

## Original Article

# Life and crisis: sexual harassment among Chinese college students

Zhansen Huang<sup>1\*</sup>, Yong Qiu<sup>1,2\*</sup>, Huaxian Chen<sup>1,3\*</sup>, Tao Qi<sup>1</sup>, Bo Wang<sup>1</sup>, Lei Ye<sup>1</sup>, Hui Lin<sup>4</sup>, Jun Chen<sup>1</sup>

Departments of <sup>1</sup>Infertility and Sexual Medicine, <sup>2</sup>Psychiatry, The Third Affiliated Hospital of Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou City 510630, Guangdong Province, China; <sup>3</sup>Department of Colorectal and Anal Surgery, The Six Affiliated Hospital of Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou City, Guangdong Province, China; <sup>4</sup>Center for Reproductive Medicine, The Third Affiliated Hospital of Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou City 510630, Guangdong Province, China. \*Equal contributors and co-first authors.

Received January 11, 2018; Accepted February 21, 2018; Epub May 15, 2019; Published May 30, 2019

**Abstract:** Objective: We take college students as samples to learn sexual harassment and observe its influence on health and education in China through a modified questionnaire. Methods: Data were collected from an online survey on [www.sojump.com](http://www.sojump.com). The prevalence was accessed by a modified tool called Sexual Experience Questionnaire-China (SEQ-China). The structure validity of SEQ-China was tested through confirmatory factor analysis with LISREL 8.80. Results: While 72.8% of 2,080 respondents experienced at least one situation of harassment listed in SEQ-China, 29.7% reported having been sexually harassed. The impacts of sexual harassment on emotion and education were remarkable (all  $P < 0.05$ ). Men suffered even more (all  $P < 0.05$ ). Conclusions: Chinese college students with inadequate cognition are confronting the crisis of sexual harassment. Modifying the law and giving protection are necessary.

**Keywords:** Sexual harassment, sexual behavior, coercion, sex

### Introduction

Harmful effect of sexual harassment is an indisputable and frustrating fact that can be seen in people's work, education, psychological and physical health [1]. However, these impacts vary across different areas and cultures. For instance, Merkin found that unlike the studies of United States, the job satisfaction among Latin American employees does not significantly decrease due to sexual harassment [2]. Settles et al. reported that with the increasing number of harassment, black males are likely to have greater limitation in job role while white males have lower coworker satisfaction [3]. It is in view of the diversity that a significant amount of investigations and studies on sexual harassment have been carried out all over the world [4]. Based on these investigations, some western countries, such as the United States, have introduced a series of laws to reduce the occurrence and influence of sexual harassment. After the establishment of these legislations, the legal compliance in organizations and education or training pro-

grams do reduce sexual harassment to some extent [5, 6]. However, China, the world's most populous country, has carried out less research on sexual harassment. Unlike the United States having national studies in academia, the existing surveys of academic sexual harassment in China are often conducted in small areas and published in local journals [7-9]. The number and scope of studies are insufficient to reveal explicitly the prevalence and influence of sexual harassment in China, and the consummation of the law against sexual harassment thereby lacks scientific evidence. As the legal system cannot effectively protect people from sexual harassment, nation-wide investigation and the perfection of the laws are necessary [10].

Herein, the study in the field of education was chosen as a wedge into the problem of sexual harassment and a nation-wide online survey was carried out. Considering the sensitivity of the questionnaire and the comprehensive ability of respondents, college students were chosen as samples.

# Sexual harassment among Chinese college students

## Methods

### *Questionnaire design*

The questionnaire consisted of several parts. The first part focused on socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, such as gender, age, sexual orientation, etc. The second part was about the prevalence of sexual harassment and students' perceptions. The measurement for the impact was at the final part. At the beginning of the questionnaire, respondents were informed that it involves some sensitive questions in the questionnaire, but completely voluntary and anonymous, and the security of data and personal privacy were promised.

The following simple definition was provided at the beginning of the questionnaire (adopted from a study by Association of University Women Educational Foundation [8]): "Sexual harassment is unwanted and unwelcome sexual behavior which interferes with your life. Sexual harassment is not behaviors that you like or want (for example wanted kissing, touching or flirting)".

### *Sexual harassment measurement*

Based on Sexual Experiences Questionnaire-Department of Defense (SEQ-DoD), a scale for Chinese was developed [11]. In this scale, the types of sexual harassment have been classified as: sexist hostility, sexual hostility, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion. SEQ-DoD was developed from SEQ whose internal consistency coefficient was 0.92 (based on the samples of 1,700 students) and the 2-week test-retest stability coefficient was 0.82 (based on 46 students) [11]. SEQ-DoD was of great validity and reliability ( $\alpha$  men = 0.79-0.97,  $\alpha$  women = 0.83-0.95) [1]. Twenty-five items over the original 26 items in SEQ-DoD were adapted, including 23 classifiable items and one open question "Have you ever experienced other offences, please describe it" and another subjective question "Have you ever been sexually harassed?" There is one item abandoned since it cannot fit into any of the four types of harassment according to Fitzgerald et al. [1]. Meanwhile, the examples in the questionnaire were changed, turning the work-related content into academic ones. Each answer of SEQ-DoD has five options. To simplify the questionnaire, three alternatives were used instead ("never",

"once", "more than once"). If respondents answered "once or more than once", they were asked to provide the gender of harasser. Finally, the questionnaire was translated from English into Chinese, and then back to English to make sure the consistency. 30 college students were asked to fill in the Chinese version, Sexual Experience Questionnaire-China (SEQ-China), in which the language was modified according to their feedback, thereby ensuring the scale can be understood correctly. In addition, as long as the respondents experienced any of the situations in SEQ-China, they were instructed to answer "when and where did the harassment occur" and the identity of harassers. The options referred to the survey by [8].

### *Survey of perception about sexual harassment*

To understand college students' perception and cognition of sexual harassment, the question "Do you think this situation described above belongs to sexual harassment?" was given below each item of SEQ-China, and followed by "Have you ever been exposed to this situation?". Besides, there is an open-ended optional question "If you were a scholar, how would you describe the term 'sexual harassment'?".

### *Measuring the impact of sexual harassment*

In order to understand the emotional and educational impact of harassment, different questions have been set for people who reported having experienced sexual harassment and those who reported not. The items are referred to the survey by Hill & Silva [8]. Those who reported experiencing sexual harassment "more than once" were asked to express the emotional and behavioral reactions of "the first time" and "the latest time" harassment. For those who denied experiencing sexual harassment, they had been asked "If you were sexually harassed, would you have such emotion or behavior as follows?".

### *Sample and procedure*

The study was approved by the Third Affiliated Hospital of Sun Yat-Sen University. This survey was carried out on www.sojump.com from March 2013 to March 2014 among college students in mainland China, where 2,080 valid questionnaires were collected. The data were obtained anonymously and no one had access

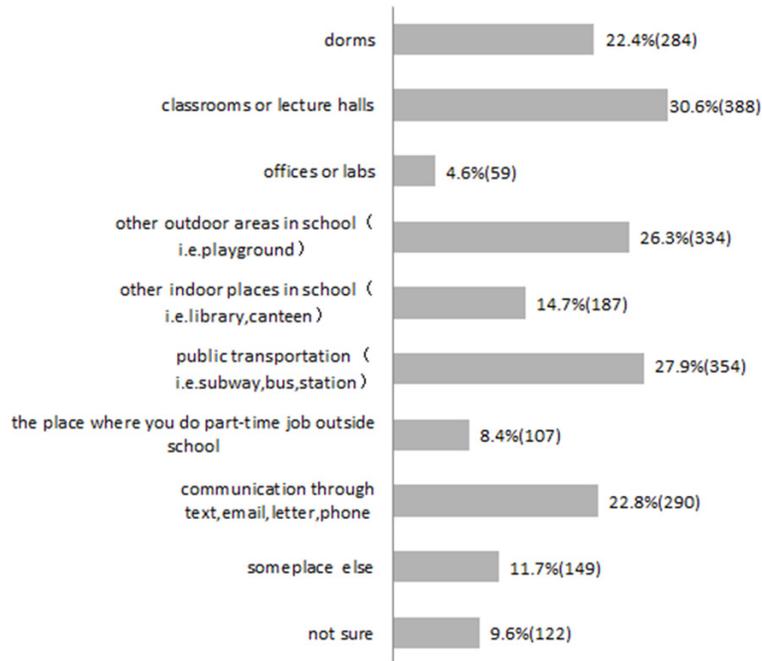
## Sexual harassment among Chinese college students

**Table 1.** Prevalence and approval of each item on sexual experience questionnaire-China

	Prevalence						Approval		
	Male	Female	Heterosexual	Non-het-erosexual	Not sure/unwill-ing to disclose	Total	Male	Female	Total
Sexist hostility						34.2%			86.5%
5 Treated you "differently" because of your sex (for example, mistreated, slighted, or ignored you)	7.9%*	13.0%	8.9%*	25.7%	17.2%	10.5%	40.8%*	35.7%	38.2%
8 Displayed, used, or distributed sexist or suggestive materials (for example, pictures, stories, or pornography which you found offensive)	19.1%	17.7%	17.5%*	29.6%	17.2%	18.4%	77.9%*	83.8%	81.0%
9 Made offensive sexist remarks (for example, suggesting that people of your sex are not suited for the kind of major you study)	9.7%*	20.4%	13.8%*	28.9%	20.2%	15.2%	38.4%*	28.5%	33.3%
11 Put you down or was condescending to you because of your sex	5.2%*	16.7%	9.7%*	22.4%	19.2%	11.1%	30.9%*	21.8%	26.2%
Sexual hostility						67.2%			96.8%
1 Repeatedly told sexual stories or jokes that were offensive to you	40.9%*	34.6%	36.9%	44.7%	41.4%	37.6%	49.1%*	68.4%	59.0%
2 Whistled, called, or hooted at you in a sexual way	20.3%*	29.2%	24.3%*	34.2%	22.2%	24.9%	51.1%*	70.7%	61.3%
3 Made unwelcome attempts to draw you into a discussion of sexual matters (for example, attempted to discuss or comment on your sex life)	21.5%*	14.9%	16.7%*	36.2%	16.2%	18.1%	70.8%*	78.0%	74.6%
4 Made crude and offensive sexual remarks, either publicly (for example, in classroom) or to you privately	18.0%*	12.2%	14.2%*	26.3%	13.1%	15.0%	72.0%*	84.8%	78.7%
6 Made offensive remarks about your appearance, body, or sexual activities	18.4%*	27.6%	21.9%*	35.5%	27.3%	23.2%	50.5%	50.5%	50.5%
7 Made gestures or used body language of a sexual nature which embarrassed or offended you	20.5%	20.9%	19.8%*	33.6%	18.2%	20.7%	74.4%*	91.4%	83.2%
12 Stared, leered, or ogled you in a way that made you feel uncomfortable	20.7%*	40.2%	30.1%*	39.5%	29.3%	30.8%	39.3%*	52.5%	46.1%
13 Exposed themselves physically (for example, "mooned" you) in a way that embarrassed you or made you feel uncomfortable	17.6%*	31.3%	24.3%	28.9%	24.2%	24.7%	32.7%*	39.4%	36.2%
Unwanted sexual attention						47.6%			98.8%
10 Made unwanted attempts to establish a romantic sexual relationship with you despite your efforts to discourage it	13.9%*	25.8%	19.5%	26.3%	21.2%	20.0%	60.8%	62.1%	61.5%
14 Continued to ask you for dates, drinks, dinner, etc., even though you said "No"	11.0%*	26.6%	18.0%*	30.3%	22.2%	19.1%	54.9%	58.0%	56.5%
17 Touched you in a way that made you feel uncomfortable	14.7%*	35.6%	24.7%*	36.2%	25.3%	25.5%	81.2%*	91.2%	86.3%
18 Made unwanted attempts to stroke, fondle, or kiss you	8.6%*	19.1%	13.2%*	23.7%	14.1%	14.0%	92.4%*	97.6%	95.1%
22 Attempted to have sex with you without your consent or against your will, but was unsuccessful	2.3%	2.5%	2.3%	3.9%	2.0%	2.4%	93.2%*	97.6%	95.5%
23 Had sex with you without your consent or against your will	1.6%	1.2%	1.1%	3.3%	3.0%	1.4%	91.2%*	96.1%	93.8%
Sexual coercion						5.7%			97.7%
15 Made you feel like you were being bribed with some sort of reward or special treatment to engage in sexual behavior	2.6%	2.5%	2.4%	4.6%	2.0%	2.5%	65.8%*	78.0%	72.1%
16 Made you feel threatened with some sort of retaliation for not being sexually cooperative (for example, by mentioning an upcoming review)	1.7%	1.6%	1.5%	3.3%	2.0%	1.6%	87.9%*	95.0%	91.5%
19 Treated you badly for refusing to have sex	2.8%	3.3%	2.7%*	7.2%	3.0%	3.1%	74.8%*	84.6%	79.9%
20 Implied faster promotions (for example, president of student union) or better treatment (for example, good grade or opportunity for scientific research) if you were sexually cooperative	1.3%	1.3%	1.2%	2.6%	1.0%	1.3%	87.0%*	93.1%	90.1%
21 Made you afraid you would be treated poorly if you didn't cooperate sexually	1.4%	1.2%	1.3%	1.3%	2.0%	1.3%	89.1%*	94.4%	91.8%

Note: Item 8 belongs to "sex discrimination" and "unwanted sexual attention", and was separately included in each category when analyzing the prevalence of each type of harassment and the validity. Respondents include 1,005 males and 1,075 females, 1,829 heterosexuals and 152 non-heterosexuals. 99 respondents chose "not sure/unwilling to disclose" for the question about orientation. Chi-square test was used, \*P<0.05.

## Sexual harassment among Chinese college students



**Figure 1.** The places where the harassment occur. Data were based on 1,270 respondents.

to information that could identify individual participants during or after data collection. And there is no interference in participants' life or benefit.

### Statistical analysis

Data collected from questionnaire for statistical description were analyzed by EXCEL version 2010, SPSS version 19.0. The differences were tested by Chi-square test. Analyses were two-tailed and *P* value was set at 0.05. The structure validity of SEQ-China was tested through confirmatory factor analysis with LISREL 8.80. During the procedure, the data were estimated through the Diagonally Weighted Least Squares (DWLS) method.

## Results

### Respondents' characteristics

There were 2,080 valid questionnaires. The average age of the respondents was 20.3 (SD = 1.7). There were 1,005 males and 1,075 females with the sex ratio of 48.3:51.7. As for sexual orientation, 1,829 students (87.9%) were heterosexual, 152 (7.3%) were non-heterosexual (5% were homosexual and 2.3% were bisexual), and 99 (4.8%) chose "not sure/unwill-

ing to disclose". The percentage of freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors was 32.3%, 31.0%, 24.6% and 12.2%, respectively.

### Validity and reliability

Reliability and validity of SEQ-China was first analyzed. Based on the sample of 2,080 students, SEQ-China had an acceptable internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  men = 0.844,  $\alpha$  women = 0.831). Based on smaller sample size ( $N = 34$ ), the coefficient of retest stability over one week was 0.875. Using females' data to assess the structure validity of SEQ-China, the structure produced a Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) of 0.027, a Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) of 0.980, an Adjusted

Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI) of 0.976 and a Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI) of 0.996. The same procedure was applied to analyze the males' data, and the result also showed adequate fit with RMSEA = 0.027, GFI = 0.983, AGFI = 0.979, NNFI = 0.997.

### Prevalence

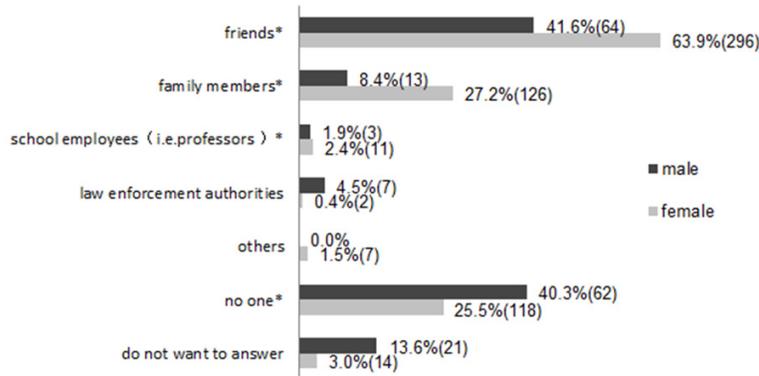
Respondents who were SEQ-positive accounted for 72.8%. Those who experienced any situation described in SEQ-China (endorsed at least one item) once or more than once were SEQ-positive, otherwise they were SEQ-negative. In total, 67.3% of males and 78% of females were SEQ-positive. Twenty-three items of SEQ-China can be classified into the following four categories (see **Table 1**): sexist hostility, sexual hostility, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion. To analyze the prevalence of each type of sexual harassment, those who answered at least one item on each subscale were considered as experiencing that type. Therefore, for males, the prevalence of each type was 28.6%, 63.0%, 37.4% and 5.6% respectively, while it was 39.5%, 71.2%, 57.1% and 5.9% respectively for females. There was no significant difference between genders in sexual coercion ( $P = 0.77$ ). The prevalence of

## Sexual harassment among Chinese college students

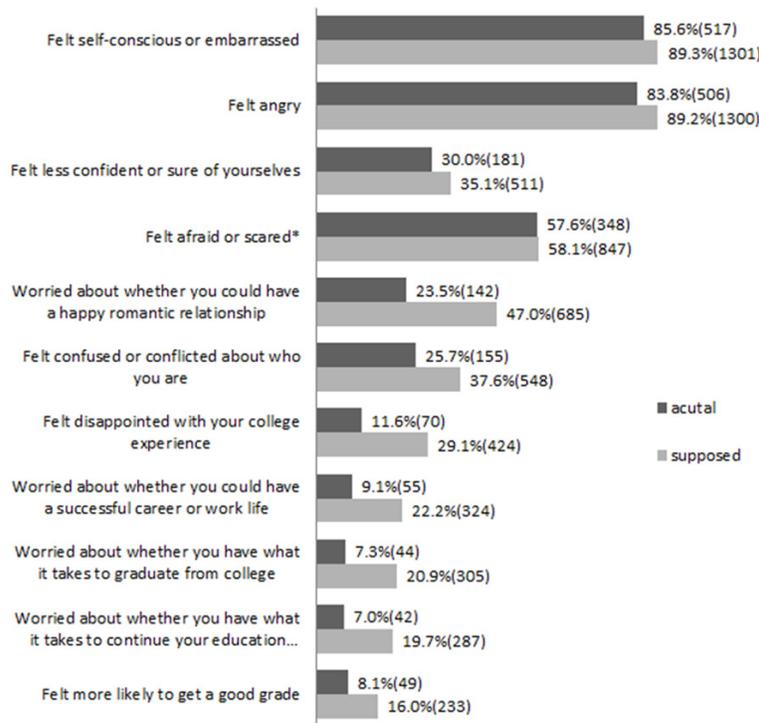
**Table 2.** Gender of harasser among self-reported harassment

Gender of Harasser	Self-reporters				
	Heterosexual	Non-heterosexual	Not sure/unwilling to disclose	Male	Female
Same gender	8.3%	19.4%	2.9%	35.1%	0.6%
Different gender	86.6%	56.7%	82.4%	46.8%	95.2%
Both	5.0%	23.9%	14.7%	18.2%	4.1%

Note: Self-reporters include 154 males and 463 females, 516 heterosexuals and 67 non-heterosexuals. 34 respondents chose "not sure/unwilling to disclose" for the question about orientation. Percentage may not total 100 due to rounding.



**Figure 2.** Percentage of harassed students who tell someone (by gender). Data were based on 617 respondents: 154 male and 463 female students. \*The difference between male and female students is statistically significant.



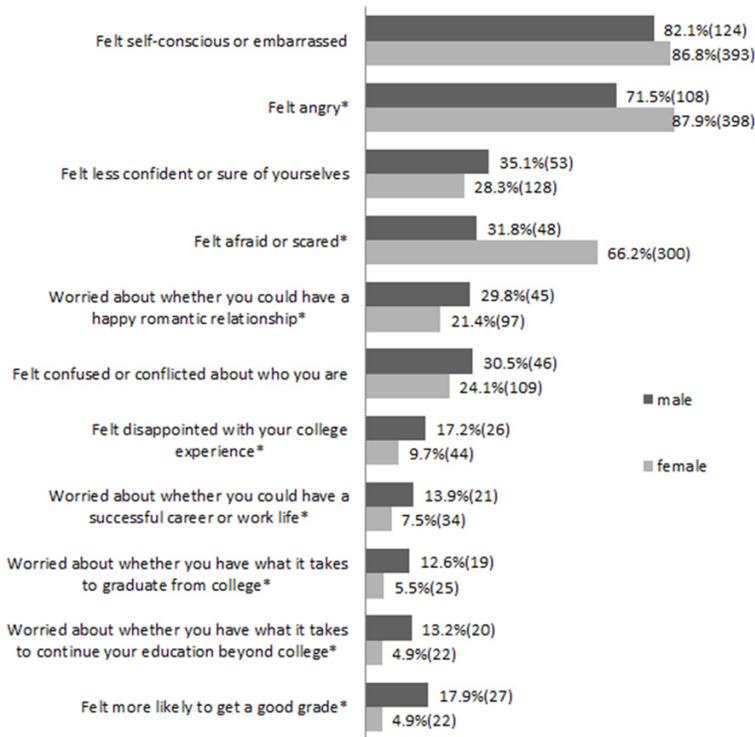
**Figure 3.** Emotional Reactions to Sexual Harassment (actual vs. supposed). A total of 604 respondents answered for the actual situation, 1,457 respondents for the supposed situation. \*The difference is statistically significant.

each harassing situation can be seen in **Table 1**.

From the perspective of sexual orientation, 72.0% of heterosexuals and 84.9% of non-heterosexuals (homosexuals and bisexuals) were SEQ-positive. As for heterosexuals, the prevalence of sexist hostility, sexual hostility, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion was 32.5%, 66.2%, 46.3% and 5.2%, respectively, while for non-heterosexuals it was, respectively, 52%, 79.6%, 61.2% and 13.2%. For all types, the differences between heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals were statistically significant ( $P < 0.01$ ). **Table 1** shows that the rate of every statistically significant harassing situation is higher for non-heterosexuals than heterosexuals.

The self-reported rate of having been sexually harassed was 29.7% (617 students). These respondents are called self-reporters. The rate was 43.1% among females while 15.3% among males. Meanwhile, the self-reported rate among non-heterosexuals was 44.1% and 28.3% among heterosexuals. Among the SEQ-positive respondents, 39.1% reported suffering sexual harassment. The self-reported rate among SEQ-positive females and males was 53.4% and 21.4%

## Sexual harassment among Chinese college students



**Figure 4.** Emotional Reactions to Sexual Harassment (male vs. female). Data were based on 604 respondents: 151 male and 453 female students. \*The difference is statistically significant.

( $P < 0.01$ ) while among non-heterosexuals and heterosexuals was 50.4% and 37.7% ( $P < 0.01$ ). In addition, among the SEQ-negative respondents, the self-reported rate was 4.2% (6.3% females, 2.7% males). The number of the sample of SEQ-negative non-heterosexuals was so small that it lost the value and significance of analysis.

The SEQ-positives were asked to provide time and place that the harassment occurred and the identity of perpetrators (multiple choices). The most common locations were school classrooms and lecture halls (**Figure 1**). The perpetrators were mainly students (79.3%) and strangers outside school (31.3%). The harassers could also be relatives (7.8%), school employees (6.3%) or others (6.5%). These harassing behaviors happened before primary school (3.7%) or in primary school (11.9%), middle school (25.8%), high school (53.2%) and universities (59%).

Among the self-reported harassment, the harassers were mainly the opposite sex in terms of different gender and sexual orienta-

tion of the victims (**Table 2**). However, males were prone to be victims by same-gender harassment than females (35.1% vs. 0.6%), while non-heterosexuals were more likely to experienced same-gender harassment than heterosexuals (19.4% vs. 8.3%).

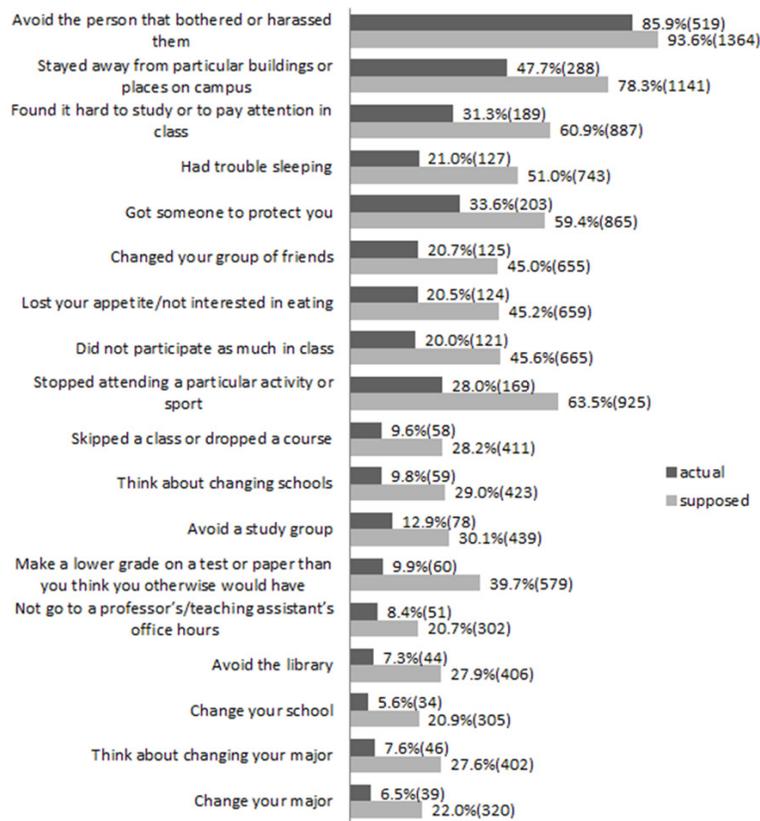
Among the self-reporters, 29.2% of them did not tell anybody. 58.3% confided to friends. Some had talked to family members (22.5%). A few of them told the school employees (2.3%), law enforcement departments or others (1.1%). Besides, 5.7% did not want to answer this question. Compared with females, males were more likely to tell no one ( $P < 0.01$ , **Figure 2**). Females were more likely than males to tell friends or family members ( $P < 0.01$ ).

The self-reporters had to tell their emotional and behavioral reactions to the first-time harassment (**Figures 3-6**). Since there was no statistical difference between heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals in the emotional and behavioral reactions, these data were not given. Those who reported having experienced harassment more than once were asked to provide their emotional and behavioral reactions to the first time and the latest harassment respectively (**Figures 7, 8**). For the latest harassment, respondents' reaction pattern remained nearly the same as the previous one, but the rate of each reaction reduced to different degrees. Respondents who denied experiencing sexual harassment had to suppose the reactions they would have if they were harassed (**Figures 3, 5**). For each reaction, the rate of supposed situation was higher than the actual.

### Perception

The questionnaire asked the respondents about the approval of labeling the items of SEQ as sexual harassment. The approval rate was 86.5%, 96.8%, 98.8% and 97.7% for sexist hostility, sexual hostility, unwanted sexual atten-

## Sexual harassment among Chinese college students



**Figure 5.** Behavioral Reactions to Sexual Harassment (actual vs. supposed). Six hundred and four respondents answered for the actual situation, 1,457 respondents for the supposed situation.

tion, and sexual coercion, respectively. As for the male, the approval rate was 85.1%, 94%, 97.8%, 96.3%, respectively, while 87.9%, 99.3%, 99.7% and 99%, respectively for the female. There were statistical differences ( $P < 0.01$ ) between males and females in all types of harassment except for the sexist hostility ( $P = 0.059$ ). Specific approval rate of each item of SEQ is listed in **Table 1**. The data of heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals were not given because there were no significant differences.

Most of the items of SEQ had higher recognition from female students than males, except for "Treated you differently because of your sex", "Put you down or was condescending to you because of your sex", "Made offensive sexist remarks". These three items together with "Displayed, used, or distributed sexist or suggestive materials..." belong to "sexist hostility", but the fourth one had higher recognition from females. As for the approval rate of sexist hostility, the difference between genders was not

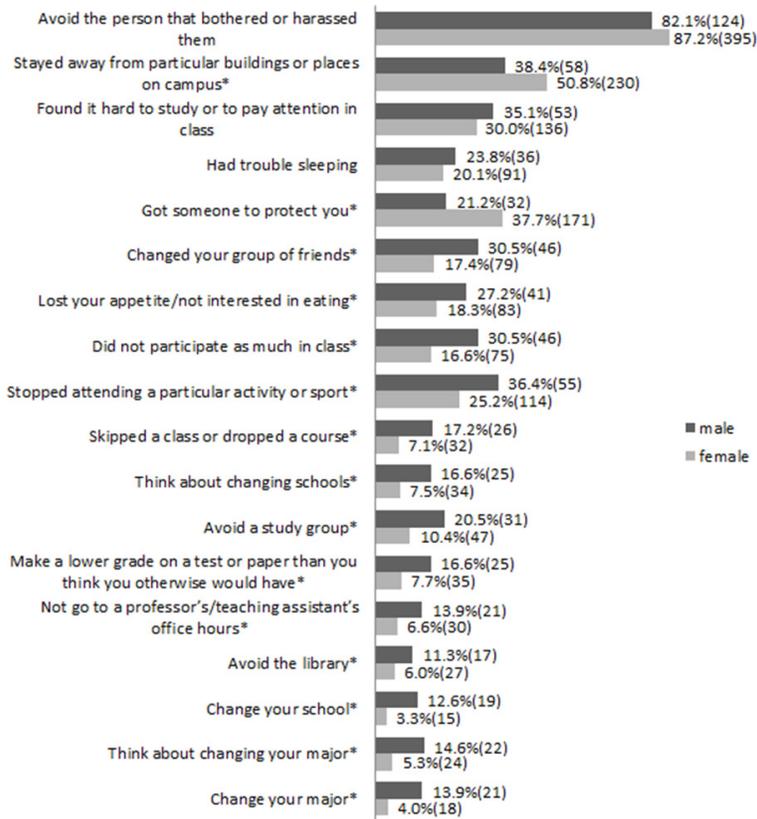
statistically significant ( $P = 0.059$ ). It was noticed that the fourth item mentioned above was far more highly endorsed than the other three. This may be due to the description "suggestive materials...pornography" which does not purely describe gender discrimination. Thus, the difference between genders of the approval rate of sexist hostility without this item was reanalyzed. Then the difference between genders was significant ( $P < 0.01$ ), and males' approval rate was (56.1%) which was higher than females' (46.5%). That is, males were more likely to approve "gender discrimination is sexual harassment" than females.

Five hundred and forty students approved and also were exposed to the same item of SEQ-China, but in the end, they did not consider themselves to be sexually harassed. They counted to 36.9%

among 1,463 students without report of sexual harassment, 48.7% among 1108 students who approved and also were exposed to the same item of SEQ-China.

As for the question "If you were a scholar, how would you describe the term 'sexual harassment'?", about 1,000 valid answers were received. It is easy to conclude from their opinions that sexual harassment is sex-related, against to the willingness of the receiver, disturbing and uncomfortable. However, students were more likely to mention "physical contact" than "verbal harassment", and few of them mentioned "gender discrimination" or "discrimination". It is worth mentioning that one of them referred to "violation of one's dignity". In addition, 2 respondents explicitly mentioned that gender discrimination does not belong to sexual harassment, and one of them thought lots of people would be involved otherwise. She questioned if it is sexual harassment that parents favor boys over girls. It is also worth

## Sexual harassment among Chinese college students



**Figure 6.** Behavioral Reactions to Sexual Harassment (male vs. female). Data were based on 604 respondents, 151 male and 453 female students. \*The difference is statistically significant.

noting that one student mentioned that sexual harassment may occur between couples when the conduct is against one's will.

### Discussion

Students' perception and cognition of sexual harassment can be directly or indirectly reflected in their definitions, the SEQ approval rate, SEQ positive rate and self-reported rate. Understanding the thought and suggestion of college students provides the opportunity for carrying out proper education and giving an acceptable legal or academic definition of sexual harassment to the public.

First, Chinese students hardly admit "gender discrimination is sexual harassment". One of the reasons may be associated with traditional Chinese culture and social atmosphere which is full of trace of patriarchy and male chauvinism. Although the principle of gender equality has been written into the Constitution, the traditional attitude or ideology is still prevalent and sex-

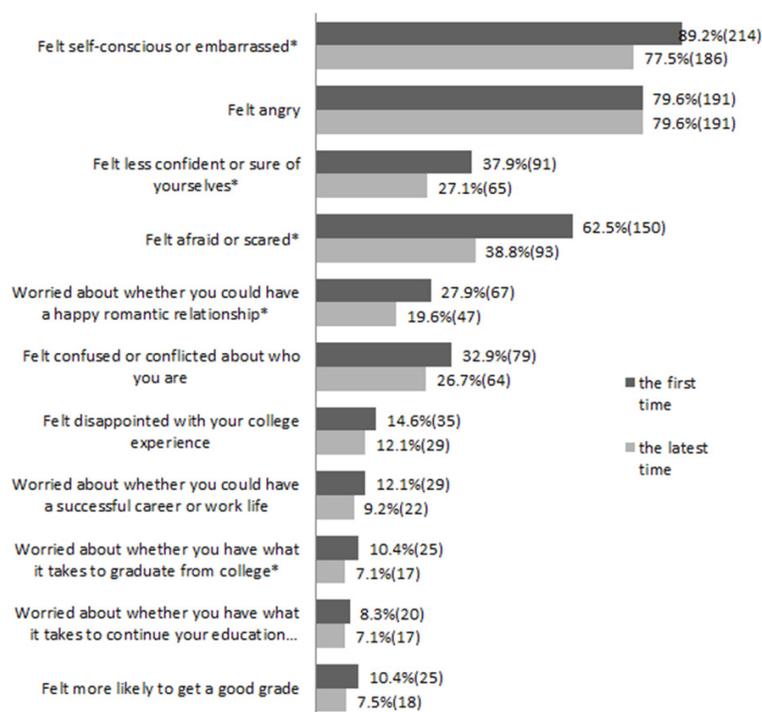
ism like "Son Preference" is a common phenomenon. It's not hard to imagine how difficult it is for people who grow up in such environment to consider gender discrimination as sexual harassment. Meanwhile, the term of "sexual harassment" did not appear in Chinese laws until 2005, and it lacks definition so far. Without the guide of laws, the public education or propaganda against sexual harassment is limited and insufficient.

Despite the lack recognition of "gender discrimination is sexual harassment", there is gender difference on this opinion which can be read from the SEQ approval rate. Males were more likely to recognize gender discrimination than females. It's supposed that Chinese women, as the usual victim of sexism in traditional Chinese culture, may grow up into the psychological identity on sexism to prevent further harm subconsciously.

Just like a girl asked "...would the parents preferring boys to girls constitute sexual harassment to the girls?", people who grew up with prevalent sexism around can hardly associate it into sexual harassment.

The concerned here is: sexual harassment still prevails by influencing people's perception and cognition. For example, Fasting et al. said that the prevalence of sexual harassment is due to its being part of students' school life and culture [12]. In this survey, SEQ-positive rate was far higher than self-reported rate of sexual harassment. It is believed that although SEQ may exaggerate the incidence of sexual harassment, there must be some reasons such as cultural atmosphere that make students not consider the sexually harassing behaviors they experienced as sexual harassment, otherwise SEQ-positive rate and self-reported rate of sexual harassment could not vary so much [13]. Therefore, the students' awareness of sexual harassment needs to be improved. However, it takes an awful lot of determination and effort

## Sexual harassment among Chinese college students



**Figure 7.** Emotional Reactions to Sexual Harassment (the first time vs. the latest time). Data were based on 240 respondents. \*The difference is statistically significant.

to raise the public awareness, because the revolution may also involve the environment such as sexism.

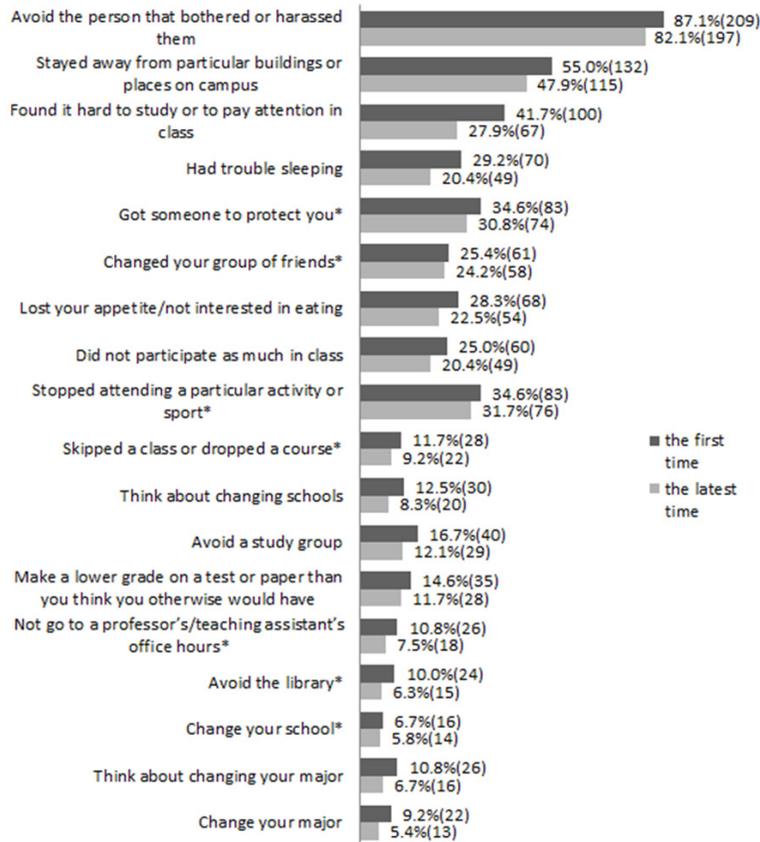
In addition, the cognition of students may be psychologically affected. Some students did not admit being sexually harassed after experiencing the situation they supported. As sexual harassment is a trauma, psychological defense mechanisms such as “denial” may play a role here, but it needs further study. In sum, only through the provision of education and psychological or social support can truly improve the victims’ awareness of sexual harassment and the report rate.

Undoubtedly, Chinese college students are confronted with the crisis of sexual harassment. As for college students in United States, the reporting rates of sexual harassment ranged from 20% to 60% [8, 11]. Hill reported that two thirds of American students had suffered certain type of sexual harassments during university in 2005 [8]. As for Chinese college students, our reported rate was 29.7%. Nevertheless, about 72.8% of Chinese college students (67.3% males and 78% females) ex-

perienced certain type of harassments according to SEQ-China while SEQ-positive rates ranged from 49% to 76% among female American counterparts [14, 15]. It’s disputed that the versions of the above SEQ varies a lot in many ways, such as the number of items, the wording etc., thereby the results cannot be compared with each other. Such high SEQ-positive rates in some sense reflect sexual harassment spread both in the United States and China. Although the SEQ-positive rate cannot be equal to the incidence of sexual harassment, it cannot be denied that harassing behaviors are widespread.

According to the result of SEQ-China, females than males and non-heterosexuals than heterosexuals suffered more harassment. On one hand, females and non-heterosexuals may suffer more harassment because of their relatively disadvantageous social position, according to double jeopardy theory (having disadvantaged social identities increases one’s risk of unequal treatment) [16]; on the other hand, among the SEQ-positives, females and non-heterosexuals were more likely to report sexual harassment. It’s assumed that females and non-heterosexuals may have more perception of sexual harassment and more sensitivity to the incident because of their gender or sexual orientation. Therefore, they tend to remember the harassment more deeply, which results in higher SEQ-positive rate and self-reported rate of sexual harassment. Besides, females and males suffer different types of harassment. Except for sexual coercion, females were more likely to encounter other types of harassment in SEQ, especially in unwanted sexual attention. In severe harassment such as sexual coercion, the difference between males and females was not statistically significant, which is similar to the American research [8]. But in viewing the specific content of SEQ, males were more likely to

## Sexual harassment among Chinese college students



**Figure 8.** Behavioral Reactions to Sexual Harassment (the first time vs. the latest time). Data were based on 240 respondents. \*The difference is statistically significant.

receive verbal harassment, while females were more likely to be physically harassed. Generally speaking, sexual joke is common among men, which may result in more verbal harassment. Some scholars conclude that the harassment to women strengthens the gender role of men, so females may receive more harassment from men and more serious harassment like physical contact [17]. Consistent with many researches, this study shows that non-heterosexuals than heterosexuals received more sexual harassment and they suffered more gender discrimination and coercion, which may be due to homophobia.

Meanwhile, about 30% students chose to keep silence after suffering sexual harassment. Those who confided in someone preferred friends to school employees or law enforcement agencies. Students may confide in their peers in considering the privacy. Furthermore, the absence of relevant institutions in school makes students have no place to complain.

More to the point, behind the silence is the great impact on students. Unlike the study in America, this investigation showed that Chinese male students were more likely than female students to suffer from emotional, physical and educational problems, such as feeling confused about themselves, having trouble sleeping, losing appetite, getting lower grade, etc [8]. The case that men sometimes suffer more serious problems than women after sexual harassment can also be seen in other studies [18, 19]. It is considered that men are usually less harassed so that they get more overwhelmed when sexual harassment happens [18]. And according to our survey, men are more inclined to keep silence, so they may get less help than women and get less support in emotion adjustment, which is harmful to their health and life. Furthermore, there may be a positive correlation between negative impact and the level of gender role conflict for men.

On one hand, compared with women, men have to confront more social pressure of presenting gender role which usually means "the masculinity". Nonetheless, their so-called masculinity may lead to unhealthy conception and behavior [20]. On the other hand, men with higher level of gender role conflict are more likely to have negative emotions, such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and are less willing to seek psychological support [21]. Therefore, since sexual harassment has performed "power" and "masculinity", it increases the gender role conflict of male victims and even causes or worsens their negative emotions and silence [17]. First of all, sexual harassment makes the masculinity of male victims become fragmented, and male victims may thereby feel confused about themselves. Second, male victims may choose ways such as keeping silence to refuse help for maintaining their so-called masculinity. Therefore, men suf-

## Sexual harassment among Chinese college students

fer more negative problems than women. But this still remains to be further studied. Another point to mention is that the differences between different sexual orientations in students' emotional and behavioral reactions were not statistically significant, which was inconsistent with the result in America [8]. This may attribute to the small number of non-heterosexual victims in our investigation.

As the students who didn't experience sexual harassment but were asked to imagine their reaction to sexual harassment, it is interesting to note that every supposed rate was higher than the actual incidence. That is, people may have overestimated the impact of sexual harassment. However, it is possible that the respondents endorsed the responses given by the questionnaire for recognition of authority when they imagined the impact, thereby increasing the rate. Meanwhile, people may have excessive panic because of the poor cognition of sexual harassment and the long-term absence of protection. Facing the serious situation, except for consummating the necessary laws and ensuring the implementation, it is necessary to reinforce educating and training. Only education can improve people's cognition of sexual harassment and the ability of self-protecting. Paludi et al. recommended that multiple training should be available to all kinds of students in school, in order to teach students to recognize and protect themselves from sexual harassment, and reduce the blame for the victims or negative comments [22].

In spite of the high validity and reliability of SEQ-China, sexual harassment was also reported among the SEQ-negative, which suggests that SEQ-China may not measure all types of harassment. Furthermore, as the culture difference between China and western, perhaps SEQ-China needs further readjustment. As for the design of questions, the questionnaire asked the respondents whether they had ever experienced sexual harassment. The time span is so long that the results can be affected by the memory of respondents. In addition, as this is an on-line survey, there may be selection bias, such as a network limited, respondents' preferences. However, limited by insufficient finance and members, on-line survey is an appropriate way to do national research. Future research can be conducted in small areas

with strict random sampling and so on to reduce errors.

Definitively, Chinese college students are suffering from the prevalence of sexual harassment. Male victims are no longer uncommon and may even suffer from more serious problems. Even though, in 2014, the Draft Amendment of the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China proposed to extend the definition of indecency from women only. The law about sexual harassment remains to be revised, as it judges women as the only objects. Furthermore, relevant law enforcements are needed, as well as the ways or authorities for people to complain in schools or communities. Meanwhile, as people's awareness of sexual harassment is limited, effective training and education are needed to protect them from sexual harassment.

For further study and better protection, a unified and clear definition of sexual harassment is necessary in Chinese legislation or academia so that relevant authorities can judge the harassing behaviors and take actions as well as design an operational measurement tool. People can refer the structure of SEQ-China to set definition, and in return the new definition can guide the revision of SEQ-China. In the future, the SEQ-China can be applied to other fields such as workplace to measure sexual harassment for diverse groups in China.

### Acknowledgements

This work was partly supported by the National Nature Science Foundation of China (No. 81370705 and 81471450).

### Disclosure of conflict of interest

None.

**Address correspondence to:** Jun Chen, Department of Infertility and Sexual Medicine, The Third Affiliated Hospital of Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou City 510630, Guangdong Province, China. Tel: +86-189-02336333; E-mail: jchen121121@hotmail.com; Hui Lin, Center for Reproductive Medicine, The Third Affiliated Hospital of Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou City 510630, Guangdong Province, China. Tel: +86-13711184130; E-mail: 340290958@qq.com

## Sexual harassment among Chinese college students

### References

- [1] Fitzgerald LF. Sexual harassment. Violence against women in the workplace. *Am Psychol* 1993; 48: 1070-1076.
- [2] Merkin R. The impact of sexual harassment on turnover intentions, absenteeism, and job satisfaction: findings from Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. *Journal of International Women's Studies* 2008; 10: 73-91.
- [3] Settles IH, Buchanan NT and Colar BK. The impact of race and rank on the sexual harassment of black and white men in the U.S. military. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 2012; 13: 256-263.
- [4] McDonald P. Workplace sexual harassment 30 years on: a review of the literature. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 2012; 14: 1-17.
- [5] Perry EL, Kulik CT and Schmidtke JM. Individual differences in the effectiveness of sexual harassment awareness training. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 2010; 28: 698-723.
- [6] Dobbin F and Kelly EL. How to stop harassment: professional construction of legal compliance in organizations. *American Journal of Sociology* 2007; 112: 1203-1243.
- [7] Lipson J. Hostile hallways: bullying, teasing, and sexual harassment in school. American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, Washington, DC 2001.
- [8] Hill C and Silva E. Drawing the line: sexual harassment on campus. American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, Washington, DC 2005.
- [9] Hill C and Keral H. Crossing the line: sexual harassment at school. American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, Washington, DC 2010.
- [10] Srivastava DK and Gu MK. Law and policy issues on sexual harassment in China: comparative perspectives. *Oregon Review of International Law* 2009; 11: 43-70.
- [11] Fitzgerald LF, Magley VJ, Drasgow F and Waldo C. Measuring sexual harassment in the military: the sexual experiences questionnaire (SEQ-DoD). *Military Psychology* 1999; 11: 243-263.
- [12] Fasting K, Chroni S and Knorre N. The experiences of sexual harassment in sport and education among European female sports science students. *Sport Education & Society* 2014; 19: 115-130.
- [13] Fitzgerald LF, Shullman SL, Bailey N, Richards M, Swecker J, Gold Y, Ormerod M and Weitzman L. The incidence and dimensions of sexual harassment in academia and the workplace. *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 1988; 32: 152-175.
- [14] Gutek BA, Murphy, RO and Douma B. A review and critique of the sexual experiences questionnaire (SEQ). *Law Hum Behav* 2004; 28: 457-482.
- [15] Cortina LM, Swan S, Fitzgerald LF and Wald C. Sexual harassment and assault: chilling the climate for women in academia. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 2010; 22: 419-441.
- [16] King DK. Multiple jeopardy, multiple consciousness: the context of a black feminist ideology. *Signs* 1988; 14: 42-72.
- [17] Franke KM. What's wrong with sexual harassment? *Stanford Law Review* 1997; 49: 691-772.
- [18] Vogt DS, Pless AP, King LA and King DW. Deployment stressors, gender, and mental health outcomes among gulf war I veterans. *J Trauma Stress* 2005; 18: 115-127.
- [19] Street AE, Gradus JL, Stafford J and Kelly K. Gender differences in experiences of sexual harassment: data from a male-dominated environment. *J Consult Clin Psychol* 2007; 75: 464-474.
- [20] Courtenay WH. Constructions of masculinity and their influence on men's well-being: a theory of gender and health. *Soc Sci Med* 2000; 50: 1385-1401.
- [21] Addis ME and Mahalik JR. Men, masculinity, and the contexts of help seeking. *Am Psychol* 2003; 58: 5-14.
- [22] Paludi M, Nydegger R, Desouza E, Nydegger L and Dicker KA. International perspectives on sexual harassment of college students: the sounds of silence. *Ann N Y Acad Sci* 2010; 1087: 103-120.