Sexual Harassment of Chinese College Students

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Sexual harassment of Chinese college students with a focus on their awareness, experiences, responses, and expectations of institutional intervention to the problem was examined. 358 male and 491 female Chinese college students in Hong Kong participated. There were no gender differences in students’ awareness of the phenomenon. Students’ own experiences were less frequent than what they had heard about sexual harassment. Peer harassment occurred twice as frequently as faculty harassment. Compared to men, twice as many women said they had been sexually harassed. About one in four women students experienced various forms of sexual harassment and 1% were coerced into sexual activities during their college years by either teachers or peers. Students typically avoided and ignored the harassers and felt that the university should take up active roles in combating the problem. Comparisons with U.S. studies suggested that Chinese college students had a lower awareness and experience level in sexual harassment than U.S. students.

KEY WORDS: sexual harassment; Chinese college students; prevalence; awareness.

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INTRODUCTION

Studies have documented the widespread occurrence of sexual harassment in educational settings (Dziech and Weiner, 1984; Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Fitzgerald and Ormerod, 1991; Mazer and Percival, 1989; McKinney, 1990; Paludi and Barickman, 1991; Reilly et al., 1986). Incidence studies conducted on various campuses in the United States have shown that men are often the harassers and women the victims (Adams, Kottke, and Padgitt, 1983; Bond, 1988; Dziech and Weiner, 1984; Fitzgerald, 1993; Reilly et al., 1986). These studies suggested that 30–50% of the women have experienced at least one incidence of sexual harassment by faculty members during their college life, while 70–90% of the women respondents reported being sexually harassed by male students (Paludi and Barickman, 1991). When various dimensions of sexual harassment are considered, the incidence rate of gender harassment (i.e., sexist or misogynistic comments or behaviors) is the highest and amounts to about 70% (Adams et al., 1983; Bond, 1988). Thirteen to 16% of the students reported receiving unwanted sexual invitations or verbal sexual advances and 6–10% experienced unwelcome physical advances such as pinching, touching, or patting (Adams et al., 1983; Wilson and Kraus, 1983). For direct sexual assault such as unwanted intercourse and breast or genital stimulation, the incidence rate is about 2–12% (Adams et al., 1983; Bond, 1988).

Sexual harassment can result in serious psychological and practical consequences (Benson and Thompson, 1982; Fitzgerald, 1993; Gutek and Koss, 1993; Paludi and Barickman, 1991). Victims often experience symptoms similar to individuals suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder. These symptoms include anxiety, depression, frustration, sleep disturbances, and low self-esteem. Dziech and Weiner (1984) summarized that harassment often “forces a student to forfeit work, research, educational comfort or even career” (p. 10). Of those students experienced sexual harassment on campus, 21% did not enroll in a course to avoid such behaviors, 3% dropped a course, and 12–15% changed their major or educational program (Bailey and Richards, 1985).

Most research on sexual harassment has come from North American and very little is known about harassment in other countries (Fitzgerald, 1993; Stockdale, 1993). The authors have noted that various surveys about the prevalence rates of sexual harassment have been carried out in Chinese societies such as China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong (Chen, 1994: Coalition Against Sexual Abuse, 1992; Dolecheck, 1984). Unfortunately, these survey results are often briefly reported in local newspapers or regional magazines. Thus, it is difficult to scrutinize their methodology and compare their results with existing literature in Western countries. In Hong Kong, a recent study on coercive sexuality by dating partners revealed that about 20–50% of the female Chinese college students