

Research Article

Discrepancies between Women's Reports and Men's Awareness of Sexual Harassment: A Study among Representatives to the Union Parishads in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Objectives: The aim of the study was to investigate differences between reports of victimisation from sexual harassment by females and awareness of it among their male colleagues.

Methods: A questionnaire was completed by 821 representatives, 412 females, 409 males, from the Union Parishads, the rural local governance bodies of Bangladesh. Sexual harassment was measured with the Sexual Harassment Experience Questionnaire, measuring different types of sexual harassment.

Results: For all types of sexual harassment, reports by females on how often they were victimised were significantly higher than reports by males about how often they had observed female colleagues being harassed. Females 29–45 years of age were significantly more victimised from all types of sexual harassment than those 51–61 years old. Males 56–61 years of age scored higher than other males on observations of female victimisation from all types of sexual harassment. Females reported victimisation from verbal sexual harassment to be the most common type, followed by nonverbal harassment, and sexual harassment based on social manipulation; the least common type was victimisation from physical sexual harassment.

Conclusion: Great discrepancies were found between reports by females of victimisation from sexual harassment in the Union Parishads and awareness of it by their male colleagues.

Keywords: Awareness, Bangladesh, Union Parishads, sexual harassment, sex differences

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The aim of the present study was to investigate differences between reports by females of victimisation from sexual harassment and awareness of the same by their male colleagues in the local governance bodies, the Union Parishads (UPs), of Bangladesh. In this study, sexual harassment is understood as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature.^[1] Measurements of nonverbal and indirect sexual harassment based on social manipulation were also included.

Sexual harassment of women is a serious social problem around the globe;^[2] it occurs in almost every culture, and it takes multiple forms.^[3] Studies have shown that sexual harassment occurs frequently in workplaces, both in the public sector,^[4,5] and in the private sector.^[6–8] Exposure to sexual harassment is, to different degrees, a familiar experience for working women.^[9,10]

Two meta-analytic reviews have covered research on differences in the perceptions of sexual harassment between females and males.^[11,12] Both of them came to the conclu-

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sion that women experienced a broader range of behaviours as harassing. However, in order for a behaviour to be considered as harassing the observer first has to be aware of its existence. A study found that females and males did not agree on how often sexual harassment occurred in the workplace.^[13] Whether a person perceives a behaviour as harassing or not depends on him/her being aware of it in the first place. A simple nonverbal gesture, like e.g. a man seemingly incidentally touching the hand of a woman when giving her something might go completely unnoticed by a bystander. Thus, females and males might not only disagree on what types of behaviours are harassing, and their severity, but they might also have different levels of awareness of single behaviours.

Age is considered a highly salient social feature in the study of sexual harassment, but results regarding the association with age vary. In the US, students have reported sexual harassment before sixth grade.^[14] Another study investigating longitudinal trends in sexual harassment in US schools found an increase in sexual harassment from the 5th to the 9th grade.^[15] A study on students and staff at a US university found a positive relationship between age and observations of sexual harassment; the higher the age, the more frequent were the observations.^[16]

Sexual harassment affects the victims' mental health and well-being negatively with decreased work satisfaction,^[17–19] decreased work performance,^[20] employment loss and career interruptions,^[7,21–23] and it has, in general, negative organisational impacts.^[24,25]

Sexual harassment has been studied since the 1980s.^[26] Three theoretical models for explaining the phenomenon have been brought forward; a psychological, a socio-cultural, and an organisational one. The psychological model proposes that the views of men and women may vary regarding when a behaviour is to be considered sexually harassing.^[27] The socio-cultural model explains the occurrence of sexual harassment as a reflection of gender-based role expectations of a patriarchal society.^[28–30]

The organisational model considers workplace norms, and gender bias to be predicting factors of sexual harassment.^[13,31–34] In organisational settings, sexual harassment perpetrated by a male director or co-worker against female colleagues has been argued to originate in the power structure of the organisation as well as in cultural gender roles.^[26] It has been argued that abuse of power is the core cause of sexual harassment, and that the perpetrators must have authority over the victims in order to harass them.^[35]

Sexual Harassment in Bangladesh

Although a number of studies have been conducted on the gender discrepancy in active participation of women in the UPs of Bangladesh, few studies have addressed sexual harassment as a major hindrance for effective participation. Previous studies have also not provided measurements of frequency and intensity.^[36] A study conducted with representatives of 19 union councils in different socio-cultural zones of Bangladesh as respondents found major challenges for women to participate in the Ups; these were male domination, corruption, and faulty legal provision.^[37] Female council members to the UPs of Bangladesh have been found to be victimised from sexual harassment by their fellow male members and chairmen,^[38] in the form of both verbal and attitudinal harassment.^[36] The main cause of the sexual harassment has been suggested to be the cultural role of women in Bangladesh,^[36] as well as an unfriendly and repressive organisational culture.^[39,40]

Studies made in Bangladesh imply that power relations, negative social perceptions of women who are involved in local political bodies, a negative value system, expected gender roles for women, a patriarchal social setting, and an antagonistic organisational atmosphere foster different forms of harassment by male colleagues, directors and other locally powerful men.^[37,41,42] It has been found that female representatives of the UPs as compared to males were less socially accepted if politically active, had less access to the public sphere and information, and faced negative family attitudes.^[41]

Another study explored power distances between male and female members in the Narayanganj city corporation, an urban local government body, where patriarchal power relations were evident.^[42] Female members of the city corporation experienced systematic exclusion from routine activities, and extreme threat when carrying out their activities. In a study exploring the occurrence of sexual harassment among garment workers in Bangladesh, it was found that the female workers were victimised from sexual harassment both from their co-workers and the police.^[43] Another study, using focus group discussions and interviews, found that women were sexually harassed by passers-by in the street.^[3]

Objectives

The present study was designed to measure the frequency of different forms of sexual harassment in the UPs in Bangladesh by using a quantitative method. It also attempts to measure discrepancy between the amount of female victimisation from sexual harassment and to what extent male colleagues are able to discern it.

Methods

Sample

A questionnaire was completed by 821 representatives (412 females, 409 males) from eight Union Parishads, the rural local governance, of Bangladesh. The mean age was 42.5 years ($SD=6.5$) for females and 44.2 ($SD=6.3$) for males; the age difference was significant [$t(819)=3.85, p<.001$]. The respondents were divided into six age groups; numbers of females and males, respectively, were as follows: age groups I=29-35 yrs ($n=61, 39$), II=36-40 yrs ($n=136, 109$), III=41-45 yrs ($n=99, 96$), IV=46-50 yrs ($n=63, 101$), V=51-55 yrs ($n=45, 54$), and VI=56-61 yrs ($n=8, 10$). Among the participants, 3.9% were illiterate, 34.5% had between two and five years of education, 42.5% had between six and nine years, and 19.1% between ten and 12 years.

Instrument

Sexual harassment was measured with the Sexual Harassment Experience Questionnaire.^[44] In the case of female respondents, the instrument measured the frequency of their personal experiences of victimisation, while in the case of male respondents, the instrument measured observations by males of victimisation of their female colleagues. The subscales of the questionnaire were, however, constructed in a different way than in the original version of SHEQ. Since it is common in aggression research to categorise aggressive behaviour into physical, verbal, and indirect aggression in the form of social manipulation,^[45] an item analysis

was made in order to investigate whether the items of the scale could be organised in a similar way. It was found that four scales measuring different types of sexual harassment could be identified. The scales measured verbal, nonverbal, and physical sexual harassment, and sexual harassment based on social manipulation. The questions were proceeded by the instruction: "How many times have you experienced the following types of events?" The response alternatives for all items were on a five-point scale (never=0, once=1, a few times=2, on occasion=3, very frequently=4). Single items of the scales and Cronbach's alphas are presented in Table 1. Both the female and the male versions of the questionnaire were titled "Political Participation in the Rural and Urban Local Governments of Bangladesh"; sexual harassment constituted only one part of the questionnaire.

Procedure

Female and male respondents were approached from the same rural local governance units in Bangladesh. Since female representatives are a minority in the rural local governance, participants were selected for the study using purposive sampling in order to secure an even distribution between female and male respondents.

Data were collected in three phases. The data of the first phase were collected between January and July 2015. It included 141 (76 male and 65 female) participants from the Union Parishads of Jamalpur Sadar Upazila and Islampur Upazila. The second phase data were collected between September 2015 and January 2016, immediately

Table 1. Single items and Cronbach's alphas for the four scales in the study ($n=821$)

For females: Has your male boss/colleague/subordinate ...

For males: Have you observed a male boss/colleague/subordinate ... ("you" substituted with "a female colleague")

Verbal Sexual Harassment (12 items, females $\alpha = .94$, males $\alpha = .85$)

a) Admired your dress or make-up, b) Admired your face or hair, c) Appreciated your figure, d) Invited you for an outing or to go to a restaurant with him, e) Taken interest in your personal life with the intention that you might start responding favorably to him, f) Called you darling, sweetheart, or the like, g) Tried to talk with you about a vulgar movie or a television program, h) Told you a dirty joke, i) Tried to probe your sexual deprivation, and pretended to be a sympathetic, j) Made obnoxious calls to you on the telephone, k) Tried to talk about your or his sexual life, l) Tried to have an immoral talk with you.

Nonverbal Sexual Harassment (7 items, females $\alpha = .90$, males $\alpha = .77$)

a) Stared at you from head to toe with dirty looks, b) Tried to give you a card, c) Tried to give you a love letter, d) Offered you a lift in his car, e) Tried to flirt with you, f) Hummed filthy songs in your presence, g) Tried to show you a magazine containing pornographic material.

Physical Sexual Harassment (8 items, females $\alpha = .87$, males $\alpha = .80$)

a) Tried to touch your hand while giving you something, b) Put his hand on your hand while posing to teach you something, e.g. computer skills, c) Collided with you while passing by, d) Tried to pat you on your shoulder or back while passing you at work, e) Put his hand on your shoulder or back while working, f) Tried to have body touch with you while sitting and working, g) Tried to kiss you, h) Tried to rape you.

Sexual Harassment Based on Social Manipulation (8 items, females $\alpha = .91$, males $\alpha = .50$)

a) Tried to make you sit with him with some lame excuse, b) Withheld or delayed your work so that you might go to him again and again regarding that work, c) Tried to defame you for not fulfilling his immoral demands, d) Forced you to fulfill his immoral demands by exploiting details of your personal life, e) Have made you lose something in the workplace for not meeting his immoral demands, f) Assured you of promotion in the job or of some other benefits if you would fulfill his immoral demands, g) Threatened you to be fired if you did not develop romantic ties with him, h) Threatened to put you out of job if you didn't have a sexual relation with him.

before the UP elections which were held between March and June, 2016. It included 516 participants (260 females and 257 males) from Dewangonj, Sarishabari, Bakshigonj, Melandah, Madargonj Upazila of the Jamalpur district, Nakla, Nalitabari, Sreebardi, Jhinaigati and Sherpur Sadar Upazila of the Sherpur district, and Dhanbari Upazila of the Tangail district. The third part of the data were collected from Dhanbari and Modhupur Upazila of the Tangail district, and Muktagacha and Mymensingh Sadar Upazila of the Mymensingh district. It included 164 participants (88 females and 76 males) who retrieved their experiences of the previous term; most of them were also re-elected in the new elections.

Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to the principles concerning human research ethics of the Declaration of Helsinki,^[46] guidelines for responsible conduct of research,^[47] and the general data protection regulation of the European Union.^[48]

Results

Correlations Between the Scales

The four scales correlated highly with each other (all $p < .001$) for both females and males (Table 2). The highest correlation for females was found between victimisation from verbal and nonverbal sexual harassment ($r = .98$, $p < .001$). For males the highest correlations were found between perceptions of verbal and physical sexual harassment against females, and between nonverbal sexual harassment and sexual harassment based on social manipulation (both $r = .89$, $p < .001$).

Percentages of Having Never Been Victimised

Among the female respondents, only 23.1% reported that they had never been victimised from any of the single verbal sexual harassment items by a male boss, colleague or subordinate. In contrast, among males, 73.0% had never seen a female colleague being targeted with any of them. The equivalent percentages were 25.0% and 87.3% for

Table 2. Pearson's correlations between the scales in the study. Reports of victimisation by females ($n = 412$, below the diagonal) and perceptions of female victimisation made by males (above the diagonal, $n = 409$).

Sexual Harassment	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Verbal	-	.83***	.89***	.80***
2. Nonverbal	.98***	-	.85***	.89***
3. Physical	.80***	.72***	-	.87***
4. Based on social manipulation	.85***	.79***	.96***	-

*** $p < .001$.

nonverbal harassment, 44.2% and 93.4% for physical, and 44.9% and 91.4% for sexual harassment based on social manipulation. When the four types of sexual harassment were added together to a total score, it was found that 23.1% of the females said they had never been victimised by any of them, while 71.8% of the males had never observed a female colleague being targeted with any of them.

Single Behaviours

The most common single behaviours were as follows; for verbal sexual harassment: admired your dress or make-up, appreciated your figure, and admired your face or hair; for nonverbal harassment: stared at you from head to toe with dirty looks, tried to flirt with you, and offered you a lift in his car; for physical harassment: collided with you while passing by, tried to have body touch with you while sitting and working, and tried to touch your hand while giving you something; and for harassment based on social manipulation: tried to make you sit with him with some lame excuse, withheld or delayed your work so that you might go to him again and again regarding that work, and assured you of promotion in the job or of some other benefits if you would fulfil his immoral demands.

Differences between Females' Reports of Victimization from Sexual Harassment and Observations Made by Male Colleagues

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with sex as independent variable, the four scales as dependent variables, and age as a covariate. The multivariate analysis was significant. The univariate analyses showed that for all subscales the females' scores on the frequency of their victimisation were significantly higher than reports by the males describing their perceptions of how often their female colleagues were sexually harassed (Table 3, Fig. 1).

Table 3. Results of a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with sex as the independent variable, four types of sexual harassment as dependent variables, and age as a covariate. The variables measure victimisation in the case of female respondents ($n = 412$) and perceptions of females being victimised in the case of male respondents ($n = 408$). Cf. Fig 1.

	F	df	p <	η_p^2
Effect of age (Covariate)	10.76	4, 814	.001	.050
Effect of sex				
Multivariate analysis	135.02	4, 814	.001	.399
Univariate analyses				
Verbal sexual harassment	473.34	1, 817	.001	.367
Nonverbal sexual harassment	488.54	"	.001	.374
Physical sexual harassment	161.28	"	.001	.165
Sexual harassment based on social manipulation	237.36	"	.001	.225

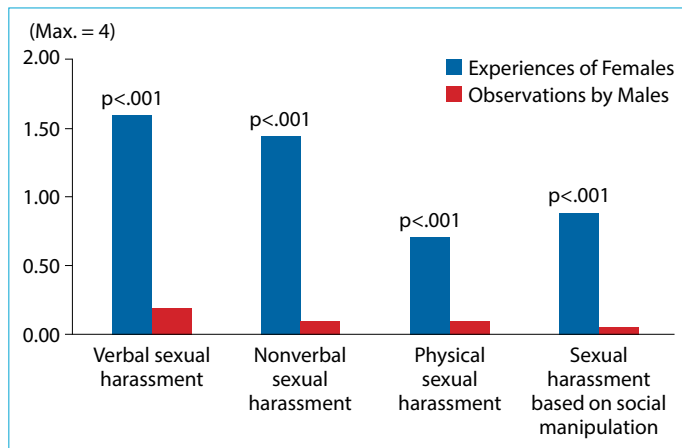


Figure 1. Mean values for females' reports of victimisation from sexual harassment (n=412) and observations of the same made by male colleagues (n=409). Cf. Table 3.

Age and Female Victimization from Sexual Harassment

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted for females only with age group (I-VI) as independent variable, and four types of victimisation from sexual harassment as dependent variables. The multivariate test was significant, and the univariate tests were significant for all four types of sexual harassment (Table 4). According to Scheffé's test, female respondents between 29 and 45 years of age were significantly more victimised from verbal sexual harassment than those between 51 and 61 years old, and respondents between 36 and 45 years old were also significantly more harassed than those between 46 and 50 years old. A similar pattern was found for the other three types of sexual harassment (Fig. 2).

Age and Male Observations of Female Victimization from Sexual Harassment

Another multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was

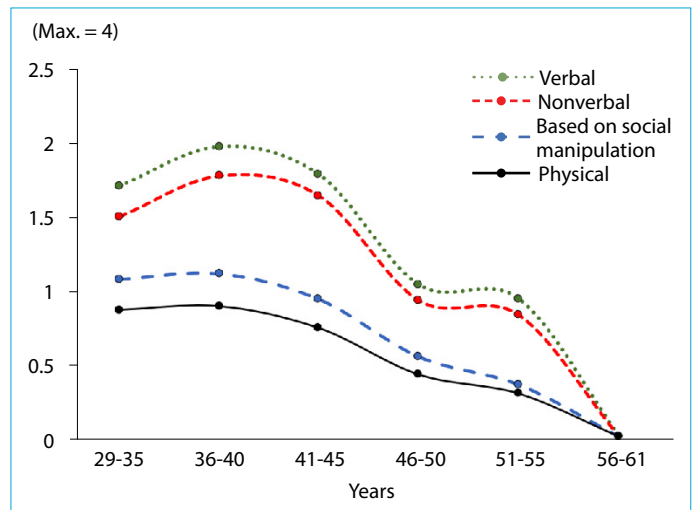


Figure 2. Mean values of female reports of victimisation from four types of sexual harassment in different age groups. Cf. Table 4.

conducted for males only, with age group (I-VI) as independent variable, and observations of four types of female victimisation from sexual harassment as dependent variables. The multivariate analysis was significant (Table 5). According to Scheffé's test, males aged 56-61 years old scored significantly higher than males in all other age groups on observations of female victimisation from verbal, nonverbal, and physical sexual harassment, as well as on sexual harassment based on social manipulation (Fig. 3). There were no other significant age differences for male observations. Two within-subjects multivariate analyses of variance (WSMANOVA) revealed that females reported victimisation from verbal sexual harassment (m=1.59) to be the most common type of harassment, followed by nonverbal harassment (m=1.43), and sexual harassment based on social manipulation (m=0.86), the least common type was victimisation from physical sexual harassment (m=0.69)

Table 4. Results of a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with age group as the independent variable, and four types of victimisation from sexual harassment as dependent variables. Female respondents (n = 412). Cf. Fig. 2.

	F	df	p ≤	η _p ²	Scheffé's test
Effect of Age Group					
Multivariate analysis	3.46	20, 1624	.001	.041	
Univariate analyses					
Verbal Sexual Harassment	12.76	5, 406	.001	.136	I - III > V, VI II, III > IV
Nonverbal Sexual Harassment	11.60	"	.001	.125	II, III > IV, V, VI VI < I
Physical Sexual Harassment	6.43	"	.001	.073	I, II > V II > IV
Sexual Harassment Based on Social Manipulation	7.44	"	.001	.084	I, II > V II > IV

Note: I = 29-35 yrs, II = 36-40 yrs, III = 41-45 yrs, IV = 46-50 yrs, V = 51-55 yrs, VI = 56-61 yrs.

Table 5. Results of a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with age group as the independent variable, and observations of four types of female victimisation from sexual harassment as dependent variables. Male respondents (n = 408). Cf. Fig. 3.

	F	df	p ≤	η_p^2	Scheffé's test
Effect of Age Group					
Multivariate analysis	2.27	20, 1608	.001	.027	
Univariate analyses					
Verbal Sexual Harassment	4.17	5, 402	.001	.049	VI > all others
Nonverbal Sexual Harassment	5.26	"	.001	.061	VI > all others
Physical Sexual Harassment	5.34	"	.001	.062	VI > all others
Sexual Harassment Based on Social Manipulation	3.76	"	.002	.045	VI > all others

Note: I = 29-35 yrs, II = 36-40 yrs, III = 41-45 yrs, IV = 46-50 yrs, V = 51-55 yrs, VI = 56-61 yrs.

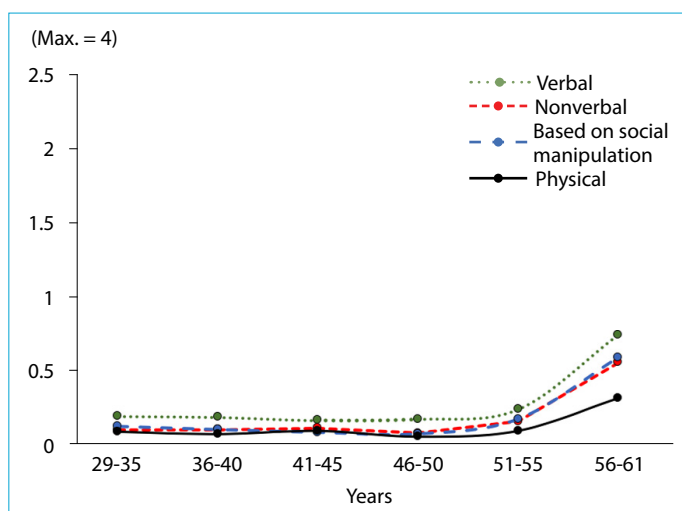


Figure 3. Mean values of perceptions by males, in different age groups, of female victimisation from four types of sexual harassment. Cf. Table 5.

[$F(3, 409)=242.82, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.640$]. For males, observations of verbal sexual harassment were most common ($m=0.17$), followed by nonverbal ($m=0.9$), and physical harassment ($m=0.8$), while sexual harassment based on social manipulation was least observed by males ($m=0.5$) [$F(3, 405)=30.22, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.183$].

Discussion

The Union Parishads are the oldest local governmental institutions in Bangladesh and they are crucial to the decentralisation of the governance. Though initiatives have been taken by the government to reduce gender inequality at all levels of the governance, it has been found that female political participation still needs to be improved in the rural local governance.^[49] It has previously been shown that sexual harassment affects the victims negatively and reduces both work satisfaction,^[17-19] and work performance.^[20] Furthermore, it also has a negative organisational impact.^[24,25] Thus, it is likely that sexual harassment can prevent true par-

ticipation in the local governance. The aim of the present study was to investigate differences between self-reported levels of victimisation from sexual harassment of female representatives to the local Union Parishads, and compare them with observations made by their male colleagues. It has to be noted that the items in the questionnaire measured how often the female respondents had been targeted with specific behaviours, and how often their male colleagues had seen a female colleague being targeted. Thus, it was not investigated what types of behaviours females and males experienced as sexually harassing; it was specifically measured to what extent different behaviours appeared.

In the study, quite significant discrepancies were found between reports of victimisation from sexual harassment made by female representatives, and the level of awareness of the same of their male colleagues. For all four types of sexual harassment measured, reports by females on how often they had been victimised were significantly higher than reports by the males about how often they had observed their female colleagues being harassed.

Females reported victimisation from verbal sexual harassment to be the most common type of harassment, followed by nonverbal harassment, and sexual harassment based on social manipulation; the least common type was victimisation from physical sexual harassment. For males, observations followed the same pattern, with the exception of sexual harassment based on social manipulation, which was the least observed type by males. Since social manipulation is by definition often perpetrated in secrecy, this finding was not unexpected.

Younger females, between 30 and 45, were significantly more victimised from all types of sexual harassment than those above 50. This is consistent with previous findings where women older than 50 were less likely to be victims of sexual harassment.^[50] Males in the oldest age group, 56-61 years old, scored higher than males in all other age

groups on observations of female victimisation from all types of sexual harassment. It has to be noticed that the number of participants in the oldest age group was very low; thus the findings concerning this age group can be only indicative. This trend of increased perceptions of older male colleagues might be explained by the fact that, with age, they have become more experienced, and they might also have reached a higher level of morality. Any similar trend of increased perceptions of male colleagues has not to the knowledge of the authors been documented before, and this matter would be well worth further study. The presence of older male colleagues might prove to have a balancing effect on younger colleagues.

Methodological Issues

Since women of rural Bangladesh are commonly shy and very resistant to expose sensitive personal matters, it was challenging to record their experiences of being sexually harassed. To overcome this barrier and to build up a close rapport with the respondents, they were interviewed by a female research assistant. All the data had to be collected behind closed doors for the respondents to feel confident. Another challenge was the fact that over a third of the participants had less than six years of education; thus, the data collectors had to explain the questionnaire while reading it out for them. Since the respondents were also not familiar with the Likert format of the responses, it was demanding to secure proper answers from them; sufficient time was required to be reserved for each participant in order to have the questionnaire duly completed.

Conclusion

Though the government of Bangladesh has taken many provisional initiatives, true female participation in the Union Parishads is yet to be established. Due to undue power distribution, a patriarchal institutional climate, and an overall gender biased work environment, it is compelling for women to thrive in an often hostile organisational culture. Taking into account the overall high levels of sexual harassment reported by the females, it can be claimed that sexual harassment has become an institutional plague in the local governance body. Mutual honour among colleagues and a sound cooperative attitude could contribute to good governance in this lowest but very significant rural local level, the Union Parishads of Bangladesh. Showing due honour to female colleagues, could ensure a positive institutional climate, which is essential for good governance of the country. To ensure good governance, equitable conditions for participation for both women and men are needed.

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Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

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Authorship Contributions: Authorship Contributions: Concept – I.H.T., K.Ö.; Design – I.H.T., K.Ö.; Supervision – K.Ö., K.B.; Materials – I.H.T.; Data collection &/or processing – I.H.T.; Analysis and/or interpretation – I.H.T., K.Ö., K.B.; Literature search – I.H.T., K.Ö.; Writing – I.H.T., K.Ö., K.B.; Critical review – K.Ö.; K.B.

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