment, and perpetuates gender imbalance in society. To guarantee young women's safety, dignity, and equal opportunity, effective preventive measures, awareness campaigns, and supportive institutional structures are crucial.

4. Research Objectives

Based on the given background, the following **four research objectives** can be formulated:

- (i) To examine the nature and types of sexual harassment experienced by young women in Sarenga Block of Bankura district.
- (ii) To analyse the frequency and common locations where incidents of sexual harassment occur in rural areas of Sarenga Block.
- (iii) To assess the level of awareness among young women regarding legal rights, support systems, and protective measures against sexual harassment.
- (iv) To explore the social, cultural, and economic factors that influence the occurrence and reporting of sexual harassment among young women in Sarenga Block.

5. Research Methodology

In order to investigate young women's experiences with sexual harassment in the rural Sangaree Block in the Bandura district, this study uses a descriptive and exploratory research approach. The approach focuses on comprehending the type, prevalence, degree of awareness, and sociocultural aspects of sexual harassment. The basic data gathered from the field serve as the study's main foundation. For this study, a sample of 50 respondents was chosen. Young women from several Sarenga Block villages who represented a range of socioeconomic and educational levels made up the responders. Since the study focuses on young women who might be aware of or have experienced sexual harassment, a purposive sampling technique was employed to choose the respondents. Structured interviews and survey techniques were used to gather data. Based on the goals of the study, a 30-question interview schedule was created. In order to collect comprehensive data on the kinds of harassment experienced, the locations where these episodes take place, the frequency of these incidents, and the degree of understanding regarding legal rights and support networks, the questions contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions. To comprehend the social setting and cultural

backdrop of the communities, observation methods were employed in addition to interviews. This made it easier to pinpoint the sociocultural elements that affect sexual harassment incidence and reporting. Using basic statistical methods like percentage and frequency distribution, the gathered data were methodically categorized, tabulated, and examined. Descriptive analysis was used to interpret the qualitative replies. This research approach contributed to the presentation of a thorough understanding of the problem of sexual harassment among young women in Sarenga Block's rural setting.

5.1 Data Presentation

Study Area: Sarenga Block, Bankura (West Bengal)

Sarenga is located in the West Bengal district of Bankura and is a Community Development Block (CD Block). It is in charge of organizing and carrying out rural development initiatives throughout the block's villages as the intermediate-level administrative unit under the three-tier Panchayati Raj system. 166 villages are covered by the six Gram Panchayats that make up Sarenga Block. The block administration provides the required planning, oversight, and execution support for numerous development initiatives, whereas these Gram Panchayats manage village-level government. (Source: <https://villageinfo.in/west-bengal/bankura/block/sarenga/>)

5.2 Nature and Types of Sexual Harassment Experienced by Young Women

To address the first objective, the collected data can be presented in a frequency distribution table showing different types of harassment experienced by respondents:

Table 1: Types of Sexual Harassment Experienced by Respondents (N = 50)

Type of Harassment	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Verbal harassment (comments, teasing)	18	36%
Staring or gestures	12	24%
Physical touching	10	20%
Online harassment	5	10%
No experience	5	10%
Total	50	100%

The table shows that **verbal harassment** is the most common form experienced by respondents, affecting **36% (18)** of young women. **Staring or inappropriate gestures** account for **24% (12)**, while **20% (10)** faced **physical touching**. **Online harassment** was reported by **10% (5)** respondents. Notably, **10% (5)** reported **no experience of harassment**. This indicates verbal forms are most prevalent. **Frequency and Common Locations of Sexual Harassment:** Data for this objective can be presented in two tables:

Table 2: Frequency of Sexual Harassment Incidents

Frequency	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Frequently	8	16%
Sometimes	20	40%
Rarely	12	24%
Never	10	20%
Total	50	100%

The table shows that sexual harassment is a common experience among the respondents. A majority (40%) reported experiencing harassment **sometimes**, while 16% faced it **frequently**. About 24% encountered it **rarely**, and only 20% reported **never** experiencing harassment. This indicates that most young women have faced some form of harassment in their daily lives.

Table 3: Common Locations of Harassment

Location	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Public transport	15	30%
Market area	12	24%
Educational institutions	10	20%
Roadside/public places	8	16%
Workplace	5	10%
Total	50	100%

The table shows that the highest incidents of harassment occur in **public transport (30%)**, followed by **market areas (24%)** and **educational institutions (20%)**. Roadside or other public places account for **16%**, while the **workplace (10%)** reports the lowest cases. This indicates that crowded public spaces are the most common locations for harassment of young women

5.3 Awareness of Legal Rights and Support Systems

To assess the level of awareness among young women regarding legal rights, support systems, and protective measures against sexual harassment, the data for this objective can be presented in two tables:

Table 4: Awareness of Legal Rights

Awareness Level	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Fully aware	10	20%
Partially aware	22	44%
Not aware	18	36%
Total	50	100%

The table shows that awareness of legal rights among respondents is relatively low. Only 20% of young women are fully aware of their legal rights, while 44% are partially aware. A significant 36% are completely unaware. This indicates limited legal knowledge and highlights the need for awareness programs and legal education among young women.

Table5: Awareness of Support Systems (Police, Helpline, NGOs)

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Aware	21	42%
Not aware	29	58%
Total	50	100%

The table shows that among 50 respondents, only 21 (42%) are aware of support systems such as police, helplines, and NGOs, while 29 respondents (58%) are not aware of them. This indicates a low level of awareness among young women regarding available support services, highlighting the need for greater public awareness and outreach programs.

5.4 Social, Cultural and Economic Factors Affecting Harassment

To explore the social, cultural, and economic factors that influence the occurrence and reporting of sexual harassment among young women in Sarenga Block. The data related to this objective are presented in the table below:

Table 6: Factors Influencing Sexual Harassment

Factors	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Patriarchal social norms	14	28%
Lack of education	11	22%
Poverty/economic dependency	9	18%
Lack of security in public places	10	20%
Fear of social stigma	6	12%
Total	50	100%

The table shows that **patriarchal social norms** are the most significant factor influencing sexual harassment, reported by 28% of respondents. **Lack of education (22%)** and **inadequate security in public places (20%)** also play major roles. **Poverty and economic dependency (18%)** further increase vulnerability, while **fear of social stigma (12%)** discourages reporting and reinforces the persistence of harassment.

5.5 Data Analysis and Interpretation

The current study aims to comprehend the nature, prevalence, awareness, and contributing factors of sexual harassment among young women in Sarenga Block of the Bankura region. The research is based on data collected through a structured survey of 50 respondents. The collected data were organized into tables and analyzed using simple percentages and descriptive interpretation in accordance with the study's objectives.

5.6 Nature and Types of Sexual Harassment Experienced by Young Women

The first objective of the study was to examine the nature and types of sexual harassment experienced by young women in the study area. The findings indicate that sexual harassment takes different forms in

rural areas. Among the 50 respondents, 36% reported experiencing verbal harassment, such as offensive comments, teasing, or inappropriate remarks in public spaces. Another 24% stated that they experienced harassment in the form of staring, gestures, or other non-verbal behaviours, which made them feel uncomfortable and unsafe. Furthermore, 20% of the respondents reported incidents of unwanted physical touching, particularly in crowded public places or during travel. A smaller proportion, 10% of respondents, mentioned experiencing online harassment, such as inappropriate messages or comments through social media platforms. However, 10% of the respondents reported that they had not experienced any form of sexual harassment. These findings suggest that verbal and non-verbal forms of harassment are more common than direct physical harassment, indicating the subtle yet pervasive nature of gender-based harassment in rural communities.

5.7 Frequency and Common Locations of Sexual Harassment

The second objective was to analyse how frequently sexual harassment occurs and identify the common locations where such incidents take place. The findings show that 40% of the respondents experienced harassment occasionally, indicating that such incidents are relatively common but not necessarily regular. About 16% of the respondents reported experiencing harassment frequently, while 24% stated that such incidents occurred rarely. Meanwhile, 20% reported that they had never faced harassment. The study also explored the locations where harassment commonly occurs. The results reveal that public transport and travel routes are the most common locations, where 30% of respondents reported experiencing harassment. This may be due to overcrowding and lack of proper monitoring in such spaces. The market area was identified by 24% of respondents as another common location where harassment occurs. In addition, 20% of respondents reported harassment in or around educational institutions, indicating that even learning environments are not always safe for young women. Other locations include roadsides or isolated public places (16%) and workplaces (10%). These findings highlight that harassment can occur in multiple public settings, particularly where supervision and security measures are limited.

5.8 Awareness of Legal Rights and Support Systems

The third objective of the study was to assess the level of awareness among young women regarding

legal rights, support systems, and protective measures against sexual harassment. The findings indicate that awareness levels are relatively low among respondents. Only 20% of respondents reported being fully aware of legal rights and protections related to sexual harassment. Meanwhile, 44% of respondents stated that they had partial awareness, meaning they had some knowledge but lacked clear understanding of legal procedures or available support systems. A significant 36% of respondents reported that they were not aware of any legal rights or protections against sexual harassment. When asked about support systems such as police assistance, helplines, or community organizations, 42% of respondents stated that they were aware of such services, whereas 58% reported having no knowledge of them. These results indicate that a lack of awareness and information remains a major barrier for young women in seeking justice or support in cases of harassment.

5.9 Social, Cultural, and Economic Factors Influencing Sexual Harassment

The fourth objective was to explore the social, cultural, and economic factors influencing the occurrence and reporting of sexual harassment among young women. The analysis reveals that several structural factors contribute to the persistence of harassment in rural areas. Patriarchal social norms were identified by 28% of respondents as a major factor, as traditional gender roles often discourage women from speaking openly about harassment. Another 22% of respondents believed that lack of education and awareness contributes to the problem, as many women are unaware of their rights or feel powerless to challenge such behaviour. Economic dependency was mentioned by 18% of respondents, suggesting that financial vulnerability may prevent women from reporting incidents or seeking help. Additionally, 20% of respondents highlighted the lack of security in public places, such as poor lighting, inadequate transportation safety, and absence of surveillance. Finally, 12% of respondents mentioned fear of social stigma, which discourages victims from reporting harassment due to concerns about reputation or blame. Overall, the data analysis indicates that sexual harassment among young women in Sarenga Block is influenced by multiple interrelated factors, including social norms, limited awareness, and inadequate safety measures. Addressing these issues requires both social awareness and institutional support to create safer environments for women.

6. Conclusion

Based on replies from 50 participants, the current study investigated the type, frequency, awareness, and contributing factors of sexual harassment among young women in Sarenga Block, Bankura district. The results show that sexual harassment is still a serious social problem that affects young women's safety, dignity, and general well-being in rural locations. The analysis reveals that respondents encounter several types of harassment, the most prevalent of which are verbal harassment, inappropriate gestures, and unwelcome physical contact. These types of harassment frequently take place in common public places like marketplaces, public transportation, schools, and roadside locations. The frequency of these episodes shows that while a smaller percentage of young women face harassment more frequently, many do so periodically. This implies that many women in the study region deal with sexual harassment on a daily basis rather than it being a singular issue. The very low degree of knowledge of legal rights and relevant support networks is another significant finding of the study. A significant portion of young women are still ignorant of the legal safeguards against harassment, despite the fact that some respondents have just a limited understanding of legislation and preventative measures. Victims may be deterred from reporting occurrences or requesting help from authorities and support groups due to this ignorance. The study also emphasizes how social, cultural, and economic factors affect the incidence and reporting of harassment. The issue persists because of patriarchal social norms, low levels of education, economic reliance, insufficient security in public areas, and social stigma dread. These elements frequently foster an atmosphere where victims are reluctant or scared to talk about their experiences. Overall, the results show that sexual harassment is a complex problem that has to be addressed by institutions and society in rural places like Sarenga Block. Addressing this issue can be greatly aided by raising legal rights awareness, bolstering community support networks, enhancing public safety protocols, and advancing gender equality through education. In conclusion, government agencies, educational institutions, community organizations, and society at large must work together to combat sexual harassment. A safer and more supportive environment for young women in rural communities can only be established by awareness, empowerment, and the efficient application of legislation.

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