

RESEARCH ON GENDER FRIENDLY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTES IN BANGLADESH



THE CASE OF GOVERNMENT AZIZUL HAQUE COLLEGE, BOGURA

The Combatting Gender-Based Violence in Bangladesh (CGBV) project of UN Women started in 2018 with an aim to enhance the capacity of educational institutions and civil society to design, implement, and sustain primary prevention of gendered violence. It further aims to strengthen government mechanisms and strategies identified under Bangladesh's Seventh Five Year Plan and the National Women Development Policy. As part of the project, UN Women partnered with six educational institutions from Cumilla, Bogura and Patuakhali districts to implement safe campus interventions and adopt a 'whole of school approach' to prevent sexual harassment (SH) and other forms of violence against women on campus premises. This approach requires embedding systemic change within educational institutions through policy, practice, procedures, staffing, environment, leadership, and culture.

Government Azizul Haque College (GAHC) is among the selected educational institutions. A baseline survey was conducted in the university to assess the extent and awareness of SH on campus, existing institutional frameworks for addressing and preventing SH, and determining appropriate responses including prevention strategies for programmatic intervention.

Sexual harassment has been identified as a major hurdle in the well-being and progress of students, especially women, and their performance in academic institutions. SH continues to be an obstacle to women and girls' continuing education, employment, and their participation in public life. Bangladesh's conservative and patriarchal society makes the odds more even more difficult. Recent evidence highlights that over three-quarters of girls encounter and report sexual harassment on or off campus. A study conducted in 2013 by Bangladesh's Human Development Research Centre among 897 students found that 76 % of females in tertiary education institutions had experienced SH.

Though the increase in SH and violence against women (VAW) in educational institutions has gained attention in recent times, there remains a lack of relevant research on the subject. Laws in Bangladesh for eliminating SH and VAW are very limited, though the government has taken some steps in this regard. One must identify the extent and nature of sexual harassment and violence in educational institutions to determine appropriate responses, including prevention strategies for programmatic interventions in educational institutions.



The research design involved a mixed-methods approach. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods and analytical approaches were used to collect primary data on SH in GAHC. Through quantitative research techniques, a one-to-one online questionnaire survey was used to obtain data and information from female and male students. Under qualitative research techniques, a key informant interview (KII) tool was used to obtain information from teachers, college administrators, sexual harassment prevention committee (SHPC) chairs, members, and staff.

The study set out to be entirely gender-responsive in purpose, approach, and method. It used a consultative and collaborative approach, applying a participatory methodology wherever possible, and systematically applied gender analysis at all steps. Given the COVID-19 public health emergency, a total of 89 participants were interviewed online and through telephone. All data was disaggregated to obtain the perspective of female and male students, teachers, staff and administration and to allow for a thorough gender analysis of the research findings. Data analysis was performed by triangulating information obtained from desk reviews, primary data and other documentation. The analysis also drew from feedback with the UN Women team and its partner WE CAN through an online debrief session where crucial elements of evidence were discussed, recommendations were made on further analysis and synthesis, and key lessons were agreed on. The preliminary findings were presented in validation meetings with GAHC teachers, students, UN Women, and WE CAN team members. Feedback from the validation session was consolidated and incorporated in the final research report.

Key Statistics



100% female students and **97.1% male students** experienced **Unwelcome sexual behaviour** such as physical contact (touching, patting, pinching, etc.) as the most frequently experienced type of SH on campus



72.4% females were more likely than **males (8.6%)** to have experienced **at least one form of SH** in their lifetime, on or off campus.





Perceptions of Sexual Harassment

The mean age of survey respondents is 22 years. The respondents, mainly students, are from diverse academic disciplines.

Unwelcome sexual behaviour such as physical contact (touching, patting, pinching, etc.) is considered as SH by most female and male students (100% and 97.1% respectively).

A wide range of behaviours and attitudes were construed as sexual harassment. For example, 96.7% of female students agreed the following behaviour is sexual harassment: sexually coloured verbal representation, sexually coloured gestures (e.g., indecent body language, staring directly at body parts, scratching one's body parts as an expression of sexual interest) and harassment through phone and SMS.

Male respondents surveyed also reported similar perceptions about SH. However, perceptions of SH depend on students' backgrounds, experiences, environment, and knowledge, and varies from one individual to another. Moreover, females (72.4%) were more likely than males (8.6%) to have experienced at least one form of SH in their lifetime, on or off campus.

According to teachers, staff, and administration, the most frequently occurring forms of SH are verbal including sexist comments, discussing or sharing inappropriate information about someone or about a group of people based on their gender identity, and asserting power through blackmail, intimidation or deception.

According to key informants, first and second-year female students and newly appointed female staff are more likely to be subjected to SH than others because they are unfamiliar with their surroundings. Key informants disclosed that certain teachers too were involved in perpetrating SH. A female undergraduate student recently complained to college authorities about being harassed by a GAHC teacher.



Causes and risk factors

The leading causes for SH on campus were identified as political influence, misuse or exercise of political power and lack of strict measures to punish the perpetrators (41.4 % and 22.9% of female and male students respectively). Other reasons were poor mentality, violent attitudes of boys and men and free movement of outsiders on campus (40 % of females and 28.6% of males). The long judicial process, lack of proper law enforcement and insufficient education (33.4% of females and 11.4% of males), girls' freedom of movement, their clothing and gestures (20.7 % of females and 31.5 % of males), and unrestricted freedom of students (14.3 % of females and 28.6 % of male students) were also mentioned.



41.4% females and **22.9% of males** identified political influence, misuse or exercise of political power and a dearth of stringent measures to punish perpetrators as the primary causes of SH on campus



85.7% of survivors (female students) **did not report** to college authorities when they experienced SH inside or outside the campus

The research shows a persistent culture of silence around SH. Survivors did not protest SH incidents and mostly remained silent. The survey data demonstrates that 85.7% of survivors (female students) did not report to college authorities when they experienced SH inside or outside the campus. With regard to reasons for not reporting, 21.7% of females and 33.3% of male students surveyed could not explain why they refrained from reporting. 30.4% females and 25% of male students mentioned reasons such as fear of threats or consequences and repeated violence. 26.1% of females and 16.7% of male students believed that reporting would not help while 17.4% of female students felt embarrassed, ashamed, or afraid of retaliation. 16.7% of females and 4.3% of male students said that reporting could give their families a bad reputation.



50% of the survivors shared the SH incident **with other female friends**, **45.5%** shared it **with their parents**, and **4.5%** shared the SH incident **with senior students** wielding political power on campus.

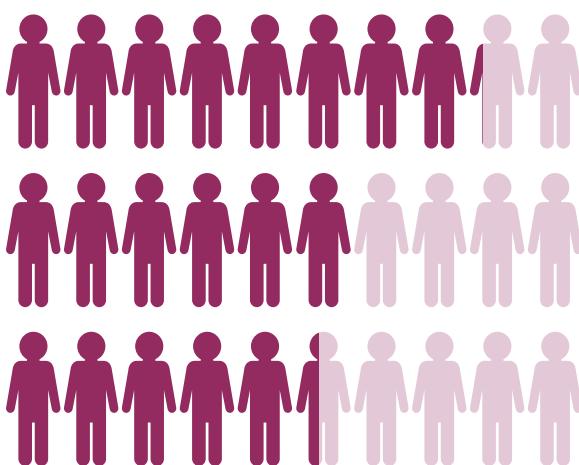
Though survivors did not report to the college authority, some did discuss their experiences of SH with others. Among female SH survivors, 50% shared the incident with other female friends, their parents (45.5 %) and senior students wielding political power on campus (4.5%). The study indicates that male SH survivors did not feel comfortable sharing such information with anyone, not even their families. None of the survivors mentioned going to the police or campus health centre. A risk factor for students to not report SH incidents to college authorities is teachers' attitudes towards SH. Many students (43.3 % of females and 34.3 % males) felt that teachers mostly blame female students for occurrence of sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment adversely effects both females and males in various ways, encompassing a range of physical, psychological, social, and academic impacts.



In terms of personal beliefs, varying percentages of female students disagreed with the following notions. Male students should ignore an incident of SH (83.3 % expressed disagreement), female students should have restricted mobility to avoid being sexually harassed (80%), women and girls are to blame when sexually harassed (83.3 %), women should accept sexual violence as a normal part of life (76.7 %), sexual harassment and violence should be handled within the family and not be reported to authorities (80%), women and girls should only report sexual violence if they have serious physical injuries (83.3 %), and women and girls should not

report sexual harassment to protect family dignity (76.7 %). However, 36.6% of female students felt that female students should cover themselves fully to avoid SH. Male students expressed disagreement with the following notions: Female students should ignore an incident of SH (62.8 % expressed disagreement), women should accept sexual violence as a part of life (82.9 %), sexual harassment and violence should be handled within the family and not be reported to the authorities (85.7 %), women and girls should report sexual violence only if they have serious physical injuries (85.7 %) and women and girls should not report sexual harassment to protect the family dignity (88.5 %). However, the following percentages of male students agreed with the following: female students should cover themselves fully to avoid SH (82.8 %), female students should have restricted mobility to avoid being sexually harassed (60%), women and girls are to blame when sexually harassed (54.3%).

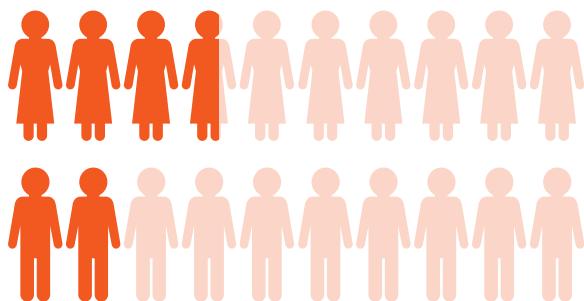


82.8 % of the male students believe that female students should cover themselves fully to avoid SH, 60% believe that the female students should have restricted mobility to avoid being sexually harassed and lastly, 54.3% believe that women and girls are to blame when sexually harassed



A safe campus is essential for maintaining the right academic atmosphere. However, frequent incidents of SH are posing serious hurdles. Weak mechanisms in Bangladesh's educational institutions are the main reason for continued SH. Acknowledging this, the High Court in 2009 issued a directive (HCD) to prevent sexual harassment at institutional settings (workplace and academic). According to the HCD, all educational institutions must take necessary measures to eliminate SH and other forms of violence within their jurisdictions by forming an Anti-Harassment Committee (AHC). The committee is meant to investigate allegations of sexual harassment and recommend appropriate measures.

The study found that a new SHPC was formed through the CGBV project following the HCD to address and prevent sexual harassment and other forms of violence on GAHC campus. Some key informants (teachers and staff) mentioned that all students, teachers, administrators and staff need to be aware of the college's policies and procedures with regard to the directive. The new SHPC has been set up to receive complaints, conduct investigations and make recommendations. A complaint box has been installed and a team of students has been formed for assistance and awareness raising, as reported by SHPC members of GAHC. Teachers too have started addressing the issue through initiatives such as awareness posters, seminars and quiz competitions on a small scale through the SHPC. However, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the committee has not yet managed to take significant steps in addressing SH, though the information regarding the SHPC has been disseminated through regular written notices. According to most GAHC teachers and staff, the college authority is trying to make the SHPC more accessible.



36.7% of female students and 20% of male students had access to health facilities and the police, when faced with such incidents within campus.

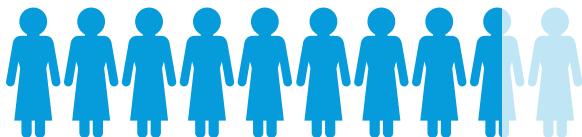
Some GAHC teachers and staff recommended that the college authority should do more to systematically disseminate information about the SHPC among students. Phone lines need to be set up to provide quick access to counselling sessions for harassment survivors. Lighting systems and closed-circuit TVs need to be installed at major points inside the buildings and campus. Students were asked about their views on the institutional resources available on campus to combat and prevent SH. Among the students who were aware of such facilities, 36.7 % of female students and 20 % of male students said they had access to health facilities and the police, when faced with such incidents. However, only 23.3 % of females and 11.4 % of male students could locate the SHPC on their campus.



The way forward

Female students held the following entities responsible for helping establish a safe and violence-free environment: police (80%), college authority (76.7 %), teachers (70%), wider community (66.7%) and the media (43.3%). According to male students, college authorities (76.7%), had the most important role to play followed by the wider community (60%). Most teachers and staff were of the view that the college authority should involve all stakeholders such as teachers, students, staff, parents, and police in preventing SH on campus.

Students were also asked about the best ways to prevent SH and end VAW. Three conditions were deemed equally important by 86.7 % of female students for preventing SH: enforcing VAW related laws, educating men and women about women's rights and gender equality, and teaching men that violence is never acceptable. 83.3 % of female students mentioned the need for more law enforcement while 80% felt CCTV cameras are needed on campus. Male students prioritized the presence of law enforcement (85.7 %) and enforcement of VAW related laws (74.3%).



86.7% of the female students believe that enforcing **VAW related laws**, educating men and women **about women's rights** and **gender equality**, and teaching men that **violence is never acceptable**, are the 3 most effective ways to prevent SH and end VAW

Recommendations

The study has found that UN Women could make various kinds of interventions

Immediate Key Actions

- UN Women can support advocacy efforts by disseminating leaflets and awareness raising posters on the 2009 High Court Directive to sensitize college community members.
- UN Women can provide guidance to the college authority by identifying vulnerable zones where students are most likely to be harassed and restricting the free movement of outsiders on campus. It can advocate for establishing CCTVs, improved lighting in every corner of the campus at night, creating a hotline, installing a complaint box and launching one stop services. (GAHC administration and SHPC)

Short term Key Actions

- Provide guidance and technical support to GAHC authorities to raise the profile of the SHPC, especially in areas central to the implementation of HCD. (GAHC administration and SHPC). Strengthen the SHPC's position and its active involvement as part of the college management. (GAHC administration and SHPC)
- Provide guidance and technical support to the college authority for establishing grievance redress systems in every department and include student representatives (GAHC administration and SHPC)

- UN Women could support collaborative reviews of student orientation plans along with the college authority and students and help to develop an innovative orientation package which encourages students to challenge harmful social norms and create a safer environment for women on campus. (GAHC students, teachers, and staff)

Long term Key Actions

- UN Women can provide professional assistance to college community members (i.e., students, teachers, staff, administration) by organizing gender-transformative trainings for raising awareness and motivation towards gender equality and creating a gender-friendly environment. (GAHC students, teachers, and staff)
- Support advocacy efforts to establish a Students Campaign Group (SCG) and coordinate various campaign events (e.g., HeForShe campaign) in an organized manner (GAHC students, teachers, and staff)
- UN Women can provide technical support to coordinate training and awareness-raising to support bystanders for preventing SH on campus. (GAHC students, teachers, and 31 staff).
- The advocacy activities of UN Women can be achieved by engaging male students, teachers, and staff in formulating policies and strategies to prevent SH and to end violence against women on campus. (GAHC students, teachers, and staff)
- Provide guidance and technical support to the college authority in establishing gender-responsive budgeting methods (GAHC administration and SHPC)
- Provide technical inputs to the college authority's monitoring mechanism and accountability on compliance with the guidelines of the High Court Directive to prevent SH on campus.
- Assist GAHC to introduce a credit or non-credit course on gender education (GAHC administration, teachers and SHPC)
- Support GAHC in establishing standards for reporting SH cases. This will ensure students have a formal method of reporting rather than depending on informal practices such as informing local political leaders.



Sexual harassment is a serious violation of women's rights and a major barrier to their well-being. The study shows that it is deeply connected to social norms, values and stereotypes that foster gender inequalities, discrimination against women and unequal power relations between men and women. This research provides evidence that SH is a significant problem in GAHC. A sizeable section of the stories of SH survivors remains unheard, unacknowledged, and unreported.

The study reveals various aspects of how female and male students at GAHC perceive and experience sexual harassment, whether or not they are likely to report it, the wide-ranging adverse effects on individuals on account of SH and the role of beliefs and social norms. The study also finds that institutional mechanisms at GAHC to respond to SH cases need to be strengthened and publicised much more. There is significant scope for UN Women to make useful interventions and help address the problem of SH at educational institutes like GAHC.

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