Students' Awareness of Sexual Harassment Forms at Campus II, University of Labor and Social Affairs

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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment (SH) remains a pervasive yet underrecognized issue in Vietnamese higher education, particularly regarding non-physical and culturally normalized behaviors. This study investigates students' awareness and perceptions of different forms of sexual harassment at Campus II, University of Labor and Social Affairs. Employing a mixed-methods design, quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 364 students, complemented by in-depth interviews with selected students and university staff. The findings indicate that while most students are able to accurately identify overt and explicit forms of sexual harassment, such as unwanted physical contact or forced exposure to pornographic content, awareness of verbal, non-verbal, and technology-mediated harassment remains limited. Behaviors occurring in familiar contexts—such as joking among peers, interactions within romantic relationships, or physical contact by relatives—are often trivialized or perceived as normal, leading to the normalization of boundary violations. Notable gender differences were observed, with female students demonstrating higher sensitivity and accuracy in identifying sexually harassing behaviors than male students. The study highlights significant gaps in comprehensive sexuality education and consent awareness, underscoring the need for targeted communication, social work interventions, and institutional policies to enhance awareness and prevent sexual harassment in university settings.

Keywords: Sexual harassment, student awareness, gender differences, higher education, Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Vietnamese society, sexuality remains a sensitive topic that is rarely discussed openly. Education on gender, reproductive health, and skills for responding to sexual harassment (SH) is still insufficient in both families and schools. Consequently, many young people lack a proper understanding of behaviors, social norms, and their rights to protection within interpersonal relationships.

Sexual harassment is understood as verbal, gestural, behavioral, or bodily expressions of a sexual nature that harm one's dignity or create a threatening, hostile, uncomfortable, or offensive environment. It is a pressing social issue and especially alarming when victims are children, adolescents, or university students. According to Ha Đo (2020), a report by Professor John Edmonds of Durham University (UK) indicates that approximately 50,000 cases of sexual harassment are recorded each year in UK universities. Studies in the United States and Australia similarly report that 40–50% of university students have experienced SH during their studies. In China, a survey by the Guangzhou Center for Sexuality Education (2022) involving more than 6,500 students found that nearly 70% had experienced some form of harassment, yet fewer than 4% chose to report the incidents to their school or the police (Lai Nguyen, 2018).

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2019), sexual harassment is defined as "any unwanted conduct of a sexual nature that harms dignity or creates a hostile, intimidating, humiliating, or unsafe environment." Within university environments, SH can occur in a variety of forms: verbal, gestural, physical, or through digital technologies.

In Vietnam, a survey conducted under the "Safe University Campus" project by Hanoi National University of Education (Thanh Hung, 2023) revealed that 51.8% of students had experienced at least one form of SH. Notably, 68.8% of victims remained silent due to fear of judgment, stigma, or retaliation. This situation reflects a lack of knowledge, coping strategies, and especially the hesitancy among young people when confronted with violations. As a result, many students lack sufficient awareness of their rights to protection and of behaviors that infringe upon personal dignity in educational environments.

At Campus II, University of Labor and Social Affairs where over 4,000 students study and more than two - thirds are women the issue is even more concerning. In an open learning environment with extensive interpersonal communication and widespread social media use, students are vulnerable to both direct and online harassment. Insufficient awareness means many students fail to recognize when they are being harassed or do not know how to react or seek help, contributing to increasing prevalence and severity of SH. This not only affects students' psychological well-being but also reduces their likelihood of seeking support or protection. Such realities underscore the urgent need for communication, education, and training programs on SH prevention in academic settings, helping students understand their rights, respond appropriately, speak up, and support peers in similar situations. Raising awareness is critical not only to individual safety but also to fostering a respectful, gender-sensitive, and safe educational environment that promotes holistic personal development.

Therefore, studying students' awareness of sexual harassment is essential not only to assess young people's current understanding but also to provide a scientific basis for social workers and educational institutions to design effective prevention and intervention programs, ensuring a safe and dignity respecting learning environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexual Harassment in Higher Education

Sexual harassment (SH) is widely recognized as a serious social and human rights issue that negatively affects individuals' psychological well-being, academic performance, and sense of safety, particularly within educational environments. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2019), sexual harassment refers to any unwanted conduct of a sexual nature that violates dignity or creates a hostile, intimidating, or humiliating environment. In higher education, such behaviors may take verbal, non-verbal, physical, or technology-mediated forms and often involve power imbalances and gendered social norms.

International studies consistently report high prevalence rates of SH among university students. In the United Kingdom, approximately 50,000 cases of sexual harassment and sexual misconduct are reported annually in universities (Đo Hà, 2020). In the United States, surveys indicate that around 40–50% of university students experience at least one form of sexual harassment during their studies (NASPA, 2018; Fitzgerald et al., 1995). Similarly, the Australian Human Rights Commission (2017) reported that 51% of university students had experienced verbal sexual harassment and 31% had experienced unwanted physical contact. In China, a largescale survey involving more than 6,500 students found that nearly 70% had experienced some form of harassment, yet fewer than 4% reported the incidents (Guangzhou Center for Sexuality Education, 2022; Lai Nguyen, 2018).

Despite its prevalence, sexual harassment remains significantly underreported. Studies suggest that fear of stigma, victim-blaming, disbelief, and retaliation discourages students from disclosing incidents (Kearl, 2018; Fitzgerald et al., 1997). These findings highlight that sexual harassment in universities is not only widespread but also structurally silenced.

Students' Awareness and Perception of Sexual Harassment

Awareness and perception are critical factors influencing students' ability to identify, respond to, and prevent sexual harassment. Awareness refers to students' knowledge of what constitutes sexual harassment, while perception involves how individuals interpret specific behaviors in real-life situations (Piaget, 1972).

Research indicates that students are generally more capable of recognizing overt and explicit forms of sexual harassment, such as unwanted physical contact or coercion, than subtle or indirect forms (Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Berdahl, 2007). Behaviors such as sexual jokes, suggestive comments, staring, or inappropriate online messages are often dismissed as flirting, teasing, or normal social interaction (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020).

Several studies emphasize that inadequate sexuality education and limited discussion of consent contribute to students' misinterpretation of sexual harassment (UNFPA, 2018; WHO, 2013). When students lack clear conceptual boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behavior, they may tolerate violations or fail to recognize themselves as victims. This limited awareness not only affects individual coping strategies but also perpetuates a culture of silence within educational institutions.

Gender Differences in Awareness and Perception

Gender differences in the perception of sexual harassment have been widely documented. Female students consistently demonstrate higher sensitivity and accuracy in identifying sexually harassing behaviors than male students (Hill & Silva, 2005; Holland & Cortina, 2017). This difference is often attributed to women's greater exposure to harassment, higher perceived vulnerability, and gendered socialization emphasizing caution and self-protection (Fisher et al., 2010).

In contrast, male students are more likely to interpret ambiguous behaviors as joking or flirting and to underestimate their harmful impact (Flood, 2008; Katz & Moore, 2013). Traditional masculinity norms may normalize assertive or intrusive behaviors, leading men to overlook issues of consent and personal boundaries (Powell & Henry, 2017). Research also indicates that male students are more likely to confuse sexual harassment with sexual assault, particularly within romantic relationships, reflecting limited understanding of coercion and consent (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013).

Vietnamese studies show similar patterns. Female students tend to recognize verbal and non-verbal harassment more accurately, whereas male students often trivialize such behaviors (Nguyễn Thị Minh Hòa, 2019; Phạm & Trần, 2021). These gender-based differences underscore the importance of targeted educational interventions, particularly those addressing male students' perceptions and attitudes.

Sexual Harassment in the Vietnamese Context

In Vietnam, sexuality remains a sensitive topic that is rarely discussed openly in families or schools. Consequently, gender education, reproductive health education, and training on responding to sexual harassment remain limited (UNFPA, 2018). National surveys reveal that more than half of Vietnamese university students have experienced at least one form of sexual harassment, yet approximately 70% choose not to report incidents (Thanh Hùng, 2023).

Cultural norms emphasizing harmony, respect for elders, and avoidance of confrontation often discourage victims from speaking up, especially when harassment occurs within familiar or hierarchical relationships (Nguyễn & Hoàng, 2019). Moreover, the rapid expansion of social media has increased students' exposure to online sexual harassment, while institutional prevention and support mechanisms remain underdeveloped (Center for Gender and Development Research, 2022).

Although recent initiatives such as the "Safe University Campus" project have improved public awareness, empirical research focusing on students' awareness, perceptions, and coping strategies remains limited. Most Vietnamese studies emphasize prevalence rather than interpretive understanding, leaving a gap that this study seeks to address.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Concept of Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is defined by CEDAW (1992) as any unwelcome sexual conduct, including physical contact, sexual remarks, exposure to pornography, or sexual demands. UN Women (2018) similarly defines sexual

harassment as unwanted behavior of a sexual nature that affects dignity and well-being. In Vietnam, Decree No. 145/2020/NĐ-CP defines sexual harassment as non-consensual sexual conduct expressed through words, gestures, images, or physical acts.

For the purpose of this study, sexual harassment is understood as any verbal, non-verbal, physical, or digital behavior related to sexuality that occurs without consent and causes discomfort, humiliation, or a sense of threat.

Types of Sexual Harassment

Following established classifications (Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Gruber, 1998), sexual harassment is categorized into three main types:

- **Verbal harassment:** sexual jokes, intrusive questions, comments on appearance, or sexually explicit language;
- **Non-verbal harassment:** staring, suggestive gestures, exposure to sexual images, or sending explicit messages online;
- **Physical harassment:** unwanted touching, groping, coercion, or forced sexual acts.

This classification provides a conceptual basis for analyzing students' awareness across different forms of harassment.

Perception and Social Action Theory

Perception refers to the cognitive process through which individuals interpret and evaluate social behaviors (Piaget, 1972). According to Max Weber's theory of social action, behavior must be understood through the subjective meanings individuals assign to it rather than solely by its observable form.

Applied to sexual harassment, this framework explains why certain behaviors may be perceived as harmless by perpetrators but experienced as violating by victims. Cultural norms, gender socialization, and prior experiences shape these interpretations (Weber, 1978; Flood, 2008). Thus, sexual harassment persists not only due to lack of legal awareness but also because of socially constructed meanings that normalize intrusive behavior.

Analytical Framework of the Study

Based on the literature and theoretical perspectives reviewed, this study examines students' awareness of sexual harassment through three analytical dimensions:

1. Awareness of different forms of sexual harassment (verbal, non-verbal, physical, and digital);
2. Ability to recognize sexual harassment in everyday situations;
3. Gender differences in perception and interpretation of sexually harassing behaviors.

This framework guides the analysis and supports the development of educational, social work, and policyoriented interventions aimed at preventing sexual harassment in higher education.

Research Method

Research Design

This study employed a **mixed-methods approach**, integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques to enhance the comprehensiveness, objectivity, and reliability of the research findings. The combination of methods enabled the study to capture not only the breadth of students' awareness of sexual harassment (SH) but also the depth of their perceptions and lived experiences within the university context.

At the initial stage, **document analysis** was conducted to collect, review, and synthesize national and international scholarly literature, legal documents, policy frameworks, and academic resources related to sexual harassment and students' awareness of SH. This process helped establish the theoretical foundation of the study,

clarify key concepts and analytical frameworks, and identify factors influencing students' perceptions. The insights gained from the literature review informed the design of the research instruments and guided the formulation of survey items and interview questions.

Ethical Considerations

All stages of the research were conducted in strict accordance with ethical research principles. Participants were fully informed about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to decline answering any question, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed throughout the data collection and analysis processes.

These ethical measures were particularly important given the sensitive nature of the research topic, which involves personal boundaries, gender-based experiences, and potentially distressing situations. Ethical safeguards were implemented in line with international recommendations on research involving sexual violence and harassment (Basile et al., 2016; WHO, 2013; UNFPA, 2018).

Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 364 students at University of Labor and Social Affairs (HCM CIty Campus). Participants were selected using a convenient sampling strategy, which was appropriate given the exploratory nature of the study and the accessibility of the student population.

The questionnaire consisted of two main sections. The first section collected demographic information, including gender, year of study, and field of study. The second section focused on the core research variables, including students' awareness of different forms of sexual harassment (verbal, non-verbal, and physical), recognition of SH in specific situations, sources of information related to SH, and factors influencing awareness at individual and socio-cultural levels, such as family, school, media exposure, and cultural norms.

Prior to the official survey, a pilot test was conducted with 10 students to assess the clarity, wording, and appropriateness of the questionnaire items. Feedback from the pilot test was used to refine the instrument to ensure it was understandable and suitable for the target population.

The collected data were coded, entered, and analyzed using statistical software. Reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha, with results exceeding the acceptable threshold ($\alpha > 0.7$), confirming that the measurement scales demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency and were appropriate for further analysis.

Qualitative Data Collection

To complement the quantitative findings and explore dimensions that could not be fully captured through survey data, in-depth interviews were conducted as part of the qualitative component of the study. This phase aimed to gain deeper insights into students' understanding of sexual harassment, their perceptions of its various forms, and the subjective and objective factors shaping their interpretations and responses.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences and viewpoints while ensuring consistency across interviews. Interview questions focused on students' interpretations of sexual harassment behaviors, experiences or observations of SH in academic and social contexts, perceived challenges in identifying SH, and suggestions for improving awareness and prevention within the university environment.

To obtain a more comprehensive and institutional perspective, interviews were also conducted with academic advisors and staff members from the Student Affairs Office. These interviews provided insights into existing support mechanisms, institutional responses, and perceived gaps in SH prevention and awareness programs.

The qualitative analysis of students' awareness of sexual harassment forms at Campus II of the University of Labor and Social Affairs was conducted using a systematic coding procedure, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding was employed to identify key meanings and expressions in students' narratives related to verbal harassment, non-verbal behaviors, and physical contact. Subsequently, codes with

similar content were connected and clustered through axial coding to clarify patterns of awareness as well as areas of confusion between playful interactions and sexual harassment. Based on this process, selective coding was applied to develop core analytical themes that comprehensively reflect students' perceptions, with themes consolidated according to their frequency of occurrence, relevance, internal consistency, and analytical significance within the dataset.

All interviews were conducted with strict attention to confidentiality and privacy. Audio recordings and transcripts were anonymized to protect participants' identities. Following data collection, interview transcripts were coded and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and key themes that supported and enriched the quantitative results.

Data Integration and Analytical Approach

By employing a mixed-methods design, this study offers a comprehensive portrayal of students' awareness and perceptions of sexual harassment at University of Labor and Social Affairs (HCM CIty Campus). Quantitative findings provided an overview of awareness levels and patterns across the student population, while qualitative data offered contextualized explanations and deeper understanding of students' interpretations and experiences.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data strengthened the validity of the findings and provided a solid empirical basis for proposing practical and effective measures to enhance education, communication, and prevention efforts related to sexual harassment in higher education settings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Awareness of Different Forms of Sexual Harassment

The survey findings indicate that students' awareness of sexual harassment (SH) varies substantially according to the type of behavior involved. A high proportion of respondents correctly identified verbal sexual harassment (89.6%) and physical sexual harassment (87.6%), suggesting that these direct and observable forms are more widely recognized. This relatively high level of awareness is likely attributable to their frequent representation in media coverage and public discourse. Nevertheless, approximately 10–12% of students reported uncertainty even with respect to these explicit forms, indicating that awareness remains incomplete and that continued communication and education efforts are necessary both within educational institutions and in the wider community.

In contrast, recognition of non-verbal sexual harassment was lower, with an accuracy rate of 82.1% and 17.9% of respondents indicating that they were unsure whether such behaviors constituted harassment. Indirect actions such as sexually suggestive looks, inappropriate gestures, or the circulation of sensitive images remain confusing for a notable proportion of students, reflecting gaps in their understanding of the complexity and subtle manifestations of sexual harassment in contemporary social contexts. More strikingly, only 11.3% of participants correctly identified other forms of sexual harassment, including technology-facilitated harassment, solicitation of sexual favors in exchange for benefits, or abuse of authority, while 88.7% reported no awareness of these behaviors. This finding highlights a substantial knowledge deficit regarding emerging and more sophisticated forms of sexual harassment, increasing the risk that victims may fail to recognize harmful conduct, lack effective coping strategies, or delay seeking support, thereby heightening their vulnerability.

One key factor contributing to students' limited awareness of sexual harassment (SH) is the socio-cultural environment in which they have been socialized. Many students grow up in contexts where intrusive or inappropriate behaviors such as unsolicited physical contact or sexually suggestive jokes are downplayed or normalized. This cultural tolerance reduces sensitivity to boundary violations and may lead students to dismiss or minimize behaviors that infringe upon bodily autonomy.

In addition, gaps in sexuality education and rights-based education play a significant role. Existing educational programs often do not comprehensively address sexual harassment, gender equality, or personal rights, leaving many students without clear criteria for determining which behaviors constitute violations. As a result, some

students may fail to recognize harassment even when they themselves are affected. The lack of student-friendly communication channels further restricts access to accurate and relevant information. Although various sexual harassment prevention campaigns are implemented, their content and delivery methods may not align with students' communication preferences, learning styles, or lived experiences, thereby limiting their effectiveness.

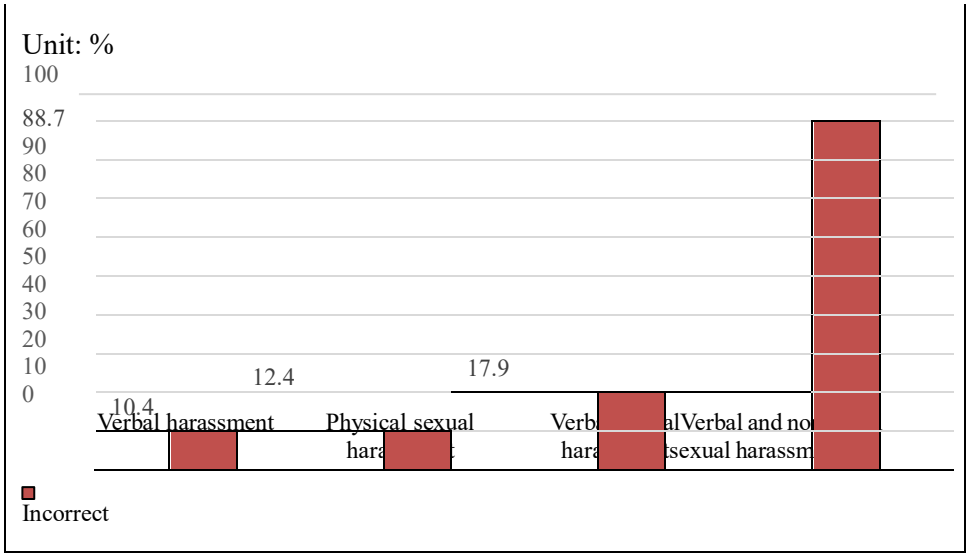

Figure 1: Subject's perception of forms of sexual harassment

Findings from the in-depth interviews reinforce these patterns. Most students clearly identified behaviors involving physical contact such as unwanted touching or hugging as serious forms of sexual harassment. In contrast, many students did not consider verbal behaviors (e.g., teasing or sexually suggestive comments) and non-verbal behaviors (e.g., prolonged staring or inappropriate gestures) to constitute sexual harassment, often interpreting them as "jokes" or actions that "do not cross the line.One participant demonstrated relatively clear understanding of sexual harassment, stating: "From what I know, SH can include verbal harassment, physical harassment, and other forms like posting sensitive photos or videos of someone online." Another student, while not articulating formal definitions, described common manifestations of SH across different categories: "I think SH includes sexualized comments, unwanted physical contact, sending explicit images, or staring at someone's body in an intrusive way." These responses suggest that while some students possess basic awareness of overt forms of sexual harassment, their understanding of non-verbal and technology-mediated behaviors remains uneven.

Overall, the findings indicate that students are more likely to recognize traditional and explicit forms of sexual harassment, whereas non-verbal and digitally mediated forms are less clearly understood. This represents a critical gap in awareness and highlights the urgent need for enhanced social work interventions focusing on communication, education, victim support, and policy advocacy in both offline and online contexts. The results further suggest that universities should expand specialized awareness-raising programs tailored to students' needs, communication habits, and social realities. Strengthening students' self-protection skills, response strategies, and knowledge of support-seeking procedures will also be essential in mitigating risks and improving sexual harassment prevention efforts within higher education settings.

Students' Awareness of Sexual Harassment Situations

The findings reveal substantial variation in students' ability to recognize sexual harassment (SH) across different everyday scenarios, indicating that overall awareness remains incomplete. In general, respondents were more likely to correctly identify situations involving **clear, direct, and observable boundary violations**, particularly those related to bodily intrusion or infringements of privacy. Scenarios such as being forced to view pornographic materials (75.3%), being stared at in a sexualized manner (76.9%), being pressured to watch explicit images during flirtation (78.0%), or experiencing unwanted touching on public transportation (71.7%) were identified by the majority of students as sexual harassment. These behaviors involve overt sexual intent or explicit physical violation, making them more readily recognizable.

However, both quantitative data and in-depth interviews highlight persistent gaps in students' ability to identify other forms of sexual harassment and sexual violence. While students generally detected direct and explicit forms of SH, they experienced difficulty recognizing **non-verbal harassment, online harassment, and behaviors occurring within intimate relationships**. One student explained: "If my boyfriend goes too far or asks for something, I think it's just part of showing affection in a relationship, not harassment." This statement illustrates how coercive behaviors in romantic contexts may be normalized and misinterpreted as expressions of intimacy rather than violations of consent.

Similarly, the normalization of inappropriate behavior through "playful teasing" emerged as a recurring theme in the qualitative data. Another participant noted: "Some guys in class like to touch our shoulders or put their arm around us jokingly—we're used to it, so we don't pay attention anymore." Such accounts reflect a cultural tolerance in which boundary violations are framed as ordinary social interactions, discouraging victims from responding or reporting. These findings reinforce the importance of comprehensive sexuality education, as emphasized by UNFPA (2018), to strengthen students' capacity to independently identify risks and develop selfprotection strategies in situations involving sexual harassment.

The present results are consistent with national evidence. Vietnamese studies conducted in public spaces, educational settings, and workplaces indicate that students and young people more readily recognize physical or explicitly sexual behaviors than subtle, verbal, or non-verbal forms of harassment (Nguyen & Dang, 2020; Pham & Tran, 2021). Although awareness has improved in recent years, ambiguous or culturally normalized behaviors continue to be poorly understood.

International literature reflects similar patterns. Research from the United States, Canada, Europe, and several Asian countries consistently shows that physical forms of sexual harassment such as forced exposure to pornography or unwanted bodily contact yield the highest recognition rates (Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Berdahl, 2007). In contrast, non-verbal, psychological, or non-coercive behaviors are frequently underestimated or interpreted through culturally shaped gender norms (Ilies et al., 2003). Systematic reviews further indicate that students worldwide face ongoing challenges in identifying verbal, online, and socially minimized forms of sexual harassment (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020).

Taken together, the findings of the present study mirror existing research: students tend to correctly identify "traditional" and overt forms of sexual harassment, yet remain inconsistent when evaluating more nuanced, indirect, or socially embedded behaviors. This pattern underscores the urgent need for comprehensive awareness and prevention programs that equip students with the knowledge and skills to recognize the full spectrum of sexual harassment, including non-verbal and technology-facilitated forms that are frequently overlooked or misinterpreted.

Table 1. Students' Awareness of Sexual Harassment Scenarios

No	**Scenario**	**Response options (%)** 1. Joking; 2. Flirting; 3. Harassment (SH); 4. Sexual Abuse (SA); 5. Normal				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	On a bus, a young man repeatedly takes advantage of sudden stops to touch your body, making you uncomfortable	6,6	9,9	71,7	9,6	2,2
2	You work as a café server and a customer keeps staring and giving you suggestive looks	17,9	43,4	32,1	5,5	1,1
3	Male classmates jokingly and intentionally touch one another.	48,6	6,0	33,2	10,4	1,6
4	Being forced to view pornographic images	2,7	2,7	75,3	17,6	1,4
5	While you are talking to a partner/client, they keep staring at intimate parts of your body, making you lose confidence	6,0	5,8	76,9	10,7	5,0

6	After a company meeting, a male colleague teases a female colleague: "Your dress is so tight today. Be careful or the men here won't be able to focus on work."	25,8	8,0	56,0	7,1	3,0
7	Even though you show discomfort, people in your group keep telling you explicit stories about their sexual activities with their partners.	17,0	6,9	58,2	8,2	9,6
8	Your romantic partner insists on having sexual intercourse even when you do not want to.	4,7	4,9	54,4	26,9	9,1
9	During flirtation, M repeatedly asks C to send intimate photos.	2,2	5,5	78	12,1	2,2
10	A posts a photo of his friend H on Facebook with the caption "My friend looks hot" without H's consent.	17,6	9,3	58,5	11,5	3,0
11	At a family karaoke gathering, people keep putting their arms around your shoulders or waist, making you uncomfortable.	30,2	7,4	43,1	8,2	11,0
12	In physical education class, classmates often tease you by saying "Your butt looks so firm."	26,4	2,7	61,8	6,9	2,2

(Source: Actual survey data).

The survey results indicate that although students were able to correctly identify certain sexual harassment (SH) behaviors, a considerable degree of ambiguity remains, particularly with regard to **non-verbal and socially embedded behaviors** that are easily misinterpreted. Scenarios such as a customer staring suggestively (43.4% classified this behavior as flirting, while only 32.1% identified it as SH), sexually suggestive comments about a female colleague's clothing (25.8% perceived these comments as teasing, compared with 56.0% identifying them as SH), and placing an arm around someone during a karaoke gathering (30.2% perceived as teasing and 11.0% as normal) illustrate that the boundary between acceptable social interaction and harmful conduct is still not clearly recognized. This phenomenon reflects the normalization of gendered behaviors in Vietnamese cultural life, which has been widely documented as a factor that weakens young people's ability to identify sexual harassment (Nguyen & Dang, 2020; Pham & Tran, 2021). These findings are consistent with international research showing that ambiguous, non-physical, or "disguised" forms of harassment are often minimized or interpreted as flirting rather than violations (Berdahl, 2007; Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Fitzgerald et al., 1995). Consequently, inconsistencies in students' identification of SH stem not only from individual knowledge gaps but also from broader cultural norms and social expectations, underscoring the urgent need for education and communication on personal boundaries and non-verbal forms of harassment.

Evidence from the in-depth interviews further illustrates how sexual harassment is normalized in everyday social contexts. One female student described her experience during karaoke gatherings with friends and acquaintances as follows: "Every time I go to karaoke with friends or acquaintances, some male friends or older men tend to put their arm around my shoulders or pull me closer. I feel extremely uncomfortable but don't know how to react because I'm afraid they will think I'm unfriendly or overly sensitive." This account demonstrates how discomfort is recognized but not acted upon, largely due to social pressure and fear of negative judgment. Such experiences align with the World Health Organization's analysis, which notes that in many East Asian societies, hierarchical relationships and expectations of being "respectful" often lead individuals to tolerate borderline intrusive behaviors that may not carry explicit sexual intent (WHO, 2013). As a result, individuals may endure these behaviors to maintain social harmony, contributing to the normalization of sexual harassment and reluctance to speak up, despite the emotional insecurity such actions create.

In addition, the findings reveal substantial confusion among students regarding the distinction between sexual harassment (SH) and sexual assault (SA). Specifically, 54.4% of respondents categorized forced sexual intercourse within a dating relationship as SH, while only 26.9% correctly identified it as SA. This indicates a significant gap in understanding consent and coercion within intimate relationships, an issue emphasized in numerous international and Vietnamese studies. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2013) and Basile et al. (2016) argue that conflating coercion with relationship conflict prevents victims from recognizing sexual assault and limits their capacity to seek support. Similarly, Nguyen and Dang (2020) contend that inadequate

comprehensive sexuality education and limited understanding of consent contribute to the normalization of violence in romantic relationships in Vietnam. Of particular concern, approximately 9–10% of students in the present study considered clearly abusive behaviors—such as telling explicit sexual stories despite others' discomfort or coercing sexual intercourse—to be "normal." This finding reflects an internalization of violence previously identified by Yodanis (2004) in research on cultural norms surrounding the acceptance of sexual violence among youth. Taken together, these results suggest that students' perceptions are shaped not only by informational deficits but also by persistent gender norms and cultural values, reinforcing a cycle of tolerance toward violence. Accordingly, sexuality education, consent training, and awareness of intimate partner violence should be strengthened in university settings to ensure that students are able to recognize and respond appropriately to abusive behaviors.

Students' Perceptions of Sexual Harassment Across Gender

Gender-based analysis shows that female students have a higher level of recognition of SH behaviors than male students in most scenarios, especially those involving physical intrusiveness or explicit threat such as unwanted touching on a bus (78.1% among females compared to 58.1% among males), being forced to view pornographic images (81.0% vs. 63.2%), or being stared at in intimate body areas (81.4% vs. 67.5%). This reflects gendered differences in exposure to and vulnerability toward SH, a pattern well-documented in international research.

Qualitative findings also highlight gender differences in identifying SH. A female student noted: "There are many behaviors that male friends say are 'just for fun,' but to me they feel very uncomfortable, even frightening. For example, when we eat out with a group, some people place their hand on my shoulder and pull me closer. For them it may be friendliness, but for me it clearly violates my personal space. I think women like us are more alert because we've been taught from a young age to be careful and avoid physical contact, so when someone acts even slightly out of bounds, we notice it immediately."

Table 2. Students' Perceptions of Sexual Harassment Scenarios by Gender

Recognition of Sexual Harassment Scenarios		**Gender**			
		Male		**Female**	
		N	**Ratio**	**N**	**Ratio**
Unwanted touching on a bus	Teasing	10	8.5%	14	5.7%
	Flirting	26	22.2%	10	4.0%
	Sexual harassment	68	58.1%	193	78.1%
	Sexual assault	9	7.7%	26	10.5%
	Normal	4	3.4%	4	1.6%
Being stared at in a café	Teasing	18	15.4%	47	19.0%
	Flirting	67	57.3%	91	36.8%
	Sexual harassment	21	17.9%	96	38.9%
	Sexual assault	9	7.7%	11	4.5%
	Normal	2	1.7%	2	0.8%
Male students pulling down each other's pants	Teasing	58	49.6%	119	48.2%
	Flirting	10	8.5%	12	4.9%
	Sexual harassment	28	23.9%	93	37.7%
	Sexual assault	19	16.2%	19	7.7%
	Normal	2	1.7%	4	1.6%

Being forced to view pornographic images	Teasing	5	4.3%	5	2.0%
	Flirting	3	2.6%	7	2.8%
	Sexual harassment	74	63.2%	200	81.0%
	Sexual assault	33	28.2%	31	12.6%
	Normal	2	1.7%	3	1.2%
Being stared at in intimate body areas	Teasing	9	7.7%	13	5.3%
	Flirting	12	10.3%	9	3.6%
	Sexual harassment	79	67.5%	201	81.4%
	Sexual assault	15	12.8%	24	9.7%
	Normal	2	1.7%	0	0.0%
Sexually inappropriate jokes	Teasing	37	31.6%	57	23.1%
	Flirting	17	14.5%	12	4.9%
	Sexual harassment	47	40.2%	157	63.6%
	Sexual assault	9	7.7%	17	6.9%
	Normal	7	6.0%	4	1.6%
Telling explicit sexual stories	Teasing	25	21.4%	37	15.0%
	Flirting	11	9.4%	14	5.7%
	Sexual harassment	62	53.0%	150	60.7%
	Sexual assault	12	10.3%	18	7.3%
	Normal	7	6.0%	28	11.3%
Partner pressuring for sexual intercourse	Teasing	11	9.4%	6	2.4%
	Flirting	10	8.5%	8	3.2%
	Sexual harassment	59	50.4%	139	56.3%
	Sexual assault	25	21.4%	73	29.6%
	Normal	12	10.3%	21	8.5%
Being asked to send sexual images	Teasing	3	2.6%	5	2.0%
	Flirting	12	10.3%	8	3.2%
	Sexual harassment	83	70.9%	201	81.4%
	Sexual assault	17	14.5%	27	10.9%
	Normal	2	1.7%	6	2.4%
Telling explicit sexual stories	Teasing	26	22.2%	38	15.4%
	Flirting	17	14.5%	17	6.9%
	Sexual harassment	52	44.4%	161	65.2%
	Sexual assault	20	17.1%	22	8.9%
	Normal	2	1.7%	9	3.6%
	Teasing	36	30.8%	74	30.0%

Unwanted touching by relatives	Flirting	12	10.3%	15	6.1%
	Sexual harassment	44	37.6%	113	45.7%
	Sexual assault	10	8.5%	20	8.1%
	Normal	15	12.8%	25	10.1%
Sexually provocative teasing	Teasing	38	32.5%	58	23.5%
	Flirting	8	6.8%	2	0.8%
	Sexual harassment	53	45.3%	172	69.6%
	Sexual assault	11	9.4%	14	5.7%
	Normal	7	6.0%	1	0.4%

(Source: Actual survey data).

Previous studies by Hill and Silva (2005) and later by Holland and Cortina (2017) have consistently shown that women tend to be more sensitive to signs of sexual violation due to gendered socialization processes and their higher frequency of exposure to sexual harassment. In contrast, male respondents in the present study demonstrated a significantly greater tendency to classify a range of potentially harmful situations as "joking" or "flirting." This pattern is evident in scenarios such as pulling down a male classmate's pants, which 49.6% of male respondents perceived as a joke, compared with 48.2% of female respondents; notably, women identified this behavior as sexual harassment at nearly twice the rate of men. Similarly, inappropriate comments about someone's body were perceived as joking by 31.6% of male students, compared with 23.1% of female students. These findings align with Fitzgerald's (1993) assertion that men are more likely to normalize sexually inappropriate behaviors due to traditional masculinity norms and lower awareness of personal boundaries.

Moreover, in scenarios involving a boyfriend demanding sexual intercourse without consent, female students were more likely than male students to correctly categorize the behavior as sexual assault (29.6% vs. 21.4%), reflecting a more developed understanding of bodily autonomy—an element that many young people, particularly men, continue to overlook (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013).

Qualitative findings from in-depth interviews further illuminate these gender differences. Female students frequently described feelings of discomfort, fear, or violation in situations that male students often labeled as "playful," such as placing a hand on a shoulder, pulling someone closer during a meal, or physical contact by relatives during social gatherings. This heightened vigilance among women reflects their greater exposure to harassment risks and is consistent with Fisher et al.'s (2010) findings that gendered experiences increase sensitivity to signs of sexual violation. In contrast, many male students viewed "mild" physical contact as normal and harmless, partly because they had not personally experienced sexual threat and were socially permitted to be more assertive in gender interactions. This pattern corresponds with findings by Flood (2008) and Powell and Henry (2017), who argue that traditional masculinity norms contribute to the normalization of intrusive behavior. As one male participant noted, behaviors such as accidental touching or joking during group work were not initially perceived as problematic. However, exposure to female peers' experiences and participation in awareness-raising activities prompted some male students to reconsider the emotional impact of behaviors they had previously regarded as harmless, supporting Katz and Moore's (2013) conclusions regarding the role of education in reshaping perceptions of sexual harassment.

Overall, the findings indicate that male students' awareness of sexual harassment remains limited, particularly in distinguishing between playful teasing, flirting, and sexually harassing behavior. A further concern is the normalization of intrusive conduct within close or intimate relationships, a phenomenon widely documented in both Vietnamese and international research on gender-based violence (Nguyễn & Hoàng, 2019; Powell & Henry, 2017). Cultural norms emphasizing intimacy, familial closeness, or romantic obligation often blur boundaries, making it difficult for individuals to recognize violations. Across all surveyed scenarios, female students consistently identified behaviors as sexual harassment at significantly higher rates than male students, while male students were more likely to label the same behaviors as joking, flirting, or not serious. This pattern aligns

with L'Hoiry and Taylor's (2020) conclusion that differential exposure to gender-based violence shapes varying levels of sensitivity when assessing harmful behavior. These findings underscore the urgent need for school-based social work interventions that emphasize comprehensive sexuality education, gender equality communication, and targeted programs for male students—a group that tends to underestimate both the risks and severity of sexual harassment. Similar gender-based disparities have been documented in Vietnamese studies by Nguyễn Thị Minh Hòa (2019) and Plan International (2018), further reinforcing the relevance of these findings.

Applying Max Weber's theory of social action provides deeper insight into the observed gender differences. According to Weber, social action should not be understood solely through its external form—such as touching, staring, or placing an arm around someone—but must be analyzed through the subjective meanings individuals attach to these actions. From this perspective, victims interpret behaviors based on perceived violations of personal boundaries, safety, and respect, whereas perpetrators may act according to socially accepted or even encouraged norms without recognizing their harmful effects. Sexual harassment, therefore, emerges not merely from physical acts but from culturally embedded interpretations shaped by gender norms and social expectations. Previous research supports this view, noting that men are often socialized in environments where fear of sexual violation is minimal, leading them to downplay the seriousness of such behaviors (Flood, 2008; Katz & Moore, 2013), while women, who face ongoing risks, develop heightened sensitivity and stricter evaluative standards (Fisher et al., 2010).

Viewed through the lens of social action theory, perceptions of sexual harassment reflect not only individual knowledge but also the broader influence of gendered socialization, cultural value systems, and social norms governing interpersonal interactions. Consequently, effective interventions cannot rely solely on legal frameworks or skill-based education. Instead, they must engage with deeper value systems, emotional responses, and behavioral norms that shape how individuals assign meaning to social actions. Weber's framework thus offers a valuable theoretical explanation for gender differences in perception and for the socio-cultural roots of misjudging the severity of sexual harassment.

Measures and Policy Implications for Enhancing Awareness and Preventing Sexual Harassment in Universities

Measures to Improve Awareness and Prevent Sexual Harassment in Higher Education Institutions

To address the gaps identified in students' awareness and perceptions of sexual harassment, a multi-level and integrated approach involving education, social work practice, communication, and research is essential.

First, comprehensive sexuality education should be strengthened to improve students' ability to identify sexual harassment. Educational institutions are encouraged to integrate content related to personal rights, bodily boundaries, the principle of consent, and the identification of sexual harassment into formal curricula, extracurricular activities, and soft-skills training programs. In addition, universities should organize communication sessions, workshops, and scenario-based simulations that help students distinguish between socially normalized behaviors such as "joking" or "flirting" and sexually harassing conduct. Particular emphasis should be placed on non-verbal and technology-mediated forms of harassment, which are frequently misunderstood. The use of visual materials and scenario-based videos is recommended to enhance students' recognition skills, especially among male students, who have been shown to demonstrate lower accuracy in identifying certain forms of sexual harassment.

Second, universities should focus on developing and strengthening social work service systems to provide effective counseling and support for victims of sexual harassment. This includes establishing or reinforcing dedicated social work offices or departments that offer "one-stop" support services, encompassing psychological counseling, guidance, and referral. Institutions should also develop and implement a clear Code of Conduct on Sexual Harassment, specifying transparent reporting procedures, confidentiality safeguards, and whistleblower protection mechanisms. Furthermore, lecturers, academic advisors, and administrative staff should receive regular training to improve their capacity to identify, respond to, and intervene promptly in sexual harassment situations.

Third, targeted communication programs should be designed for different gender groups. Communication campaigns aimed at male students are particularly important and should focus on challenging harmful masculinity norms that contribute to the normalization of sexually harassing behavior. Universities are encouraged to promote such communication activities through student clubs, youth unions, and student associations to ensure broader participation, peer engagement, and long-term sustainability.

Fourth, behavior-change communication and community-based interventions should be strengthened to address cultural norms that trivialize sexual harassment. Universities should implement communication campaigns tailored to specific gender groups, with particular attention to male students, to reduce the social acceptance of sexually inappropriate behaviors. Digital platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, university websites, and faculty fanpages should be strategically utilized to disseminate information on emerging forms of digital sexual harassment, including unsolicited requests for intimate images, cyberstalking, and violations of personal image privacy. Collaboration with social organizations and non-governmental organizations, such as UN Women, Plan International, and CSAGA, is recommended to implement community-based prevention models. Additionally, developing a network of trained "Peer Educators" can support awareness-raising activities, help identify early-risk situations, and facilitate timely connections between students and appropriate support services.

Finally, universities should promote scientific research on sexual harassment in educational environments. Higher education institutions are encouraged to conduct periodic surveys to monitor trends in sexual harassment and assess the effectiveness of prevention and intervention strategies. Future research should also expand indepth investigations into digital sexual harassment, harassment within intimate relationships, and gender differences in perception, thereby providing evidence-based insights to inform policy development and educational practice.

Policy Implications and a Sexual Harassment Prevention Model

Based on the analysis of students' awareness of various forms of sexual harassment—particularly nonverbal behaviors and digital sexual harassment—several key policy implications can be identified.

First, it is essential to develop and refine the legal and institutional framework governing the prevention of and response to sexual harassment in higher education institutions. Internal regulations related to sexual harassment should be clearly defined, transparent, accessible, and widely disseminated to ensure that students and staff are fully informed of their rights, responsibilities, and available reporting mechanisms.

Second, policies on sexuality education and gender equality should be strengthened through the systematic integration of content related to personal rights, bodily autonomy, emerging forms of sexual harassment, and clearly defined reporting procedures for both offline and online environments. Rather than being delivered as isolated awareness activities, these policy components should be embedded throughout academic programs and student development initiatives to ensure sustained learning and behavioral change.

Third, the establishment of multi-disciplinary support mechanisms for victims is crucial, with social work services playing a central coordinating role. Comprehensive support systems should include psychological and social counseling, legal assistance, confidential reporting channels, hotlines, and campus-based protection services. These services should be closely linked with external organizations such as Women's Unions, Social Work Centers, and relevant authorities to ensure timely and effective intervention.

Fourth, communication policies on sexual harassment should adopt a learner-centered and participatory approach. The strategic use of social media platforms, interactive communication tools, and visual materials can enhance both the accessibility and effectiveness of preventive messaging, particularly in addressing non-verbal and digital forms of sexual harassment that are often misunderstood or overlooked.

Sexual Harassment Prevention Model

Building on the situational analysis and proposed policy measures, the Sexual Harassment Prevention Model emphasizes a comprehensive and integrated approach that connects knowledge, skills, environment, and cultural norms, supported by continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The model targets both individual-

level awareness and institutional- and community-level structures, aiming to foster respectful behaviors, challenge harmful norms, and strengthen accountability.

By addressing sexual harassment through coordinated educational, social, and policy interventions, this model not only enhances individuals' capacity to recognize and respond to sexual harassment but also contributes to long-term normative change. Ultimately, it supports the creation of safer educational environments and reduces the risks of sexual harassment and sexual abuse within the broader community.

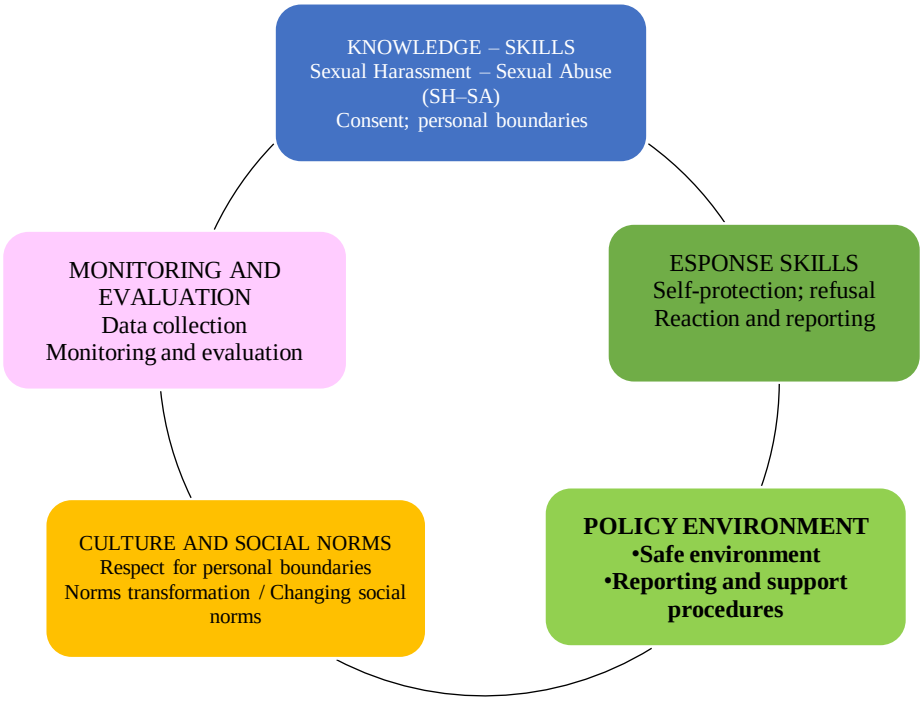

Figure 2. Sexual Harassment Prevention Model

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that university students are generally able to identify direct and explicit forms of sexual harassment, particularly those involving clear physical violations or overt sexual intent. However, students' awareness remains limited with regard to subtle, indirect, and socially normalized behaviors, especially those occurring within familiar contexts such as intimate relationships, family settings, classrooms, and workplaces. This finding reflects insufficient understanding of the complexity and diverse manifestations of sexual harassment and sexual abuse in contemporary social life.

Clear gender-based differences in perception were identified. Female students showed greater sensitivity and accuracy in recognizing inappropriate and harmful behaviors, whereas male students were more likely to normalize such actions by framing them as "joking" or "flirting," often underestimating their seriousness. These differences can be attributed to gendered socialization processes, cultural norms, lived experiences, and unequal exposure to information related to gender equality and violence prevention. Notably, behaviors occurring in close or familiar relationships were frequently trivialized or rationalized, which may reduce individuals' capacity to recognize violations, seek assistance, or report harmful acts.

The findings further reveal substantial gaps in comprehensive sexuality education, awareness of personal rights, and boundary-setting skills among students. Addressing these gaps requires coordinated and integrated interventions across education, social work, and policy domains. Key recommendations include: (a) implementing comprehensive sexuality education programs that emphasize consent, bodily autonomy, and personal boundaries; (b) strengthening students' skills in identifying, responding to, and reporting sexual harassment and abuse, with approaches tailored to different gender groups; (c) designing gender-responsive interventions that promote accountability and sensitivity among male students while enhancing self-protection

and help-seeking capacities among female students; (d) establishing safe educational environments with accessible, confidential, and non-stigmatizing reporting and support mechanisms; and (e) promoting communitybased communication and awareness campaigns to challenge cultural norms that trivialize sexual harassment.

Collectively, these measures can help narrow gender gaps in awareness, foster safer and more respectful educational environments, promote gender equality, and enhance students' capacity to prevent and respond effectively to sexual harassment across diverse social contexts.

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