



# Workplace Harassment Through the Experiences of Iranian Women: A Qualitative Study, 2017

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Received 2018 February 07; Revised 2018 April 28; Accepted 2018 May 25.

## Abstract

**Background:** The women harassment at work is one of the examples of violence against them, which requires the attention of the society and politicians.

**Objectives:** The purpose of this study is to investigate and describe the women harassment in Iranian workplace.

**Methods:** A qualitative design was used based on a content analysis approach to reach this study aim. 20 women who were worked in different places in Tehran, Iran, semi-structured interviews were carried out to gather data.

**Results:** From the data of this study, 52 cods and 9 sub category and 3 main themes were extracted. Three main themes emerged including "The perceived harassment by women", "gender discrimination", and "harassment facilitators".

**Conclusions:** According to the results of this study, the experience of harassment at the workplace occurs in a context where power relations between women and men are unequal. On the other hand, women believe their lifestyle is affecting the harassment. Female harassment brings many problems to them, including reducing self-esteem and reducing workplace performance. So, paying attention to this issue and more monitoring in work environments can partly reduce this issue.

**Keywords:** Qualitative Research, Sexual Harassment, Workplace

## 1. Background

Since the 1980s, there have been numerous definitions of harassment at the workplace. One of the most complete definitions was given by Brodsky "frequent and persistent attempts by a person to torment, conquer, disappoint, or excite a reaction from another person. This persistent endeavor will ultimately cause the pressure, fear, threat, or discomfort of the other person" (1). The women harassment at work is one of the examples of violence against them, which requires the attention of the society and politicians. Gender inequality and violence against women are taking place in different work environments, and usually affect women with lower jobs and lower income levels (2). Extensive studies of the prevalence of harassment at workplaces by the European Foundation in 27 EU countries in 2010 showed that of about 48,000 people who participated in the study, 5% have experienced a type of harassment at their workplace over the past year, but the diversity of responses varies from one country to another, and the common concern was harassment of more

women than men in all participating countries (3). Another study by Kamel et al. in Pakistan found that the prevalence of gender-based harassment was 90 percent and sexual harassment was 75 percent (4). Richman et al. (1999) do not consider the harassment of the workplace to be unique to women and divides it into five categories of verbal aggression, disrespect, isolation, threats, and physical attacks (5, 6). In 2000, Madison and Minichiello conducted a study aimed at discovering gender-based harassment by formal nurses and how to deal with it in Australia's health care workplace. The most types of abuse perceived by nurses were privacy intrusion, being over friendly, disrespectful, and fraudulent (7). In a study conducted by Gelfan on 2007, ethnicity, age, community culture and women's family status are directly affected by the harassment at the workplace (8). Other variables affecting this issue are the marital status of individuals, in which single women are more likely to be harassed than married women. Educated women tend to report harassment in the workplace more than illiterate or low-educated women (9). The concept of harassment at the workplace was highly obscure

by the 1990s and has recently attracted the attention of researchers around the world (10). An estimated 81.3% of the research were conducted from 2000 to 2008, 16% in the 1990s, and only 2.7% before 1980 (11). While there is a lot of evidence in the world about the consequences of this harassment for women and their health, it seems that in Iran, to date, there is no comprehensive study on this issue and there is insufficient information, especially given the context and culture of the community.

## 2. Objectives

Therefore, this study was conducted with the aim of investigating the harassment of women in work environments from Iranian women perspective.

## 3. Materials and Methods

### 3.1. Design

A qualitative design was used based on a content analysis approach to reach this study aim. Qualitative studies are aimed to improving the understanding and description of the world of human experience (12). Content analysis is a systematic approach to categorization that can be used to explore a large amount of text information to identify trends and communication patterns (13).

### 3.2. Participants

In this study, participants were selected by purposive sampling method, and maximum variation for age, Job Type, Workplace, organization level, and Government or private job were considered. Women who had the following criteria were eligible to participate in the study: (a) being Employed, (b) over 18 years of age, (c) Part-time or full-time jobs and (d) fluent in Persian language.

Data Collection all data were collected from February to May 2017. After the eligible women were informed of the aim of the study, semi structured, in-depth interviews were carried out with 20 women. Participants were selected from various workplaces, both public and private. The sampling was difficult because the women have fears, but no one left the study. The main questions were:

- What is the meaning of harassment at the workplace?
- Could you explain more, please?
- What other annoying behavior did you experience?
- Could you please give a concrete example?

Interviews were conducted individually and face to face in a private room, which lasted 45 to 90 minutes on average. Each participant was interviewed only once. Interviews were conducted at any place where the participant

was comfortable. Some at office, some in the house, coffee shop, and ... All interviews were carried out in Persian language. Each interview was recorded and then analyzed. Also transcripts returned to participants for comment and confirmation.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

In this study, data analysis was done by content analysis simultaneous with data collection as recommended by Graneheim and Landman (14). This method avoids the use of predefined category and allows category and their names to be extracted from the data. At first, data analysis begins with frequent reading of the text to immerse a sense of the whole, then the word-by-word is read to be extracted meaning units and Synonyms are termed as codes, in the next stage sorting codes into sub-categories. Categories based on comparisons regarding their similarities and differences and finally themes as the expression of the latent content of the text formulate.

### 3.4. Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this study was assured using Lincoln and Guba's criteria (13). To meet these criteria, activities such as purposive sampling, member checking, peer checking, prolonged engagement with participants, and maintaining an audit trail by the corresponding author's memos were conducted.

### 3.5. Ethical Considerations

This article is part of the thesis for getting a PhD in Sexuality and reproductive health. The ethics committee of Tehran University of Medical Sciences approved the study proposal (code: 9321151004). The participants were informed of the aim and method of this study. The permission to type record the interviews was obtained from the participants' before the interviews and all participants signed written informed consent forms.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. General Characteristics of the Participants

The mean age of the participants was  $30 \pm 8.6$  years. The range of employment was between 2 and 14 years (mean 8; SD = 6). Two participants had High school education, three had diploma and fifteen of them had academic education (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	No. (%)
<b>Age, y</b>	
20 - 25	2 (10)
25 - 30	6 (30)
> 30	12 (60)
<b>Married status</b>	
Single	7 (35)
Married	8 (40)
Divorced	5 (25)
<b>Education status</b>	
High school	2 (10)
Diploma	3 (15)
University	15 (75)
<b>Work Experience, y</b>	
1 - 5	4 (20)
5 - 10	8 (40)
10 - 15	8 (40)
<b>Type of work</b>	
Private	8 (40)
Governmental	12 (60)

#### 4.2. Themes

From the data of this study, 52 cods and 9 sub category and 3 main themes were extracted. Three main themes emerged including “The perceived harassment by women”, “gender discrimination”, and “harassment facilitators”. Here are some quotes from interviews to explain each theme.

#### 4.3. The Perceived Harassment by Women

One of the extracted themes from the data was the perceived harassment by women. It consisted of three sub-themes: “psychological harassment”, “physical harassment”, sexual harassment.

Psychological harassment: one of the participants said: “When I spoke to a man at work, quickly made a rumor for me that I had a relationship with him.” Another participant said: “My supervisor was expecting me to carry out his duties as well. If I did not do it, with different excuses, I was dying.”

Sexual harassment: in the Iranian society, due to the specific culture, sexual harassment occurs in the form of sexual jokes, provocative speeches, and physical harassment, and sexual harassment occurs rarely at the workplace. In one case, one participant says, “I worked for seven

years in an organization where my colleague had taken my phone number and sent me sex messages, or if we were in a quiet place, he tried to touch me, and in all of this I stayed silent and drowned. ”Another participant adds: I worked in a room where all my colleagues were men. They were talking about sexuality intent to embarrass me, and sometimes looking at pornographic films and pornography that hurt me so much, but because I did not want to be judged by others, I would not be able to talk to anyone about this problem.“

#### 4.4. Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination is one of the main themes of this study, which can almost be said to be the main one, and each of the themes is in some way related to this theme. This theme has one sub themes including philanthropy. About this, one of participants says: “In our society, women who are older and who are not married are subject to verbal abuse due to our culture, or a woman who is obese and wears a tight overcoat can easily be harassed, even by her female colleague. This gets worse when a girl a divorced. She will be harassed by other men. “As to the patriarchy, one of the participants said, “When you live where women are still not legally protected in the workplace, one should expect such abuses. I do not even dare to talk to anyone about being harassed, because they consider myself as guilty and they say you may not have the right behavior and the men are always right to behave easily.

The third main theme that was extracted from this study was harassment accelerators, categorized as sub-types of type of occupation, personality type, marital status, and age. Regarding the type of job, one of the participants says: “In government environments, harassment may be less due to a number of issues, but in private environments, due to a lack protection, there is more to come. However, in some offices, even guards also harass women, but in any case, their existence creates fear for some people”

Another participant says, “In a private environment, due to privacy, people are more likely to be harassed, but in government environments, there are a number of people in the same room so there are not many harassment conditions.”

As for age, it was found that younger women are often abused more and the marital status of people is also very influential, for example, divorced women, single girls and then married women are harassed. One participant says that “as soon as they find out at the company that you are divorced, they think that they are allowed to behave in any way and offer having a relationship. But if you have a husband, they think that there is someone who supports

you and try not to approach you. “The type of personality is also important in the event of an abusive incident, for example, if someone keeps silence against harassment, she will undoubtedly be harassed again. A participant says, “Some women behave as if they have no frameworks and allow anyone to enter in their privacy, so these people are more harassed. For example, about myself, when I enter a new environment, I try to have a privacy for myself. At your workplace, if they have less information about you, you will be harassed less. Women do not have to inform men or women about their private life at workplace”

## 5. Discussion

This qualitative research was conducted with the aim of investigating the experiences of Iranian women from harassment at the workplace. In the present study, one of the dimensions of the harassment of women at the workplace was their perceived abuse, which has three sub-categories of psychological (verbal and non-verbal), physical and sexual abuse. Among these three categories, psychological harassment has the highest rates, with the vast majority of women in the workplace facing behaviors such as ugly pranks, humiliation, interference with personal affairs, and abuse. In the Keashly study (2005), the prevalence of verbal abuse for women in work environments has been highlighted (15). Physical harassment has been imposed in the form of imposing extra work and forced labor which go beyond women’s power. In Iran, because of the special culture that governs the relationship between women and men, sexual harassment has spread through provocative speech, telephone harassment and watching distress, and the rest such as rape has been rare. In a study by Hallberg and Strandmark (2006), entitled “Workplace harassment outcomes from the perspective of public sector employees in Sweden”, the result showed that all financial harassment and job change could be neglected, but the psychological damage is very serious and the majority of the participants referred to it as a crisis (16). In the case of harassing accelerators, the results of the study showed that the cultural context is very influential. For example, in Iran, many women have considered the type of clothing important at the workplace, especially for sexual harassment. Other influential factors include workplace, personality, age, and religious beliefs. Strandmark et al. (2007) conducted a qualitative study titled “The Origin of Workplace Harassment: Experiences Regarding the Victims of Abuse in the Public Service” in Sweden. It has been seen in this study that the type of personality is very effective in harassing, for example, those who consider themselves to be strong and competent, or as vulnerable and sensitive individuals, are more likely to be involved in these abuses

(17). In the study of Khubchandani and Price (2015), aimed at examining the prevalence of harassment at the working environment and its impact on the United States, the results showed that one out of ten people were harassed at work and the extent of this harassment in women, especially divorced women was much higher than that of men (OR 1.47,  $P < 0.001$ ) (18). Harassment in the working environment has important determinants on the health of women. These people are more likely to develop obesity, sleep disorders, and addiction. Also, high stress levels, chronic pain, persistent absence from the workplace are among their associated factors (19), which is consistent with the results of the present study.

Next, other harassment of women at the workplace is gender discrimination, which shows how difficult it is for women to leave, their inability to talk about harassment and defend their rights, misinterpretation of women’s behavior and excessive expectations of men. Today, gender inequalities in the environment are a complex phenomenon that affects a variety of aspects of women, including psychological, physical, and family factors (20).

Gender discrimination at the workplace places women in lower socioeconomic situations, and this situation increases their stress, anxiety and their mental health problems (21, 22). As long as there is gender inequality in human societies, talking about gender-based harassment at the workplace and its problems will attract less attention. Because, on the one hand, the existing cultural and social structure strengthens the patriarchal view, and on the other hand, victims of gender-based harassment are reluctant to express problems in their work environment, and they refuse to speak freely or to explain the experience of harassment (23).

But less attention and the consequent concealment of the issue do not diminish the importance of the issue, but it also increases the sensitivity of the issue, while doubling the practical measures to reduce the number of victims of gender-based harassment (24-26), and the psychological harassment are seen more in women than men (25). occasionally, women are not looking development and managerial jobs because of protecting themselves from workplace harassment.

In conclusion, it is suggested that more studies be done in order to change the attitudes of the community and women know their rights. In this case, it would be hoped that the harassment of women in workplaces would be reduced.

## Acknowledgments

The research team thanked all women in Tehran who collaborated with us in this study.

## Footnotes

**Authors' Contribution:** Neda Nazem Ekbatani and Zahra Behboodi designed the study. Neda Nazem Ekbatani performed the analyses. Neda Nazem Ekbatani and Zahra Behboodi collected the data. Neda Nazem Ekbatani and Zahra Behboodi prepared the draft of the manuscript. All of the authors read and made the necessary changes in the final manuscript

**Declaration of Interests:** None declared.

**Funding/Support:** Tehran University of Medical Science financially supported the study.

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