IN BRIEF

NORMALIZED NO MORE:

AN EVIDENCE-BASED GUIDE TO MEASURING SEXUAL HARASSMENT

TULANE UNIVERSITY

emerge
EVIDENCE-BASED MEASURES OF EMPOWERMENT FOR RESEARCH ON GENDER EQUALITY

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Photo: UN Women Tanzania/Deepika Nath

Introduction

Sexual harassment is a universal form of violence. It disproportionately affects women and girls, undermining their rights, including to safety, leisure, education, mobility and economic participation. Global evidence documents how sexual harassment is often normalized and common in urban and rural spaces as well as workplaces. Technology is increasingly deployed to perpetrate it.

Current measurement approaches reveal a lack of clarity in defining sexual harassment, resulting in significant shortfalls in understanding its prevalence and consequences.[1] These gaps hinder recognition of the extent and the impact of sexual harassment as well as its inclusion in initiatives to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls. Given a call for further developing globally agreed methodologies to measure sexual harassment, including to produce quality, comparable data to inform efficient and measurable policies, this brief provides evidence-based recommendations for measuring sexual harassment at scale. A proposed set of measures could be used across settings, in national, cross-national and regional surveys and other data collection exercises.

Measuring Sexual Harassment: Background and Objective

Status of the field and gaps in measurement: Measuring sexual harassment is challenging due to the range of behaviours that constitute it. These can entail verbal, visual, physical or technology-facilitated abuses. Diverse definitions add to the challenges. Workplace sexual harassment definitions, for instance, often include forced and coerced sex, comprising rape and sexual exploitation. Statistical standards are being developed by the International Labor Organization on work-related violence and harassment in the framework of ILO Violence and harassment Convention (No. 190).[2] Complexities also arise from different legal interpretations of sexual harassment. Cultural variations in personal space and the social acceptability of physical contact can influence perceptions of acceptable versus harassing behaviour (e.g., a kiss on the cheek as a greeting). Finally, reliance on self-reported experiences can be subject to biases related to recalling past events, cultural norms and social desirability, all of which can affect data collection on sexual harassment.

Recommendation: Further guidance and tools are needed to support countries in collecting data on sexual harassment. This initial guidance, aligned with the above definition, supports the development of comprehensive measures, through a proposed definition and by outlining the key elements to consider in measuring sexual harassment. It builds on efforts in 2018 by Stop Street Harassment to conduct a comprehensive sexual harassment survey in the United States of America – the #MeToo survey – which outlined key forms.[3] The survey drew on previously published research, qualitative evidence and input from global experts. It also tapped findings from UN Women's Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces global programme, conducted across cities in low- and middle-income countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.[4]

Defining Sexual Harassment

Status of the field and gaps in definitions: The definitions of sexual harassment used in current measurement tools primarily focus on workplace harassment. This obscures the lived realities of verbal, visual, physical and other forms of sexual harassment in public spaces, perpetrated by unknown passersby, partners, peers and family, and including technology-facilitated sexual harassment. The last is a growing form of harassment disproportionately affecting youth, women in public life, and other groups of women who experience heightened risks of discrimination and abuse. The last include women of colour, Indigenous women, and women with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions, and sex characteristics.

A recommended definition: The following definition of sexual harassment expands on one developed by the United Nations.[5] It factors in diverse settings, perpetrators and forms, and can be applied across data sources to develop representative measures of sexual harassment:

> *Sexual harassment is any unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature – whether contact or non-contact based and whether in person or online - that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause harm. These harms may include offence or humiliation; physical, psychological or emotional injury; an intimidating, hostile, threatening or offensive environment; or disruption in or impediments to day-to-day functioning, economic security or social relationships. Sexual harassment is often affected and reinforced by social and structural power imbalances based on gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic positioning, age and disability. It is also affected and reinforced by relative power imbalances between individuals or groups. In the identification of cases of sexual harassment, the perspective of the victim should be considered.*[6]

Global Prevalence Estimates of Sexual Harassment

Status of the field and gaps in measurement: Existing prevalence estimates of sexual harassment vary substantially based on different factors, including geography, quantitative measurement tools and forms assessed. A systematic review of prevalence studies conducted in low- and middle-income countries found a wide variation in prevalence rates, from 12.5 per cent in the general population in China to 47 per cent of women in an academic setting in Ethiopia. Variations corresponded to different settings for sexual harassment (e.g., workplaces, the most commonly studied setting, or public spaces) as well as world regions.[7] Across all geographies, however, sexual harassment in public spaces was more prevalent than in workplaces.

2015 and 2016 studies on sexual harassment in public spaces assessed the prevalence of unwanted sexualised behaviour directed at women and girls in public urban contexts (e.g., streets, public transport and stations, marketplace areas), across multiple countries - Brazil, Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Liberia, Nepal, South Africa, Thailand, UK, and Zimbabwe. They found sexual harassment prevalence estimates ranging from above 70% to approximately 90%.[8][9] By contrast, a European Union study indicated that one in three women in the European Union–27 (30.8 per cent) have experienced sexual harassment at work in their lifetime,[10] a prevalence finding similar to that seen in national studies in the U.S in 2018 and 2024.[11][12]

Major variations in sexual harassment prevalence reflect the different ways it is defined, measured and experienced across diverse social, cultural and organizational contexts. Available evidence suggests that in general, it occurs in both workplace and non-workplace settings, including public spaces, transportation, markets and online, in urban and rural areas. It is part of the continuum of violence that women and girls experience throughout their lives.

Recommendation: Consistently using a standardized or harmonized measure across countries in assessing forms of sexual harassment would help clarify its pervasiveness as well as related risks and vulnerabilities. Further advocacy raising attention to the impact of sexual harassment on individuals, communities and institutions is needed to ensure governments, businesses and other partners to make action on sexual harassment a top priority. This includes integrating the issue in comprehensive legislation on violence against women and girls and developing programmes and policies informed by robust data and research.

Forms of Sexual Harassment

Forms of sexual harassment can vary by the nature of contact (e.g., verbal versus physical contact), means of contact (e.g., in person versus online) and severity (e.g., aggression or assault). Harassment can be perpetrated from strangers as well as from known individuals including acquaintances, work colleagues and former and current partners. Table 1 provides a list tested in comprehensive sexual harassment surveys in the United States. It provides a reference tool to illustrate different manifestations and is not meant to be exhaustive. Indeed, additional forms can be surveyed as relevant to contexts. Including **visual sexual harassment** which include acts such as someone displaying written or graphic material such as posters, graffiti, drawings, pictures; as well as unwelcome staring, leering or making obscene gestures. While Table 1 is intended to help assess victimization, the same items can be modified to assess perpetration.[13]

International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women 2016 - Jamaica. Photo: UN Women/Khristina Godfrey

TABLE 1

Forms of sexual harassment tested in the 2018 and 2024 #MeToo Surveys[14]

VERBAL SEXUAL HARASSMENT
Someone whistling, honking, making kissy noises, "pssst" sounds.
Someone saying things such as, "Hey baby," "Mmmm sexy," "Give me a smile" or similar comments in a way that is disrespectful and/or unwelcome and/or made you feel unsafe.
Someone calling you a sexist slur, such as "bitch," "slut" or "whore".
Someone purposefully misgendering you or calling you a homophobic or transphobic slur, such as "fag," "dyke" or "tranny."
Someone talking about your body parts inappropriately or offensively (such as your legs, crotch, butt or breasts), making sexually explicit comments ("I want to do BLANK to you") or asking inappropriate sexual questions.

PHYSICAL SEXUAL HARASSMENT
Someone flashing or exposing their genitals to you without your permission.
Someone physically following you without your permission or when you told them to stop.
Someone purposely touching you, grabbing you or brushing up against you in an unwelcome, sexual way, when you did not want it or told them to stop.

DATING COERCION OR SEXUAL THREATS
Someone making threats to harm you, to harm someone you know or to share personal information you don't want shared (examples could include your sexual orientation, drug use history or immigration status).
Someone saying you must date them or perform a sexual act for them in exchange for something (such as a good grade, promotion, job, drugs, food or something similar) or instead of something (like paying rent or a citation, etc).
Someone repeatedly texting or calling you in a harassing way.
Someone repeatedly asking you for a date or your phone number when you've said no or ignored them.

CYBER SEXUAL HARASSMENT
Someone sending you sexual content without your permission, sexualizing you inappropriately or threatening you with sex acts in private online spaces, such as over email or text.
Someone sending you sexual content without your permission, sexualizing you inappropriately or threatening you with sex acts in public online spaces, such as on social media.
Someone taking and/or sharing sexual pictures or videos of you without your permission.

SEXUAL COERCION OR ASSAULT
Quid pro quo sex or coercion to engage in sexual activities when you do not want to. This can be coerced sex with them or someone else.
Forced sex.

*Note: This can occur by strangers, partners, acquaintances, family, or others.

Place of Occurrence

The location or setting of sexual harassment is important to understand specific risks and capacities to escape an incident. Canada's Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces defines public space as "anywhere the public is able to access with little or no restrictions, e.g., coffee shops, the street, shopping malls, public transportation, bars, restaurants".[15] Past surveys have identified the following locations as sites of harassment. These should be assessed in future research:

* **On the street**
* **In other open/free public spaces, such as the library, park, bus stop, market**
* **Online/virtual spaces**
* **Entertainment venues: concert, bar or club**
* **Workplace**
* **School (including colleges and universities)**
* **On public transportation (e.g., bus, subway)**
* **On private mass transportation (train, plane)**
* **Ride share or taxi**
* **In your home or someone else's home**
* **In your car or someone else's car**
* **Other location not listed**

Girls from the National High School of Choreography performed at the launch of the 16 days of activism against gender based violence. Photo credit: UN Women Albania/Violana Murataj

Number and Gender of Perpetrators and Relationship(s) with Perpetrator(s)

A persistent myth for all forms of sexual violence is that perpetrators are only unknown strangers in public spaces – who, in the most severe cases, stalk dark alleys and use violence and weapons to commit abuse – or are supervisors in the workplace. Yet evidence has long established the continuum of violence against women, across the life cycle, settings and relationships. The perpetration of sexual harassment can include partners, relatives and peers. The number and gender of harassers are important elements to capture; sexual harassment, notably in public spaces and online, often involves multiple men or boys harassing one or a smaller number of women or girls. The relationship to the harasser(s) could be any of the following:

* **Stranger(s)**
* **Supervisor/employer (or supervisee/employee)**
* **Colleague/co-worker**
* **Teacher/trainer/coach (or student/trainee)**
* **Landlord (or tenant)**
* **Doctor/healthcare worker**
* **Other persons in position of authority (police/military officer, social service provider, etc.)**
* **Friend or peer**
* **Partner or former partner**
* **Family member (elder, younger or peer)**
* **Client/customer/patient**

If possible, other social characteristics of harasser(s) and those who are harassed should be noted. Factors related to age, race/ethnicity or citizenship can affect vulnerability to the escalation of abuse as well as the risk of non-disclosure.

Frequency and Recency of Occurrence

Ongoing versus one-time interactions with a harasser can have different effects on actual and perceived safety. They may indicate power dynamics that can impede the ability to escape a situation. For example, sexual harassment in public spaces, such as streets, may create a sense of vulnerability. But this ceases outside that environment, unless acts occur often enough for survivors to see these spaces as unsafe. Sexual harassment or abuse from someone with whom a survivor has regular contact, such as a landlord, employer or even a partner, can feel particularly difficult to escape.

Age and the recency of occurrence may also have effects. If experiences begin at a younger age, they can incite even greater confusion or feelings of self-blame. More recent experiences, even if similar in severity to past experiences, may feel more salient for a harassed person at the time of a survey. Questions to generate more complete information might therefore include:

* **Age at first occurrence and age at most severe occurrence**
* **Age at most recent occurrence OR past year occurrence**
* **Frequency of occurrence (several times a day, daily, weekly, monthly, a few times a year, one or two times a year) in the past year**
* **Frequency of occurrence in adolescence and young adulthood, the period of highest prevalence**

Photo: UN Women/Hoang Van Nam

Photo credit: UN Women

Perpetrator's Motivation

Perpetrators may report various reasons for sexual harassment, including: amusement; social positioning; personal gain, sexually or economically; or even to cause harm deliberately. Since 2008, the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) led by Equimundo has been adapted in over 32 countries.[16] It includes items on men's perpetration of violence, including sexual harassment on streets and at workplaces, to understand:

* **Men's reported perpetrated rate of sexual harassment, triangulated with women's experience rate**
* **Reasons for perpetrating sexual harassment, including "for fun" and based on blaming women for dressing "provocatively"**
* **Factors associated with this violence, including age, education levels and childhood experiences of violence**

Impact on Harassed Persons

The consequences and impacts of sexual harassment can be more insidious than those of some other forms of violence that cause more visible and immediate injuries and traumas. This represents another challenge in measuring sexual harassment and helps to explain the lack of priority given to it. While most forms of sexual harassment might not include physical acts of violence, its impacts, in physical and virtual spaces, can be as devastating as other forms of violence.

Sexual harassment can affect the harassed person in a variety of ways: diminishing mental health and perceived safety, causing physical harm or injury, imperilling job security, undercutting comfort at school or work, generating fear in relationships and causing discomfort in public spaces that limits freedom of movement. Although asking questions on the consequences of sexual harassment may reveal important insights into the impacts on women and girls, only a few surveys have included them. One recommendation is to integrate the following effects in data collection:

* **Mental health**
* **Changes to mobility, including commuting to a workplace**
* **Perceived community safety**
* **Changes in interpersonal relationships**
* **Changes in activities, including online presence and in terms of professional careers or public engagement**

Photo: UN Women/Ellie van Baaren

Sexual Harassment Norms and Perceptions of Sexual Safety

In addition to direct sexual harassment experiences and their consequences, indirect exposure to sexual harassment occurs when it exists in the ambient environment and is socially acceptable. This influences perceptions of sexual safety and behaviours related to mobility and online presence, and may become a barrier for women entering politics or other parts of public life.[17]

Measures of a given institution, community or other site can assess how much an individual fears sexual harassment, how often they see sexual harassment, and how much sexual harassment is tolerated or occurs with impunity. Such measures help to examine the climate or norms in public spaces or workplaces. For example, the World Values Survey includes questions on the frequency of various crimes and discrimination in neighbourhoods[18] (see the recommended measures that follow). Canada's Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces features a section on sexualized behaviours witnessed, with an item on acts related to sexual harassment, including jokes, comments, gestures or unwanted contact directed at others.[19]

Understanding not just norms and attitudes but also the willingness to act when seeing the abuse of another person – i.e., positive bystander behaviour – can provide much information on the social acceptance of sexual harassment and how easily someone can harass with impunity. At the same time, assessing negative bystander behaviour, which can include doing nothing in the face of abuse and may involve laughing at or gossiping negatively about the victim of harassment, can illuminate patterns reinforcing abuse. Only a few studies, however, currently include questions on bystanders, with limited information on their reactions.[20]

Normative measurements should include both descriptive and injunctive norms to assess perceptions of which behaviours are occurring and which should be performed.

Measurement Methods

Different, complementary data sources should be considered to produce a comprehensive, multifaceted understanding of sexual harassment. The following recommendations cover the three main quantitative data sources and methods: surveys, administrative data and qualitative data.

1. Surveys: Survey research is the most standard means of assessing experiences of sexual harassment as well as the climate and norms related to sexual harassment. Comprehensive measures of sexual harassment would benefit from national standalone surveys, such as the #MeToo Survey in the United States[21] and the multi-year National Sexual Harassment Survey conducted by the Australian Human Rights Commission.[22] Periodic investment in such surveys is important to produce a solid understanding of sexual harassment and, based on that, to design and implement effective solutions to end it.

Standalone surveys are expensive, however. A more cost-effective means of surveying sexual harassment may be embedding measures into existing multinational surveys, such as on the labour force, digital connectivity, schooling/education and political spaces/politicians. For example, since 2021, the Afrobarometer survey[23] introduced an item on women's experience with sexual harassment in public space which has been rolled out in over 28 countries. Establishment surveys, including surveys conducted by large companies, should be encouraged to produce complementary data.

Furthermore, while the production of nationally comparable prevalence data on all forms of violence against women and girls, including sexual harassment, is a priority, sexual harassment has localized manifestations. These depend on the space where it is taking place; therefore, local data should complement national data. Partnerships with local women's rights organizations to collect local citizen data on sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence against women and girls in public spaces are critical. Exercises such as focus group discussions or key informant interviews can inform the development of national and multi-country instruments.

2. Administrative data: Intake forms used by police, the justice system, social and health services, employment commissions, schools and services responding to violence against women are important sources of information to assess and track cases and responses to sexual harassment. Limitations to administrative data come from the low disclosure rates of sexual harassment to legal bodies. Values in many cases are likely to be underreported.

Strengthening the availability and quality of administrative data on sexual harassment can enhance understanding and lead to more effective responses. Such data may support more refined comparisons of the types of violations as well as the sociodemographic characteristics of survivors who report cases and seek services. One basic step entails capturing different types and settings for sexual harassment as part of intake forms used to report violence against women. Survey measures focused on direct experiences with sexual harassment (see the recommended measures below) can be used to identify minimum variables for collection by administrative data systems.

3. Crowd-sourced data: Citizen data on sexual harassment can emerge from civic-driven collaborations providing real-time tracking, assessment and identification of geographic risks. Real-time tracking through social media is one possibility. Surveys conducted through collaboration with national statistics organizations and academia can provide rigour and generalizability to the data. Such efforts are usually smaller in scale, but they allow a closer focus on sexual harassment. They may collect data on pertinent issues beyond prevalence, such as bystander behaviours, disclosure experiences, consequences of experiences, social norms and more. Big data may be another option if they can be obtained, offering insights on sexual harassment based on social media sentiments or other measures.

While this brief focuses on the quantitative measurement of sexual harassment, qualitative research remains relevant in producing a full and refined understanding of the experiences of women and girls. It captures their lived experiences, helping to explore context and power dynamics, and identify emerging or hidden forms of harassment.

Recommended Measures

Based on published literature and inputs from experts across national settings, there are four strategies to consider in addressing the need for measures of sexual harassment and encouraging political support to enact them:

1. Focus on data on prevalence and norms to deepen understanding of the scope and scale of the problem.
2. Emphasize workplace sexual harassment, sexual harassment in public spaces and technology-facilitated sexual harassment, as women's labour force participation, mobility and use of technology are global priorities.
3. Assess forms of sexual harassment that are generally viewed as unacceptable behaviours.
4. Prioritize brevity and clarity as key to supporting the inclusion of measures of sexual harassment in existing surveys.

Based on these elements, several measures to capture experiences of sexual harassment were selected and validated in multi-country studies conducted by the World Values Survey, Afrobarometer and EMERGE. The measures can be used in a single survey or embedded in broader surveys on labour force participation, the use of technologies, and demographic and health issues. They may also inform key variables for collection by administrative data systems and other sources of data on violence against women.

These measures strictly aim to measure women's experiences and norms as a minimum recommended standard to assess the prevalence of sexual harassment. Additional questions, including to probe risk factors and the impacts of sexual harassment, as well as men's roles as perpetrators, are recommended for inclusion in longer, more dedicated data collection instruments.

Workplace Sexual Harassment Experiences and Norms

Have you ever experienced unwanted sexual attention in the workplace? Unwanted sexual attention in the workplace can include staring/leering, repeated requests for romantic or sexual interactions despite refusal, touching in a way that made you feel uncomfortable, or other things that made you feel sexualized and uncomfortable.

Yes	**No**

Have you experienced unwanted sexual attention in the workplace in the past 12 months? Unwanted sexual attention at the workplace can include staring/leering, repeated requests for romantic or sexual interactions despite refusal, touching in a way that made you feel uncomfortable, or other things that made you feel sexualized and uncomfortable.

Yes	**No**

How often do you think women receive unwanted sexual attention at your current workplace?

Never	**Rarely**	**Sometimes**	**Usually**	**Always**

*Note: This measure could be modified based on specific fields, such as politics and journalism.

Sexual Harassment in Public Spaces Experiences and Norms

How often do women in your community not go to a public space (for example, to a market, work or school), even when they wanted to do so, because they were worried about being spoken to or being touched/grabbed/pinched in a sexual way that they did not want?

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always

How often in the past 12 months did you not go to a public space (for example, to a market, work or school), even when you wanted to do so, because you were worried about being spoken to or being touched/grabbed/pinched in a sexual way you did not want?

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always

How often in the past 12 months were you spoken to or touched/grabbed/pinched in a sexual way you did not want when you were in a public space (for example, a market, work or school)?

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always

Cyber Sexual Harassment

Has anyone ever sent you sexual content without your permission, sexualized you inappropriately or threatened you with sex acts, in private online spaces, such as over email or text?

Yes, in the past 12 months	Yes, but not in the past 12 months	No

Has anyone ever sent you or showed you sexual content without your permission, sexualized you inappropriately, or threatened you with sex acts, in public online spaces, such as on social media?

Yes, in the past 12 months	Yes, but not in the past 12 months	No

Has anyone ever shared real or fake sexual pictures or videos of you online without your permission?

Yes, in the past 12 months	Yes, but not in the past 12 months	No

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