

Study on Students' Sexual Attitudes and Views on Sexual Harassment

Executive Summary

Background

1. The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has commissioned the Department of Special Education and Counseling of The Hong Kong Institute of Education to conduct a research project "Study on Students' Sexual Attitudes and Views on Sexual Harassment". The survey was undertaken during the period of May to November 2011. A total of 5,902 students¹ participated in the questionnaire survey. Apart from questionnaire survey, 16 focus group discussion sessions involving 131 participants were carried out in order to know more about their knowledge and understanding of sexual harassment, as well as the prevalence of sexual harassment on campus, and measures taken to prevent sexual harassment.

2. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) defines sexual harassment as a non-consensual and unwelcome sexual behavior, and it will affect lives of the victims. This definition emphasizes the consequences and implications of sexual harassment, and it distinguishes from consensual behaviors such as flirting, kissing and touching. Forms of sexual harassment vary a lot, which transverse from one end of physical sexual assault to the other end of the non-verbal sex cues. In the era of information explosion today, internet and related social networking enhance the occurrence of sexual harassment due to the fact that harassers can rapidly abuse others anonymously without restriction in a specific physical locale. Commonly, they believe that they will not be liable to legal responsibilities.

3. Most sexual harassment is perpetrated by male against female. However, there are also cases of harassment by women against men, and of same sex harassment perpetrated by either sex. Other than workplace environment, sexual harassment is common at every stage of education. Sexual harassment on campus commonly occurs among peers and most students who experience it do not report what has happened. The dynamics of sexual harassment often involve an aggressor who holds a position of power over the victim, which include men against women, senior against junior students, and in a teacher-student relationship. Moreover, those sexually harassed students can be targeted for retaliation if they report the cases, by both their peers and school employees.

¹ Questionnaire survey participants included primary four, secondary one, four and six students, and students from tertiary institutions.

Findings of Questionnaire Survey

4. Students generally consider sexual behaviors in the questionnaire as sexual harassment. Among those physical sexual behaviors such as pulling clothing or touching others' body, 80% of the students reveal that they amount to sexual harassment. For those involving verbal sexual behaviors such as calling others 'gay' or 'tomboy', relatively fewer students (about 40%) regard them as sexual harassment. In general, more female students than male students consider sexual behaviors in the questionnaire as sexual harassment. When compared to children and teenagers (their views are similar), more adults perceive sexual behaviors in the questionnaire as sexual harassment. Similarly, when compared to primary and secondary school students (their views are common), more university students regard sexual behaviors in the questionnaire as sexual harassment.

5. During the past one year, 50% of the students have experienced various forms of sexual harassment. Among them, most students indicate the experiences of "Someone made sexual jokes about you", "Someone talked about sex all the time in your presence", "Someone asked you to talk about sexual topics or to have intimate body contacts with the same/opposite sex", "Someone continuously made suggestions, propositions, or demands to you for sexual favors or sexual relationship" and "Someone rubbed or touched against you on purpose".

6. Sexual harassment, in terms of the forms, involves people of opposite sexes, of same sex and in a group. Among female students, who had been sexually harassed, they experienced "A male bothered by asking for dates, though you had answered 'no'", "A male continuously made suggestions, propositions, or demands to you for sexual favors or sexual relationship", and "A male rubbed or touched against you on purpose". Among male students, who had been sexually harassed, they experienced "Two or more males talked about sex all the time in your presence". Moreover, "Someone made sexual jokes about you" mostly occurred in social groups (two or more persons of both genders). Among students who have experienced sexual harassment, 97% of the victims express that the harassers are their "boy/girl friends". Next are "classmates" (21%) and "friends" (14%). Sexual harassment primarily occurs "in school" (including university campus) (49%), where students spend much time in studying. Most of the incidents take place "in the classroom" (25%). It is followed by "in the street" (11%) or "on public transport vehicles" (8%).

7. More male students than female students express that they have experienced sexual harassment such as "Someone called you 'gay'", "Someone made sexual gestures/movements to you" and "Someone showed or passed to you pornography". More teenagers than children and adults indicate that they have experienced sexual harassment of various forms. Similarly, more senior secondary school students show that they have experienced various forms of sexual harassment, when compared to Primary 4 and Secondary 1 (P4 & S1) and

university students. Examples are “Someone made sexual jokes about you”; “Someone talked about sex all the time in your presence” and “Someone rubbed or touched against you on purpose”.

8. When the students encounter sexual harassment, most of them indicate “Feeling angry” (40%), “Feeling afraid or scared” (38%) and “Cannot relate well with others” (36%). However, fewer students express that their daily life will be affected, such as “Sleep disturbances” (7%) and “Eating disorders” (10%). On one hand, more female students are affected psychologically and emotionally, when compared to male students. On the other hand, more male students than female students are affected in daily life and interpersonal relationship. More primary and secondary school students (especially children) are impacted in some ways, when compared to university students. They include “Cannot relate well with others”, “Cannot study well” and “Eating disorders”. Alternatively, more university students (adults in particular) will obviously be affected in some ways, when compared to primary and secondary school students. They include “Feeling helpless”, “Feeling angry” and “Feeling stressed and confused”.

9. Over a half of the sexually harassed students are found “Keep silent” (58%) and “Complain to the harassers” (51%). They are followed by “Tell classmates/friends” (39%) and “Call the police” (34%). They seldom choose to seek help from “family members” (16%), “seniors in school” (5%) and “the EOC” (3%).

10. 53% of the students indicate that promotional materials such as posters/leaflets about preventing or dealing with sexual harassment are posted or delivered in school. About a half of the students (51%) express that there are school policy and regulations on prevention of sexual harassment. Apart from these, 44% of the students reveal that school assemblies/seminars/workshops on prevention of sexual harassment are held. Students indicate that school assemblies/seminars/workshops on prevention of sexual harassment are delivered by teachers (20%), social workers in school (20%), the EOC (18%) and social service organizations outside school (17%). The proportions of the latter two sources tend to be low. This reflects that schools less likely engage external resources to promote the prevention of sexual harassment, and therefore, social workers and teachers in school have to bear greater responsibilities of educating the students.

11. A majority of the students (80%) express that they understand what “*Wonjokyuje*”² is. Only 11% of them have no idea about it. More female students (68%) than male students (43%) do not accept *Wonjokyuje*. In respect of premarital sex, similar pattern is observed that more female students (44%) than male students (30%) do not accept it.

² Adolescent girls engage in a sexual relationship with older men for money. An alternative name given to such activity is compensated dating.

Instead, more male students (34%) than female students (28%) show acceptance of premarital sex. The same pattern repeats in relation to teenager pregnancy. More female students (84%) than male students (75%) do not accept teenager pregnancy. It is noted that the rate of not accepting teenager pregnancy is greater than those of the previous two issues.

12. The impact of age on the acceptance of premarital sex is clearly observed. As students increase their ages from children (11%), teenagers (27%) to adults (44%), their level of acceptance increases significantly. Also, it only occurs in adulthood that the level of acceptance (44%) exceeds that of not accepting (38%) premarital sex. Furthermore, the level of not accepting is affected by age, as indicated in issues including *Wonjokyuje* and teenager pregnancy. For instance, not accepting *Wonjokyuje* increases from children (46%), teenagers (54%) to adults (71%); the same pattern repeats in disapproving teenager pregnancy (children (73%), teenagers (77%), adults (88%)).

13. Differences are found among students in various educational levels. Significantly more university students (71%) do not accept *Wonjokyuje*, when compared to senior secondary school students (55%) and P4 & S1 students (44%). As for premarital sex, slightly more university students (41%) do not accept it, when compared to senior secondary school students (39%) and P4 & S1 students (35%). Rather, many more university students (44%) accept premarital sex, in comparison with senior secondary school students (30%) and P4 & S1 students (12%). In respect of teenager pregnancy, university students (89%) obviously do not accept it, the proportion of which is significantly higher than those of senior secondary school students (77%) and P4 & S1 students (72%).

Findings of Focus Group Survey

14. Although the students are at different stages of schooling, they have a basic understanding of sexual harassment which also comprises sexually implicit words or behaviors. They recognize that these words or behaviors are compelling and can distinguish whether the involved parties are subject to sexual harassment involuntarily or not. In general, the students opine that sexual harassment will cause feelings of intimidation, repulsion, discomfort and anxiety in the victims. This matches with survey findings that students generally consider sexual behaviors in the questionnaire as sexual harassment and harassed victims have to suffer from various disturbances.

15. The findings of focus group survey are supplementary to questionnaire survey data. First, there are discrepancies between how the students understand the definition of sexual harassment and their actual responses in real life situations. In the course of determining whether certain behaviors are actually sexual harassment, the students are more concerned about the motives and mentality of the perpetrators. Since most incidents of sexual

harassment involve friends or classmates, the victims find that it is somewhat difficult to differentiate the harassers' intention. There are times when the victims even think that the behaviors form part of the school ethos or a playful culture, with verbal sexual harassment in particular.

16. The forms of sexual harassment are very similar to what reveal in the questionnaire survey. While verbal and physical sexual harassment is prevalent for students in primary or secondary schools, students in universities mostly encounter verbal sexual harassment. In terms of sexual jokes and comments on body and private life of other people, some students perceive it as a part of the school ethos. Even if some classmates disapprove, it will continue.

17. In the face of sexual harassment, most of the students adopt passive means to address the issue by themselves. For example, they will choose to tolerate or to leave. Even though the harassers are mostly students, the victims rarely seek help from their teachers. Some of the students think that their teachers, either inexperienced or embarrassed, are incapable of handling cases of sexual harassment. The fear of revenge also prevents them from reporting the incidents of sexual harassment to their teachers. This may explain why the figures of seeking help from other sources appear as low as revealed in the questionnaire survey.

18. Currently, education on prevention of sexual harassment is primarily carried out in the form of seminars. A portion of students express that they show no interests in the talks, whereas some others indicate that they have fallen asleep during the seminars. The majority think that daily life examples are lacking in these seminars and it may explain why the students cannot apply what they have learnt to prevent the occurrence of sexual harassment, and do not know how to face and deal with the incident once it has happened. Therefore, the problem is related to the ways how the students are educated. At present, understanding of the definition of sexual harassment is emphasized but the students mostly do not recognize some underpinning concepts such as the relationship between gender equality and sexual harassment.

19. Male students in primary or secondary schools opine that the relationship between both genders is not amicable. There appears a 'tit for tat' mentality. Preventive measures against sexual harassment on male students are lacking. There are reports on male students being sexually harassed by female students. Apart from heterosexual harassment, there is sexual harassment between students of the same sex, the occurrence of which is even harder to be identified.

20. Both teaching staff and parents indicate that the current education on sexual harassment is inadequate, and its importance has not been emphasized in school. School curricula are so compacted that prevention of sexual harassment as well as sex education is not included. The parents hope that training courses about sex education will be provided so that they have the opportunities to learn how to nurture their children about sexual harassment. Some of the students, teaching staff and parents express that schools tend to handle complaints of sexual harassment in a very subtle manner (or even doing nothing), fearing that the school reputation would be adversely affected.

Conclusion and Recommendations

21. The occurrence of sexual harassment originates from the harassers, who have discriminated against the victims by violating the victims' rights physiologically, sexually and physically. The mild cases cover rude sexual jokes, showing/ passing pornographic materials, indecent gestures, attitudes, behaviors, insults and touches. The moderate cases include continuous propositions or demands against victims' willingness. The serious cases consist of sexual assaults or attacks. This Study reveals that about a half of the interviewed students have experienced various forms of sexual harassment without their consent in the past year. Furthermore, over one-third of the senior secondary school students indicate that they have been sexually harassed (mainly on sexual jokes) in the previous year. The findings match with results of the survey undertaken by the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2003 (i.e. About 23% of the interviewed senior primary school students and 43% of the secondary school students have experienced sexual harassment from peers (e.g., sexual topics or jokes, propositions or demands to view pornographic videos/ webpages / publications). This shows that there has not been much improvement in reducing sexual harassment on campus. It is worrying that during the focus group discussion sessions, some students have accepted sexual harassment as school culture. Therefore, although other students have expressed resentment, sexual harassment will still go on.

22. In the face of sexual harassment, most of the students react passively by addressing the issue on their own. For example, they will choose to tolerate or to leave. Even though the harassers are mostly students, the victims rarely seek help from their teachers. Some students think that their teachers, either embarrassed or inexperienced, are incapable of handling cases of sexual harassment. The fear of revenge also prevents them from reporting the incidents of sexual harassment to their teachers. It is rare for the victims to seek external assistance and therefore they are alone to face the incidents. Despite the fact that they can talk to family members or friends and get reliefs from fearful and angry emotions, their negative feelings from embarrassment to damage of self-respect, and even depression linger. Local studies point out that victims, after being sexually harassed, show low self-confidence/ self-image, depression, insecurity, and poor sense of belongingness to school. Overseas

research shows that apart from feeling unsafe at school, elevated risk of suicidal thoughts, early dating and substance use are also found. Girls are even reported of dieting and self-harm behaviors.

23. It is perplexing to note that schools adopt “ostrich policy” in response to the incidents of sexual harassment on campus. The findings of the focus group survey indicate that the policies on sexual harassment mainly focus on the relationship between students and teaching staff/ external tutors. Sexual harassment between students is seldom addressed. Both teachers and social workers consider that schools address the issue in a low-key manner in order to uphold their reputation. The general attitude is “don’t make a mountain out of a molehill”. It should be understood that not dealing with sexual harassment does not mean its disappearance. Indeed, effective ways of dealing with sexual harassment involve the collaboration of the Government, principals and teaching staff, parents, students and stakeholders in the community. As such, victims can follow formal complaint procedures or legal means to solve the sexual harassment problems so that sexual harassers should receive appropriate punishment and counseling.

24. Based on the above discussions, there are a number of areas that need improvement in terms of the preventive measures against sexual harassment on campus and proper management in handling complaints of sexual harassment. In this regard, the research team proposes the following recommendations:

(1) Policies and Mechanisms in Handling Sexual Harassment on Campus

Each school should develop a policy to address sexual harassment. This policy should give a clear definition on sexual harassment so that principals, teaching staff and social workers know how to handle sexual harassment cases. The system of complaint-handling should serve to safeguard the basic rights of teachers and students, as well as their gender equity and equality. In operation, the system should uphold the principles of fairness, transparency and protection of privacy, and the authority to discipline.

With reference to the universities, mechanisms should be established in primary and secondary schools in order to handle complaint cases. Concurrently, all students and parents should understand clearly about the complaint procedures (e.g., relevant information uploaded on the school website). Moreover, appropriate channels should be provided for students who can seek help in confidence. Once the policy is set, the school should enforce the policy, with proper mechanism to monitor the implementation and review the policy from time to time, in order to ensure the efficacies of its implementation.

(2) Training of School Principals and Teaching Staff

Incidents of sexual harassment mostly occur among peers in the classroom during the changing of classes or recesses. In fact, most students choose not to seek help from school staff. Therefore, more comprehensive training programmes should be provided for school principals, teachers, counselors and social workers in order to enhance their abilities in dealing with sexual harassment in schools.

(3) Provision of Appropriate Psychological Counseling

When incidents of sexual harassment occur, involved parties need to receive some sound psychological counseling. On one hand, the perpetrators need to address their offending behaviors which may involve psychological abnormalities or biases. On the other hand, victims need counseling services because they have experienced a lot of negative emotions and cognitions. The schools should collaborate with their counseling team, including the use of external resources and providing appropriate channels so that the victims are able to access one-stop professional counseling and follow up services. Designated persons will provide various support services for the victims, follow up their psychological wellbeing and avoidance of being sexually harassed in future.

(4) Strengthening Sex/ Gender Education

Different ages represent different developmental stages. The survey findings reveal that different educational modes should be administered to students in primary and secondary schools and universities. The primary school students have a vague concept of sexual harassment and therefore, an inductive and more flexible model should be adopted to educate them. For students in secondary schools and universities, strengthening of education on campus about issues including sexual harassment among students, relationship and courtship between genders, and even some controversial topics (e.g., *Wonjokyuje*, premarital sex and teenager pregnancy). Restructuring of lessons should be undertaken to increase class time to have teaching about sexual harassment. The mode of teaching should not be unidirectional and it needs to adopt other modes such as small group discussion and role-playing. Students can therefore freely discuss and clarify their concerns. It also helps students to establish mutual respect and self-respect in values around sex, and to build a “zero sexual harassment” campus.

Following the rapid development of information technology, local students increasingly get more channels and opportunities in employing information technology and the internet in their living and study. Many research findings reveal that as daily internet usage by children and teenagers continues to increase, exposure to online sexual harassment or violence will become more serious. For example, they receive online indecent or obscene materials (including child pornography) or experience sexual assaults in meeting their net friends. The

schools and related organizations are responsible to equip teachers and parents to increase their awareness, understanding and knowledge about the issue. Students can therefore acquire the values and the concept of online security so as to prevent the online sexual harassment.

(5) Education for Parents

The schools and related organizations should organize various activities (such as workshops and parent-child camps) to help parents increase their awareness on the issues about sexual harassment. Tools such as CDs and activity kits could also be used as resources for parents to educate their children at home about sexual harassment.

(6) Roles of the Government, EOC and NGOs

The Government and the EOC should collaborate with related organizations to undertake large scale studies on sexual harassment on a regular basis. Furthermore, the Government should produce programmes about sex/ gender education which are broadcasted on mainstream media. CDs and teaching kits can be produced as useful tools to facilitate parents and teachers. Survey findings indicate that students seldom ask for assistance from teaching staff/ social workers in schools and external NGOs. It is proposed that hotlines and email accounts should be set up so that students can seek help in confidence.