

Studying the Factors Contributing to the Sexual Harassment of Women in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan: A Social Perspective

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Abstract: This research looked at the social causes of sexual harassment of women in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan, and discovered workable solutions. The study included descriptive analyses, content analysis, field-based data collecting, and a qualitative methodology. Semi-structured interviews with married women who experienced sexual harassment, offenders, and community members were used to gather qualitative data. Two hundred semi-structured interviews with a representative sample of married women in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan, were conducted as part of the survey research approach. This research examined the ways in which patriarchal attitudes, societal norms, dominant expectations, sexual perception, non-mahrams, cohabitation, excessive freedom, honor culture contribute to sexual harassment. The study, based on feminist theory, identified 20 societal factors contributing to sexual harassment, including social stigma, lack of knowledge, and negligent legal enforcement, and suggested preventive measures like community education campaigns and legislative changes. In Jalalabad City, Afghanistan, sexual harassment of women is a serious issue with societal contributing elements. Effective prevention of sexual harassment requires a holistic strategy that addresses societal norms, empowers women, and strengthens legal frameworks, while also considering cultural norms, inadequate enforcement mechanisms, and a culture of silence. In order to advance gender equality, provide safer surroundings, and stop sexual harassment of women in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan, this paper makes specific recommendations for legislators, non-governmental organizations, and local authorities. Based on these findings, this study recommends evidence-based prevention methods. These could involve advertisements for sexual harassment awareness, legal changes for better protection, and training for law enforcement on handling complaints more effectively.

Keywords: Sexual Harassment, Women of Jalalabad City, Feminism, Social Factors, Prevention Methods

Introduction

Afghan women, victims of unrestrained freedom and extremist discrimination due to Western civilization and misunderstanding of Islam, are becoming increasingly sensitive to each other (Hemat, 2023). Violence

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against women is widespread globally, particularly in the Western world, with 13 million women in the European Union experiencing physical and 3.7 million experiencing sexual violence in 2013 (Orfan et al., [2022](#)). Afghan women are not receiving Islamic rights, and liberal circles are alienating them from society, causing destruction and urging their removal from these circles (Hemat, [2023](#)). The Boon Conference established a separate ministry for women in 2001, which was dissolved in 2021. In 2009, a law was introduced to end violence against women, but it divided society, raised suspicion of Western involvement, and conflicted with Islamic teachings, leading to its being unapproved by parliament.

Women's contributions are crucial for national development, affecting families, societies, and economies. It is important to prioritize their safety. The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979, is hailed as a global women's rights bill, promoting gender equality in various spheres and condemning discrimination against women (Bhat & Deshpande, [2017](#)). Sexual harassment is a significant issue in Afghanistan, where women are fighting for their human rights, including life, education, and employment. Sexual harassment in Afghanistan is a growing issue that is often overlooked due to a lack of legal investigations, cultural condemnation, family and social barriers, and police misconduct. Violence against women and girls is a serious global human rights violation and is often linked to gender discrimination. This must be stopped because violence harms women physically, mentally, and financially, limiting their freedom and opportunities. It creates dependency, making women subordinate. Cultural norms and traditions that discriminate against women increase violence. Structural change is needed to prevent violence and effectively support survivors. This article examines sexual harassment against women in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan, focusing on societal factors that contribute to the issue.

Sexual harassment in public places, a form of sex discrimination, often goes unrecognized by social science researchers due to its verbal and nonverbal actions (Lahsaeizadeh et al., [2012](#)). Sexual harassment is a widespread issue in various spaces, particularly in retail, affecting millions daily and necessitating immediate action (Zahra, [2024](#)). Afghanistan, a poor country, is rife with violence against women, with 87.2% experiencing sexual, physical, or psychological abuse and 52% experiencing spousal violence, and gender inequality persists in education (Orfan et al., [2022](#)). Afghan women and girls face harassment, including sexual harassment, which can challenge their honor and lead to further restrictions, prompting legal initiatives to address this issue (Shi & Zheng, [2021](#)). Harassment is illegal because of sex, including sexual advances, favor requests, and offensive remarks (Akpotor, [2023](#)). Various laws aimed at fighting violence against women in Afghanistan address sexual harassment (Orfan et al., [2022](#)). The law prohibits harassment against women, including physical contact, illegitimate demands, verbal/nonverbal abuse, psychological harm, and insult to dignity (Shi & Zheng, [2021](#)). Sexism is an attitude in which one sex perceives themselves as superior to another sex (Chaudhury et al., [2017](#)). Sex discrimination refers to the discrimination or treatment of an employee based on sex in employment decisions or treatment (Akpotor, [2023](#)). Harassment is often caused by power dynamics, misguided beliefs, and social conditioning, and promoting compassion and emotional intelligence can help deter such behavior (Folorunso, [2023](#)). However, Sexual harassment is a form of unwelcome sexual behavior.

Literature Review

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is a complex issue with no universally agreed definition and interpretation in various contexts (Popoola, [2008](#); Joseph, [2015](#)). Sexual harassment refers to unwelcome advances and requests, often involving physical, verbal, and nonverbal actions. It can occur offline or online and can include unwelcome touching, kissing, hugging, sexual comments, and intrusive questions about someone's private life (Akpotor, [2023](#); Galdi & Guizzo, [2021](#)). Misogyny stems from the Greek term "mīsoḡunīā" and shows as male privilege, patriarchy, gender bias, harassment, and violence (Chaudhury et al., [2017](#)). Sexual harassment; unwelcome sexual advances in unequal power settings. Includes physical contact, requests for favors, inappropriate comments, display of pornographic material, and sexual behavior (Bhat & Deshpande, [2017](#)). However, the definition provided by the Afghanistan Law of 2009 on Prohibiting Harassment against Women and Children is similar.

Sexual harassment involves insulting, harassing, poisoning, or turning someone off, focusing on appearance, body parts, sexual orientation, or activity, and includes uninvited sexual gestures and physical contact (Shi & Zheng, [2021](#); Glass et al., [2020](#)). Sexual violence in society includes exploitation, rape, assault, prostitution, workplace violence, insults, swearing, selling, trafficking, and sexual threats against women, affecting their well-being and safety (Rostamzadeh et al., [2016](#)). Harassment or violence against women, particularly between the ages of 18 and 25, endangers their mental health and society (Hemat, [2023](#)). Sexual harassment victims often avoid reporting due to fear of retaliation. Respect, responsibility, and education are crucial for addressing this issue through collective action (Sarawgi, [2023](#)). However, Sexual harassment is repeated, unwanted verbal and physical acts done for pleasure and displeasure.

Sexual harassment involves unwanted sexual acts that must be performed using self-consent. If satisfaction is initially expressed, the act should be stopped, and if continued forcefully, it is considered sexual harassment, potentially leading to sexual assault or rape. The four types of sexual acts: rape, adultery, sodomy, and sexual harassment, each involving different forms of sexual assault, sexual relations, and unwanted advances (Shi & Zheng, [2021](#)). Sexual harassment, including verbal, physical, spectatorship, and psychological forms, can result in physical, emotional, and psychological harm, including sexual jokes, violent actions, sexual behaviors, and exposure to images (Hemat, [2023](#)). Conditional environmental sexual harassment involves offering something in exchange for sexual relations or space, whereas hostile environment sexual harassment occurs when employees leave an unfavorable work environment (Akpotor, [2023](#)). Rape is the act of using another person against their will to satisfy sexual desire. Illegitimate sexual intercourse is considered a crime in Islamic and Afghan society. Sexual harassment is a prelude to rape because it suppresses sexual desire. However, rape involves penetration, but sexual harassment does not (Azizi, [2022](#)). The Quran's fourth chapter, An-Nisa, discusses women's rights, with the 34th verse criticizing feminist criticism, asserting that men are in charge of women and righteous ones are devoutly obedient (Chaudhury, et al, [2017](#)). Henry suggests updating religious curricula to combat harmful gender stereotypes and violence (Henry, [2017](#)).

Islamic, Social and Feminist Perspectives on Sexual Harassment

Understanding violence against women in Islamic Sociology is crucial for sustainable solutions. It emphasizes societal foundations, personal preferences, and actions based on the Creator's standards and the Holy Prophet's Sunnah, ensuring a balanced approach to addressing this issue (Usman, [2018](#)). With the assistance, the exploration of this study examines pre and post-Islam Arab society to understand Islamic sociology, focusing on the ultimate authority deposition to the Quran and Sunnah (Muneer, [2017](#)). Arab society's social structure was reconstructed through Islam's balanced teachings, emphasizing responsibility, obedience, love, respect, and responsibility towards the Prophet, promoting a peaceful society (Usman, [2018](#)). The Quran prohibits both physical and non-physical sexual harassment. These actions degrade women's human dignity and body sovereignty. Examples include body shaming, groping, poking, and rubbing body parts. Prophet Muhammad PBUH advised against groping a woman who is not his own wife, as stated in hadiths (Mir-Hosseini, [2011](#)). Prophet PBUH advised against laying on another woman's shoulder, as it is better to welt with a pig covered in mud and dirt (Ali, [2016](#)). Hadiths strongly prohibit sexual violence in Islam, as it degrades human dignity, primarily targeting possessed souls with low lusts, resulting in animal instinct and logical and humanity-based reasons.

Feminist theory states that sexual harassment disempower women's efforts to compete with men (Henry, 2017). Feminist theory critiques sexual harassment, arguing that it stems from unequal power dynamics between genders, patriarchy, and the over-sexualization of women's bodies (Berdahl, [2007](#)). This perspective highlights the harmful effects of patriarchal societies, which normalize behaviors that control women and make them vulnerable to harassment (Henry, [2017](#)). The social perspective examines societal norms and institutions that limit women's mobility and participation in public spaces, leading to harassment (Schweinle & Roseman, [2015](#)). Social norms prioritize male honor over female safety, and weak legal systems discourage reporting and seeking justice for sexual harassment (Henry, [2017](#)). However, Combining feminist theory and social perspective can provide a nuanced understanding of sexual harassment in Jalalabad, highlighting gender inequality, social norms, and institutional failures.

Factors like religion, cultural beliefs, peace, and social groups can create a safer, more equitable society for women (Rennison, [2014](#)). Sexual harassment of women is influenced by societal attitudes and behaviors (Schweinle, & Roseman, [2015](#)), including gender roles and inequality (Henry, [2017](#)), traditional expectations, and limited opportunities (Rennison, [2014](#)), which create a power imbalance and vulnerability for women.

Materials and Methods

The study collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with married women who faced sexual harassment, perpetrators, and community stakeholders and analyzed the data through content and descriptive analysis. The data were collected field-based through 200 interviews with a diverse group of women in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan. The research applied feminist theory to study the influence of social norms, patriarchal attitudes, and the aftermath of conflict on sexual harassment. The data were gathered from 200 married women, with interviews conducted among female employees in government and private organizations, female teachers, students, housewives, and public women.

Results

Sexual violence, often overlooked due to social and cultural factors, is a significant contributor to women's deviations, affecting them both during and after marriage, with family violence playing a more significant role (Soleimani, 2010). Violence against women is a complex sociological issue influenced by moral, social, economic, and political factors and is now a significant human rights concern in family and home settings (Jha, 2020). Violence against women has social and cultural roots that view women as inferior and require male control. These harmful beliefs justify oppression and harassment. We explored social factors related to the sexual harassment of women. Women in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan, face violence in marriage and family, reflecting their low social status. Sexual harassment occurs anywhere, to anyone, and anytime. Victims often ask, "Why me?" without a clear answer. Here, we explore social causes. Our interview results revealed that the participants experienced sexual harassment in various situations.

Table 1

Social factors of sexual harassment in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan

Factors	Descriptions
Undervaluation women	Afghanistan's undervaluation of women in various fields leads to sexual harassment, neglecting the Islamic values that hold them in high regard, making them vulnerable and recurrent victims.
Dominant expectations	Women are often seen as inferior to men in society and family, leading to tragic outcomes such as ongoing sexual harassment and lack of autonomy in decision-making processes.
Sexual perception	The sexual objectification of women reduces human interactions to satisfying sexual desires, perpetuating demeaning norms and dehumanizing women.
Non-mahrams	Islam prohibits women from relationships with non-mahrams because of the risk of sexual harassment and rape. Unnecessary social interactions can lead to harassment and rape.
Poor conditions and bad relationships	Impoverished families struggle to protect relatives from abuse due to a lack of privacy and improper attire. Close relationships between cousins and other relatives can lead to sexual misconduct.
Defective family	Reflecting on this, women's deviance comes from dysfunctional families lacking Islamic values. Families must prioritize educating their females to combat sexual harassment.
Dirty environment	A girl needs a good family, but when they leave, they face a bad environment. This morally sensitive environment can make sexual harassment seem normal because of common myths.
Bad friends	Bad friends influence sexual harassment. Good friends inspire good deeds, but bad friends lead to wrongdoing.
Cohabitation	Involving a mix of men and women often leads to deviant acts, causing societal temptation and causing women to resort to satanic means.

Factors	Descriptions
Early marriage	This tradition is based on sexual lust, leading to safety concerns, abuse, and domestic violence. Marriage should be lifelong, consented to, and considered, whereas forced marriages are considered coercion.
Giving a girl	The practice of giving a girl to a son, who may later marry, can lead to childhood marriages, forced marriages, and family violence, especially for victims of sexual harassment.
Exchange marriages	Families exchange daughters without consent, leading to abuse, sexual harassment, divorce, or mistreatment, exposing the issue in families and society.
Improper family education	Some families fail to properly educate their children, making them more vulnerable to sexual harassment.
Excessive freedom	Excessive freedom for women and men leads to sexual harassment, particularly in public spaces. Families with more freedom, particularly boys, often harass girls and make sexual demands.
High brides (Dowry)	Young men frequently complain about high brides, a growing issue of sexual harassment. Women are also harassed by men who cannot afford the bride's price. Sexual harassment has become a way of dismemberment.
Forced marriages	Involve girls without consent, often leading to insulting behavior, harassment, and potential violence, including sexual harassment, forced fleeing, or even death for honor.
Honor Culture	Emphasis on protecting family honor, which can discourage women from reporting harassment for fear of shaming the family. Pressure on families to remain silent about harassment to avoid social stigma.
Traditional Practices	Cultural practices that limit women's mobility and social interaction, increasing their vulnerability to harassment. Restrictions on women going out alone and limited access to public spaces.
Social stigma	Women who report sexual harassment are often ostracized by society and blamed for the incident. This fear of social stigma discourages reporting and reinforces the power imbalance.
Online Harassment (Social Media & Calling)	Unsolicited sexual messages, videos and pictures, cyberstalking, and harassment on social media target women.

Table 1 presents social factors contributing to sexual harassment in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan, based on semi-structured interviews with married women. Undervaluation of women, dominant expectations, sexual perception, non-mahrams, poor conditions and bad relationships, defective family, dirty environment, bad friends, cohabitation, early marriage, giving a girl, exchange marriages, improper family education, excessive freedom, high brides, forced marriages, honor culture, traditional practices, social stigma, online harassment (social media & calling) are social factors of sexual harassment in Jalalabad, Afghanistan.

Table 2

Issues and solutions to sexual harassment of women in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan

Issues	Description	Solution
Gender Norms	Deeply entrenched patriarchal society views women as subordinate. Men feel entitled to control women’s behavior and bodies.	Educational campaigns promoting gender equality. Community discussions challenging traditional gender roles. Empowering women socially.
Lack of Awareness	Many women are unaware of their rights and hesitate to report harassment due to fear of stigma or retaliation.	Public awareness campaigns defining sexual harassment and available support systems. Educational programs in schools and communities about women's rights. Training law enforcement and justice officials on handling sexual harassment cases.
Weak Law Enforcement	An ineffective legal system discourages reporting and emboldens perpetrators. Fear of a biased system prevents women from seeking justice.	Legal reforms are strengthening laws against sexual harassment. Improved training for law enforcement to handle harassment complaints effectively. Establish dedicated support services for victims during investigations.
Limited Mobility	Restricted movement due to cultural norms or safety concerns confines women to limited spaces, increasing their vulnerability.	Promoting safe public transportation and infrastructure, especially for women. Encourage women’s participation in public spaces through supportive social circles. Addressing the underlying security concerns that restrict women’s movement.
Workplace Culture	Male-dominated workplaces lack clear policies against harassment, thus creating a culture of tolerance.	Implement and enforce clear anti-sexual harassment policies in workplaces. Establish grievance redressal mechanisms within institutions for reporting and addressing complaints. Promoting bystander intervention training to encourage colleagues to speak up against harassment.
Social Norms	Limited mobility for women, restricted access to public spaces, and unequal gender roles.	Advocacy campaigns promote gender equality, educational programs challenge traditional gender norms and create safe spaces for women in public areas.
Economic Dependence	Women’s economic dependence on men or their families can make them reluctant to report harassment for fear of losing financial support.	Promoting women’s economic empowerment through skills training, microfinance initiatives, and encouraging female entrepreneurship.

Table 2 shows seven problems and resolutions concerning women’s sexual harassment in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan, derived from semi-structured interviews with married women. Gender norms, lack of awareness, weak law enforcement, limited mobility, workplace culture, social norms, and economic dependence are issues and solutions to sexual harassment of women in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan.

Table 3
Challenges faced by women in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan

Challenge	Description	Example
A Weak Legal Framework	Lack of clear laws against sexual harassment or inadequate enforcement mechanisms.	Difficult for women to report harassment due to fear of repercussions.
Ineffective Law Enforcement	Police are unwilling or unable to investigate complaints due to social norms or corruption.	Cases of harassment going unreported or dismissed.
Lack of Support Services	Absence of hotlines, shelters, or counselling services for victims of sexual harassment.	Women are left without resources to cope with the trauma of harassment.
Gender Norms	Deeply entrenched beliefs about the roles of men and women. Men are seen as dominant, and women are seen as subordinate.	Restrictions on women’s mobility and limitations on educational opportunities.
Victim Blaming	The idea is that women are somehow responsible for the harassment they experience through their clothing or behavior.	Society questions a woman's character if she is harassed.
Lack of Awareness	Limited understanding of sexual harassment as a social ill and its negative consequences.	Jokes about harassment being normalized and the silence surrounding the issue.

Table 3 illustrates the challenges faced by women in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan, as identified through semi-structured interviews with married women. A weak legal framework, ineffective law enforcement, lack of support services, gender norms, victim blaming, and lack of awareness are the challenges faced by women in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan.

Table 4

Women's views on harassing acts in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan

Category	Act	Prevalence of Sexual Harassment
Public Places	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Verbal harassment: Catcalling, obscene comments, insults, and threats. * Nonverbal harassment: Leering, stalking, following, exposing oneself, and using offensive gestures. * Physical harassment: Groping, pinching, and brushing against, tripping, and physical assault. 	Medium
Educational Settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Unwanted comments or jokes about appearance, body, or gender. * Leering, staring, or following classmates, teachers, or staff. * Unwanted physical contact or advances. * Pressuring for dates, relationships, or sexual favors. * Sharing sexually suggestive content electronically or physically. * Spreading rumors or gossip about a woman's character. 	Medium
Workplaces (Public & Private)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Unwanted comments or jokes about appearance or gender. * Leering, staring, or following colleagues or superiors. * Unwanted physical contact or advances. * Pressuring for sexual favors in exchange for job security, promotions, or benefits. * Creating a hostile work environment through sexual innuendo or offensive jokes. 	Medium
Social Media and Phone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Sending unsolicited sexual messages, pictures, or videos. * Cyber-stalking or online harassment. * Making inappropriate comments on social media posts. 	High
General social harassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Restricting women's freedom of movement and clothing choices. * Socially excluding or ostracizing women who do not conform to gender norms. * Gender-based discrimination and limitations on opportunities. * Intrusive questions about my private life * Questions about when I would get married * Smiling or talking to you in a way that is uncomfortable * Whistling at you 	High

Table 4 presents women's perspectives on experiences of harassment in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan, as obtained from semi-structured interviews with married women. Public Places, Educational Settings, Workplaces (Public and private), Social Media and Phone, and General social harassment are women's views on harassing acts in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan.

Discussion

Sexual harassment is a complex issue influenced by social norms, attitudes, public spaces, education, media, and representation. Social norms, victim blaming, honor culture, unsafe environments, and bystander intervention contribute to this risk. Education and awareness are also fundamental, with limited understanding and inadequate gender equality education contributing to a culture of harassment. Media portrayals that objectify women and lack diverse representation contribute to a sense of female inferiority. These factors often interact and reinforce each other, making it difficult for women to report harassment. In Jalalabad City, society should educate harassers on empathy, equality, and harm caused to women. Men must respect women's needs. I emphasized addressing sexual harassment, prioritizing prevention initiatives and awareness campaigns, starting with children, and promoting unity by addressing gender divides in Jalalabad City. Psychoeducation could potentially address Jalalabad's sexual harassment issue by teaching men empathy and equality, potentially altering their attitudes toward women, and mitigating the psychological impact of harassment. Harassers often seek recognition through provocative actions, necessitating improved policies, reporting procedures, and ethical education to eradicate harassment and promote a respectful society that values dignity and humanity.

Gender inequality in societies increases women's sexual objectification and abuse. In weak gender awareness, strong taboos, and dominant complementarianism views, harassers abuse power without protecting women's privacy. The intersection of gender with class, ethnicity, and religion increases harassment. Increasing public awareness of women's rights and their place in society through television, radio and other means. The more education in rural and remote areas, the more likely it is to reduce sexual harassment of women. The role of scholars in reducing violence against women is the most. Scholars should explain the rights of women within the framework of Islamic teachings and call people to treat women well. In addition to this, the Islamic and Afghan positions against other forms of violence (such as sexual assault, harassing women on the streets, etc.) should also be clarified to the people. Most of the perpetrators of sexual harassment of women escape from the judicial bodies because of money and corruption. If the corruption in the judiciary is reduced, it is possible that the heinous crimes of sexual harassment of women will also be reduced.

Conclusion

In Jalalabad City, Afghanistan, this research investigated the societal variables that contribute to women being sexually harassed. It identified 20 such elements, including a lack of knowledge, social shame, lax legal enforcement, and a culture of silence. It suggests specific actions, such as educational campaigns, legislation changes, and law enforcement capacity development, for legislators, non-governmental organizations, and community leaders in order to advance gender equality and foster safer surroundings. A rising problem in Afghanistan, sexual harassment has an impact on women's rights to an education, a job, and a life. Through interviews, the study applied feminist theory to investigate how societal variables

affected sexual harassment experienced by 200 women in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan. A number of societal variables, including the devaluation of women, prevailing expectations, non-mahrams, unfavorable living circumstances, early marriage, and many more, have an impact on sexual harassment in Jalalabad City. Fight back by encouraging education and resisting social influences. Due to a patriarchal society, ignorance, lax law enforcement, cultural norms, working culture, and reliance on the economy, sexual harassment occurs in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. Education, community dialogues, women's empowerment, public awareness, and law enforcement training are essential in the fight against this. It is imperative that laws be changed, law enforcement training be improved, advocacy be done, and social standards and workplace culture be taught.

The complicated issue of sexual harassment is shaped by public settings, media portrayal, education, attitudes, and societal standards. The danger is increased by elements such as bystander intervention, risky situations, honor culture, and victim blame. It is important for society to put preventative measures in place and educate harassers about women's needs and sensitivity. Social elements that contribute to the sexual harassment of women in Jalalabad were found in this study. Two hundred women were interviewed; these women included educated women, housewives, workers, and students; all of these women had either personally encountered harassment at work, in the marketplace, or at educational institutions or had knowledge of pertinent incidents. I suggest filling up the knowledge gap about people's obligations in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan.

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