



Students Scientific Conference

RESPONDING TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT BY CULTURAL STEREOTYPES

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Banská Bystrica
2015

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Introduction

"To do nothing is within the power of all men." Samuel Johnson

Violence and harassment in our society are huge and prevalent problems of contemporary societies. But is the society actually inclined to dealing with such problems? That is a question which led us to our experiment, which was aimed at answering such significant question – “How many people are willing to help women in need?”

This research looks at sexual harassment through the optic of cultural stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination.

Whithin this experiment, we used a variety of information and also we were inspired by similar social experiment that was conducted in India which showed a rather low level of awareness of people and unwillingness to help victims. Encouraged by this experiment, we decided to get insight the level of awareness of people in a particular region.

Also, as a background of our research we analyzed studies that have been conducted in the United States on safety and the prevalence of sexual harassment. Most of these studies used informal surveying methods, i.e. resulting in a high number of people who said they have been harassed, but in our research we applied the observation method, which provided direct access to the social phenomena under consideration.

Sexual harassment is a widespread problem, which affects millions of people, mostly women, in significant ways. Therefore, our interest in this topic is based on the fact that problems of sexual harassment are very current and such common situations may actually happen arise in real life. Also, sexual harassment could be considered as a form of oppression and discrimination that negatively impacts the lives of most harassed persons. That is why it should be taken seriously and stopped before it can have some serious consequences.

Cultural stereotypes include beliefs about the characteristics of the target group and at the same time they also can function as social expectations. Cultural stereotypes may be used as a source of prejudice or expectation about the other party, and as a reference applied to the judgement of the other party's behaviour.

With this research we would like to point out the common social problems connected with sexual harassment and suggest the potential influence of cultural stereotypes on the behavior of people who have witnessed it.

1 Background information to sexual harassment

Sexual harassment can be determined as unwelcome sexual behavior, requests for sexual favors, sexually colored remarks, including sexual demands, whether by verbal or physical actions. Such action can be humiliating and may also involve a reason of people's psychological and emotional harm. (www1.umn.edu)

Also, sexual harassment could be considered as a violation of human rights and a form of gender violence in different countries. (www.stopvaw.org)

While there were a lot of studies conducted in the United States and different comprehensive national reports look at the experiences of both women and men and the intersection of race and sexual orientation, sexual harassment is a significant problem in the United States. So below, we presented the results of A National Street Harassment Report "Unsafe and Harassed in Public Spaces" (www.stopstreetharassment.org), conducted in the United States.

According to this report, sixty-five percent of women replied experienced at least one type of street harassment in their lifetimes. More than half (57%) of all women had experienced verbal harassment, and 41% of all women had experienced physically aggressive forms of violence, including sexual touching (23%), following (20%), flashing (14%), and being forced to do something sexual (9%). For men, 25% experienced street harassment, too, including 18% who experienced verbal harassment and 16% those who experienced physically aggressive form of behavior.

An interview-based study conducted by Dr. Laura Beth Nielsen (Nielsen, 2004) in the beginning of 2000s with 54 women in the California Bay Area, found out that 100% of women could recall at least one incident of offensive or sexually suggestive remarks.

Informal studies about sexual harassment on the public transportation systems in New York City (2007) majority of the respondents were women and it was found that more than 60% of riders had experienced sexual harassment. (Stringer, 2007)

In 2008, an informal online survey Stop Street Harassment (SSH) conducted with 811 women found 99% had been harassed, including 81% who had been the target of a sexually explicit comment and 57% who had been sexually touched. (www.stopstreetharassment.org)

Talking about the problem of sexual harassment in Slovakia we should mention that this issue is regulated by different legislation Acts and Norms.

Slovakia's Anti-Discrimination Act (2004) prohibits sexual harassment as a form of discrimination, and defines it as "verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that is aimed at or can cause a violation of the dignity of a person and creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment."

Victims of sexual harassment can bring a claim under the Anti-Discrimination Act in civil court for injunctive relief, restitution and even punitive damages, although courts are reluctant to award non-pecuniary damages. The law provides for a burden-shifting protocol, in which the accused is presumed guilty if the claim is reasonable and thus, the accused has the burden of proving that discrimination did not take place. Victims of harassment may contact the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights for assistance, as the Centre is responsible for arranging legal aid for victims under the law. Victims of harassment in the workplace may also file a complaint with their employer, who is obliged to promptly resolve the issue under the law. (www.non-discrimination.net)

In 2011, Slovakia amended criminal provisions on "dangerous harassment" in Section 360 of the Criminal Code ("Serious Threats") to penalize stalking, or long-term harassment that puts a woman in fear for her life or health, or that of her children, or that "significantly impairs" her quality of life. This is noted in the Act No. 262/2011 Coll., amending Act No. 301/2005 Coll. the Criminal Code, as amended, and amending certain acts, in State party report, par. 112. Other forms of sexual harassment, in employment or public life, are not criminalized in Slovakia.

2 Cultural stereotypes and prejudices

In our paper such important issues as cultural stereotypes are explained and these stereotypes can be characterized as: “a belief that all people from a culture behave a certain way. The stereotype – picture we have created about this nation – is an opinion based on very little information about the culture of this nation/country. It is also very much unfluenced by the values of the person who created the stereotype.” (Benchikova, 2007, p. 72)

To make a stereotype according to the nation or culture means to believe that all its members behave in the same definite way. Usually, categorizing and generalizing about other cultures or people are natural, but if too rigid, the stereotypes can become a real problem in intercultural communication. (Bencikova, 2007)

Also our paper include another relevant sociological issue as prejudice.

According to Samovar and Porter “prejudice is an opinion, which is not based on experience or reason“. As a stereotype, it can again be either positive or negative, however, in general, prejudice is referred to as „ the unfair, biases or intolerant attitude or opinion towards apnother person or group simply because they belong to a specific race, religion, nationality or another group“ (Samovar, Porter, 1991).

On basis of this research we decided to get in touch with such a problem as cultural discrimination which is quite currunt and common in Slovakia. According to monitoring on occurrence of discrimination cases against Roma minority in Eastern Slovakia, which was held during the period of from 1 April 2007 till 30 September 2008 by the Center for Civil and Human Rights and has been conducted under the project ‘Bridging the Divide’ supported by CEE Trust, Poland, we can indicate new specific cases of unequal treatment towards the Roma population. We clearly see that there is indeed a great need to continue to fight against racial discrimination for the Slovak society as a whole. (The Center for Civil and Human Rights, 2007-2008)

3 Methodology of the experiment

This report presents the findings of 30 situations based on three similar experiments. Our experiments were conducted in different focus groups in February 2015 and March 2015 in Banská-Bystrica, Slovakia.

In this research, we evaluate the level of social responsibility and willingness to help others and suggest potential influence of cultural stereotypes on this issue.

The subject of this paper is sexual harassment and the main object of our research is visitors of Europa Shopping Center in Banská-Bystrica.

We stated two main objectives. The first one was to find out whether people in Banská-Bystrica are willing to prevent sexual harassment if they see it. The second one was to observe and evaluate the impact of cultural stereotypes on people's reaction to unpredictable situations connected with sexual harassment.

The focus group of our experiment consisted of common visitors of shopping center, of different age and social status. We tried to carry out the experiment near the crowded places where we expected occurrence of more men than women and children.

For all three experiments, specific random public places in Europa Shopping Center BB were chosen. Specifically it was the Food court, the wi-fi zones, bookshop Panta Rhei, Supermarket Terno, Lavazza Café Ice-cream Café TWIST and places of very similar character.

In our research, we used the observational method. The main strength of this technique is that it provides direct access to the social phenomena under consideration. (www.strath.ac.uk) Instead of relying on some kind of self-report, we actually observed and recorded their behavior in situations which were connected with sexual harassment. We decided that this method is the most effective for our research because by using survey method there is a high probability to get inaccurate information. In an interview situation or in response to a questionnaire item, for example, a person may not always provide accurate or complete information, or they might answer in ways that correspond to what is socially desirable. However, in reality people in fact behave differently.

4 The analysis of the experiment

Six students participated in our experiments, while five of them were foreigners. In all three cases, the same foreign students from Ukraine were playing the victims of sexual harassment. The main actor who played the stranger changed for each experiment. The roles of the main actors were played by foreign students from Bulgaria (a white foreign male) and Azerbaijan (a dark foreign male), as well as a Slovak student.

Each situation was played ten times and the average duration of the every experiment was about five minutes. In every situation two actresses clearly indicated that they were suffering from sexual harassment and needed help in the public place, while the actor who played the stranger was trying to harass girls and actively showed improper and aggressive behavior towards them. English and Slovak languages were used for all three experiments.

The experiment was set into the environment of the Banska-Bystrica Europa Shopping Center. During the experiment, we realized that it is desirable to choose crowded places, where people are in a static position and they would not have had the opportunity to get away from the place where the actors show a scene of sexual harassment. That is why we gave preference to cafes and restaurants for the organization of our experiments.

The main aim was to observe people's reactions and their actions when they become witnesses of situation where two girls were sexual harassed by a strange person, who came from different cultures. Everything that was happening filmed with a hidden camera by foreign student from Italy.

Another aim of our experiments was to find out whether there is some influence of languages and nationality of the actor, and type of bothering behavior on the actions of public and their desire to help the girls in this unsafe situation.

4.1 Experiment 1: Reaction of people to sexual harassment by Slovak-speaking man

The first experiment was conducted on February 20 in the evening. Each of the ten situations of the first experiment was played for four-six minutes during two hours in different places of Europa Shopping Center BB. All ten situations of first experiment took place in four WI-FI zones, Lavazza Café, Ice-cream café TWIST, queue to the cinema (once for each) and in the Food court (three times). First experiment differs from the other two because the role of main actor was played by Slovak student who spoke on their native language with actresses, in other two experiments roles had changed in every from ten situation, it mean that in other

two experiments victims were played by Slovak-speaking foreign girls who suffer from annoying and even aggressive behavior of English-speaking strangers. We should mention that in all ten situations of sexual harassment girls pretended that they did not understand what the stranger was talking about, because their role was not to understand Slovak, only English. Girls who were sexually harassed experienced both verbal and physically aggressive forms of behavior from the man's side.

In the first experiment which connected with sexual harassment by Slovak-speaking there was only one person who was willing to give a helping hand to girls in need and we should mention that he was foreign student from Georgia.

Unfortunately, this experiment was not followed by interviews with the people who become witnesses of sexual harassment in a public place.

4.2 Experiment 2: Reaction of people to sexual harassment by a white foreign male

The second experiment was conducted on March 12 in the evening. Each of the ten situations of second experiment was played for five-fifteen minutes during two hours in different places of Europa Shopping Center BB as in the first experiment. All ten situations of the second experiment took place in four WI-FI zones, bookshop Panta Rhei, Food court, queue to the fast-food "KFC" (one for each) and in supermarket TERNÓ (three times). The second situation was connected with sexual harassment to Slovak girls by a white foreign male. We should mention that in all ten situations Slovak-speaking girls which were harassed by English-speaking foreigner pretended that they didn't understand what the stranger was talking about, because their role was not to understand English, they speak and understand only Slovak language. Girls who were sexually harassed experienced both verbal and physically aggressive forms. Non-sexually explicit verbal sexual harassment such as whistling, being called "baby", "sexy girl", "mmmm sexy, I want you", "nice legs" or being told to smile was the most common type of harassment for girls this time. Moreover, the girls had been followed in the shopping center for ten-fifteen minutes by actor. The Stranger was touching girls in an unwelcome, sexual way.

During second experiment only one person was willing to help victims of sexual harassment and we should mention that she was Slovak woman who speak English very well. She explained her decision to help the actresses: "I was irritated by his behavior towards you. Moreover, he invaded into my personal space".

Visitors were indifferent and tried not to interrupt the situation, people continue to do their own things and activities and pretend that nothing happened. In other cases, the witnesses said that they thought that the stranger just flirted and his behavior was not so dangerous and risky for victims of sexual harassment. People do not want to admit that they have not helped the girls, so they tried to prove that this situation was not threatened to actresses. One woman explained that everyone should protect by themselves and there is no need to participate in other people's problems.

4.3 Experiment 3: Reaction of people to sexual harassment by a dark foreign male

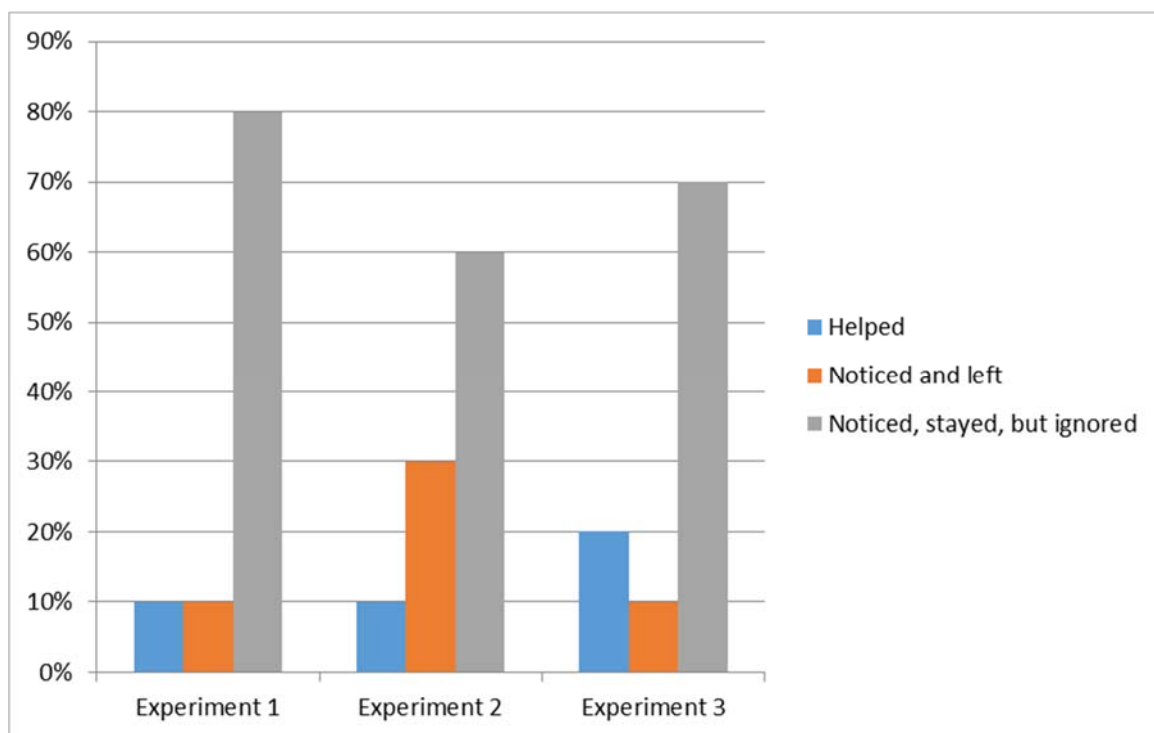
The third experiment was conducted three days after second experiment (March 15) in the evening. Each of ten situations of third experiment was played for five-ten minutes during two hours in different places of Europa Shopping Center BB, as in the first and second experiments. All ten situations of the third experiment took place in four WI-FI zones, Ice-cream café TWIST, RESERVED and H&M (one for each) and in Food court (three times). The third situation was connected with sexual harassment to Slovak girls by a dark foreign male. As usual actresses who suffer of sexual harassment pretended that they did not understand what the stranger was talking about, because they speak and understand only Slovak language. The girls who were sexually harassed experienced both verbal and physically aggressive forms. The victims had been called a sexually offensive names. Moreover, they had been purposely hit, choked, pushed away with great strength and touched in an unwanted, sexual way while in a public space, also they had been followed in the shopping center about ten-fifteen minutes. The stranger was trying to hit the victims and behaved violently towards them.

During third experiment there was only one person who clearly understood that his responsibility was to help the girls and his non-verbal behavior showed that he wanted to help, but unfortunately our male actor manifestation so much power that the young guy hacked up. It should be noticed here that this person spoke English and does he understood what was going on. He explained his decision to help us: "It was a dangerous situation. I felt obligated to help girls".

In another situation, when we conducted an experiment in the Ice-cream café TWIST, the actors had to finish all actions earlier than planned before, because the visitor of cafe was very angry with the dark foreign male who behaved aggressively towards girls. The visitor

was outraged and we decided to stop the experiment, as this person could be even more aggressive than our actor.

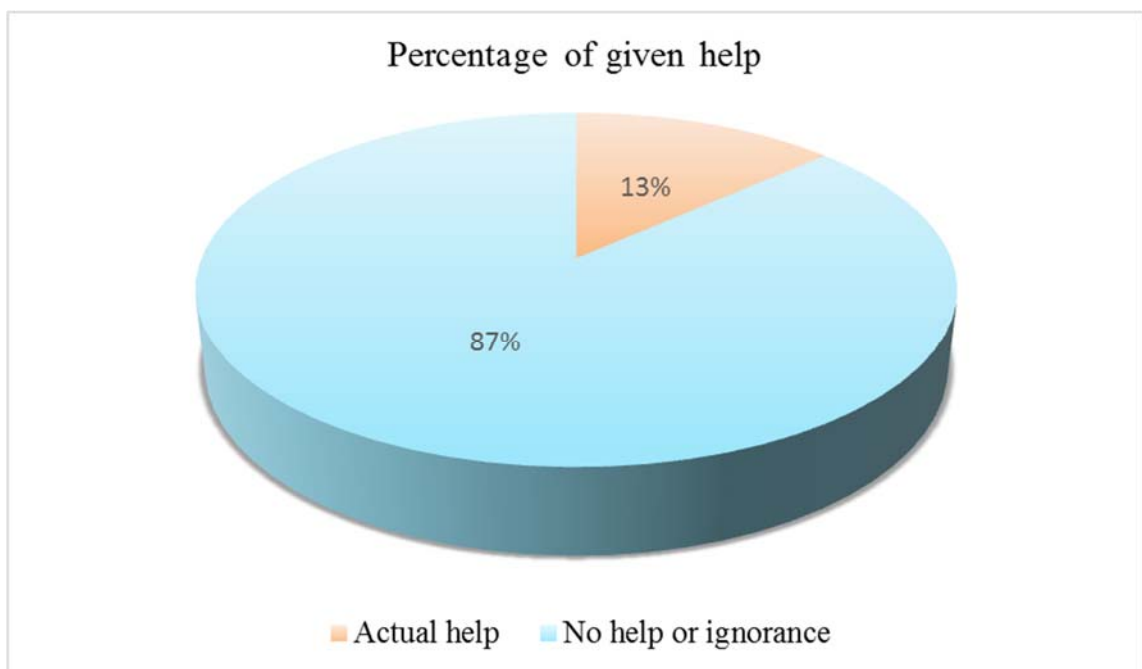
In other cases it seemed like people were waiting for development of the situation and further manifestation of violence more and more. In this experiment there was not so many people who really wanted to help the victims, including the restaurant workers and the security guard in the shopping center.



Graph 1: Comparison of the experiment results

Source: own elaboration

On Graph 1 there is comparison of the results, which were achieved during our experiments. According to this graph we can see that in all experiments the case, in which people denied the possibility to help victims of sexual harassment and preferred to ignore such situation or left, dominate over those cases which people helped women.



Graph 2: Percentage of given help

Source: own elaboration

Graph 2 shows the percentage of those cases in which people were willing to help women suffering of sexual harassment and include the results of all research. It is clear from our findings that the percentage of help given to Slovak women of Banska Bystrica who are in need is dramatically low.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the experiment, we have defined some expectations. We assumed that there would be majority of people, who would be ready to help women in difficult situation connected with sexual harassment. However, in fact we discovered that practically most people prefer not to interfere with such situation for different reasons.

The results prove that our expectations about people's reaction were overestimated and quite idealistic. We were surprised that people prefer to do nothing and to deny that there was a problem. Moreover, we were surprised not just because of the lack of response from the visitors, but also because of inaction and ignorance of the situation on the side of the staff of restaurants and other places where the experiment was held, who saw the inappropriate and aggressive behavior towards visitors in their institutions.

We can state that influence of cultural stereotypes on people's reaction was not obvious from our findings, because we found that ethnicity, languages and type of violent behavior do not play a big role in the case of sexual harassment.

This is a form of complacency, which is known as the ostrich effect. The main idea of this effect is the denial of the existence of a problem. A good way to describe such situation is by using a metaphor of "an elephant in the room", which suggests that a very big problem was ignored: "Sexual harassment? What sexual harassment? I do not see any sexual harassment".

If we think that a lot of people around us ensure our security – we are assuming wrong. The crowd could be indifferent to problems of others. Even if there is a large number of people around who could engage in helping the victims, most of us do not. The reasons appears to be the ignorance of the existence of the problem, or, on the other hand the hope that other people will take actions, so we do not need to.

This experiment helped us to realize that every women should be careful with strangers, paddle her own canoe, and try to ask for help by herself if it needed.

We must add that it cannot be up to individuals alone to solve this problem, especially not those who are harassed, but we should involve other people, such as educators, government leaders, also social organizations and businesses.

To stop sexual harassment, we first must change the common social attitude which, according to our research, appears to be "sexual harassment is not a big deal and it is actually a compliment".

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