



Research article

Sexual harassment victimization in adolescence: Associations with family background

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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment has been studied as a mechanism reproducing inequality between sexes, as gender based discrimination, and more recently, as a public health problem. The role of family-related factors for subjection to sexual harassment in adolescence has been little studied. Our aim was to study the role of socio-demographic family factors and parental involvement in adolescent's personal life for experiences of sexual harassment among 14–18-year-old population girls and boys. An anonymous cross-sectional classroom survey was carried out in comprehensive and secondary schools in Finland. 90953 boys and 91746 girls aged 14–18 participated. Sexual harassment was elicited with five questions. Family structure, parental education, parental unemployment and parental involvement as perceived by the adolescent were elicited. The data were analyzed using cross-tabulations with chi-square statistics and logistic regressions. All types of sexual harassment experiences elicited were more common among girls than among boys. Parental unemployment, not living with both parents and low parental education were associated with higher likelihood of reporting experiences of sexual harassment, and parental involvement in the adolescent's personal life was associated with less reported sexual harassment. Parental involvement in an adolescent's life may be protective of perceived sexual harassment. Adolescents from socio-economically disadvantaged families are more vulnerable to sexual harassment than their more advantaged peers.

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1. Introduction

Exact definition of the term sexual harassment has been debated ever since the term was coined in 1970s (Pina, Gannon, & Saunders, 2009). Social sciences research has suggested three separate types of sexual harassment: gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion (Buchanan, Blustein, Nappa, Woods, & Depatie, 2013; Pina et al., 2009; Schneider, Pryor, & Fitzgerald, 2010). Gender harassment comprises verbal and non-verbal gender-based hostile/derogatory communication or gender related name-calling. Unwelcome sexual attention includes any sexual behaviour, propositions,

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invitations, etc., which are distasteful and unwelcome to the target and perceived as offensive. Sexual coercion includes actual sexual assault but also any behaviours where sexual co-operation is extorted via promises/benefits or threats.

Sexual harassment has from the feminist standpoint been seen as a mechanism for reproducing beliefs and attitudes that devalue women because of their sex, and maintain rigid gender roles that reproduce inequality, even when targeting men (Pina et al., 2009; Street, Gradus, Stafford, & Kelly, 2007). From the legal viewpoint, sexual harassment is gender based discrimination, manifesting in a variety of actions that impair the target's work performance or, in schools, limit the target's ability to participate in and benefit from the educational programme, and create a hostile and offensive work/school environment (Fineran, 2002; Gruber & Fineran, 2007; Pina et al., 2009). Public health researchers may study sexual harassment as a form of sexually aggressive behaviour and a traumatizing experience for those who are victimized, and focus on exploring risk factors for perpetration of and subjection to sexual harassment (Fineran & Bolen, 2006).

Among adolescents sexual harassment has been studied also as a transitional developmental phenomenon, an extension of aggressive behaviours influenced and modified by the emerging sexual desires and increased socializing in mixed gender peer groups in early adolescence when social skills and behavioural control are still under construction (Ashbaug & Cornell, 2008; McMaster, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2002; Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Pepler et al., 2006). When adolescents are the target population, sexually aggressive behaviour may also be studied under the concept of bullying. It has been suggested that among adolescents, a considerable part of bullying is of sexual nature (Ashbaug & Cornell, 2008; Shute, Owens, & Slee, 2008).

In the more severe end of the continuum, when referring to sexual coercion, the concept of sexual harassment overlaps with the concept of (child) sexual abuse. Among children, any sexual act involving an older child or an adult may be considered child sexual abuse. Age difference of 3–5 years is often used to exclude sexual activity among peers (Stoltenborgh, van Ijzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011). Sexual acts defined as sexual abuse may vary from non-contact experiences, such as exhibitionism, to sexual coercion and rape involving serious violence (Senn, Carey, & Vanable, 2008). However, child sexual abuse research often focuses on more severe experiences than sexual harassment literature, particularly on acts involving physical contact/penetration (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011).

Research studying sexual harassment experiences of adolescents often explicitly focuses in school context (American Association of University Women, 2001; Chiodo, Wolfe, Crooks, Hughes, & Jaffe, 2009; Goldstein, Malanchuk, Davis-Kean, & Eccles, 2007; Marshall, Faaborg-Andersen, Tilton-Weaver, & Stattin, 2013; McMaster et al., 2002). Sexual harassment may be more detrimental to adolescent mental health than other types of harassment (Bucchianeri, Eisenberg, Wall, Piran, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2014). Negative experiences in the field of sexuality may be particularly traumatizing during adolescence, a period of rapid physical, and particularly sexual development, when emotional development, the ability to cope with stressors and identity are still in the making. Experience of sexual harassment has been associated in cross-sectional studies with discomfort and avoidant behaviours at school, low self-esteem, mental and physical health complaints, trauma symptoms, low life satisfaction, substance abuse and eating pathology (American Association of University Women, 2001; Buchanan et al., 2013; Gruber & Fineran, 2007). Being a victim of sexual harassment has also been found longitudinally predictive of emotional and behavioural symptoms, feeling unsafe at school, and further sexual and other violent victimization (Chiodo et al., 2009; Goldstein et al., 2007). Marshall et al. (2013), however, found that while being sexually harassed was predictive of later self-injury, self-injuring behaviour was clearly more strongly predictive of later victimization to sexual harassment.

The majority of 15–16-year-old adolescents report having been subjected to unwanted sexual attentions, mostly to verbal or non-verbal harassment (Bruijn, Burrie, & van Wel, 2006; Petersen & Hyde, 2009). The American Association of University Women (2001) reported that 81% of adolescents in the 8th to 11th grades of public schools in the USA had experienced sexual harassment at school, 27% often. Chiodo et al. (2009), in the USA, found that 42.4% of boys and 44.1% of girls had experienced any of the elicited six sexually harassing interactions on at least two occasions. Petersen and Hyde (2009), also in the USA, reported an increase in sexual harassment victimization as the adolescents grew older: of girls (boys) in 5th grade 35% (55%), in the seventh grade 55% (68%), and in the 9th grade 65% (78%) had experienced any of the elicited nine sexually harassing behaviours during the past year. McMaster et al. (2002) in Canada likewise reported increasing victimization in higher grades, with experience of sexual harassment in 38% of girls and in 42% of boys in elementary/middle school. Increased subjection to sexual harassment with higher grade was also found in the study in the USA by Gruber and Fineran (2007).

Among adults, experiences of sexual harassment are more common in women than men (Buchanan et al., 2013; Street et al., 2007), and a similar gender difference has been suggested for adolescents (American Association of University Women, 2001; Fineran & Bolen, 2006; Goldstein et al., 2007; Mitchell, Ybarra, & Korchmaros, 2014), although not consistently (Chiodo et al., 2009; McMaster et al., 2002; Petersen & Hyde, 2009). Other risk factors have been reported early puberty, advanced pubertal maturation, risky (delinquent, older) peers, early dating, more romantic/sexual partners, belonging to a sexual minority, depression, substance use, delinquency, being a bully and being a sexual harassment perpetrator (Bruijn et al., 2006; Fineran & Bolen, 2006; Goldstein et al., 2007; Gruber & Fineran, 2007; McMaster et al., 2002; Miller et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2014; Pepler et al., 2006) but also greater attractiveness and greater perceived personal power (Petersen & Hyde, 2009). If sexual harassment is to be seen as a transitional developmental phenomenon arising from emerging sexuality in the context of immature social skills and increasing contact with the opposite sex, typical for early adolescents and likely to level off towards late adolescence (Ashbaug & Cornell, 2008; McMaster et al., 2002; Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Pepler et al., 2006), mainly same aged peers could be expected to be targeted, and subjection to sexual harassment would also peak in early adolescence.

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