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Gendered Appraisals of Distress in Sexual Harassment Victimization: Implications for Measurement

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Abstract

Sexual harassment (SH) victimization is typically operationalized as exposure to specific behaviors, assuming equivalent interpretation across gender. However, threat appraisals are shaped by social norms and perceived consequences, influencing SH-associated distress. Drawing on cognitive appraisal and social norms perspectives, we examined whether incorporating psychological distress into the operationalization of SH victimization alters assumptions of gender equivalence. Data were drawn from 785 university students in Jordan (72% women). SH-associated distress was assessed using an adapted Sexual Experiences Questionnaire, and confirmatory factor analyses were conducted separately by gender. Women reported greater distress than men for most SH experiences. The SH-associated distress construct demonstrated good fit among women but not among men, indicating that behavioral measures alone may obscure the meaning and impact of SH experiences across gender.

Introduction

Sexual harassment (SH), defined as unwelcome sexual advances or requests, is highly prevalent across universities globally, affecting approximately 37% of students in high-income countries and between 14% and 73% in low- and middle-income countries (Hardt et al., 2023; Holland & Cortina, 2016; Ranganathan et al., 2021; Telfils et al., 2024). SH in higher education is associated with academic underperformance, reduced campus engagement, dropout, and social withdrawal, with pronounced implications for women (Athanasiades et al., 2023; Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Pinchevsky et al., 2020). Women are more frequently victimized, experience more severe consequences, and are more likely to interpret harassing behaviors as threatening, which men may perceive as benign (Athanasiades et al., 2023; Berdahl et al., 1996; Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Christopher et al., 2024; Cleveland & Kerst, 1993; Dougherty, 1999; Gutek et al., 1990; Hehman et al., 2022; Kessler et al., 2020; Pinchevsky et al., 2020; Uggen & Blackstone, 2004).

These gender differences suggest that exposure to the same harassing behaviors may not carry equivalent meanings, consequences, or levels of perceived threat across gender. Despite this, most existing SH measures operationalize victimization as behavioral exposure or frequency of exposure, assuming that similar experiences reflect victimization equivalently across gender. In doing so, they may overlook how SH experiences are appraised and whether those experiences are perceived as harmful, threatening, or distressing (Cleveland & Kerst, 1993; Dougherty, 1999; L. Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Settles et al., 2011; Uggen & Blackstone, 2004).

Cognitive appraisal theory posits that emotional responses are shaped by perceptions of threat and harm, providing a useful framework for understanding gender differences in appraisal of SH experiences (Langhout et al., 2005). Earlier foundational scholarship on SH recognized the appraisal of harm as central to the conceptualization of SH, emphasizing that harassing behaviors are perceived as harmful then they are appraised as threatening to an individual's well-being or future prospects (L. Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Huerta et al., 2006; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Thus, experiences of SH victimization are

shaped not only by exposure to harmful behaviors but also by how those behaviors are interpreted, evaluated, and whether they are appraised as distressing (Alsawalqa & Alrawashdeh, 2022; Berdahl et al., 1996).

Subsequent research further demonstrated the importance of appraisal processes. For example, frightening appraisals (i.e., threat-related) and bothersome appraisals (i.e., annoyance-related) have been shown to mediate the relationship between SH experiences and psychological distress, with these processes operating differently across gender, that similar SH experiences may be appraised differently across gender, resulting in different levels of distress despite comparable behavioral exposure (Settles et al., 2011). Yet, appraisal-related processes are rarely been incorporated into the measurement of SH victimization, and few studies have examined whether these measures operate equivalently across gender (L. Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Settles et al., 2011). As a result, existing SH measures based solely on behavioral exposure may fail to capture whether experiences are appraised as distressing, potentially obscuring meaningful gender differences.

These appraisal processes do not occur in isolation. Rather, social and gender norms define appropriate actions and behaviors for men and women and shape how individuals interpret experiences, perceive threat and harm, and evaluate emotional responses (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Wasti & Cortina, 2002). These norms influence power relations and shape the occurrence, perception, and response to SH, where the same behaviors may be appraised differently across gender depending on the context in which it occurs (Berdahl et al., 1996; Cislaghi & Heise, 2020; Cleveland & Kerst, 1993; Dougherty, 1999; Uggen & Blackstone, 2004). Consequently, gender-inequitable contexts provide an important setting for examining whether distress-based conceptualizations of SH victimization operate similarly across gender, as social norms may shape how threatening experiences are interpreted and experienced.

In the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, patriarchal norms are pronounced, with male abusive behaviors normalized, and women socialized to be submissive and often blamed for experiencing abuse (Alsawalqa & Alrawashdeh, 2022). These unequal power dynamics are reproduced through peer and institutional practices, reinforcing notions that women do not belong in the public sphere thereby limiting their legitimacy and protection in public spaces such as in higher education contexts (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020; Essaid et al., 2019).

Consistent with these dynamics, high rates of SH in higher education institutions have been documented among both women and men in Jordan. In 2018, SH prevalence over the prior academic year was estimated at 70% among women and 47% among men at one university (Spencer et al., in press). At another university, exposure to SH experiences among female student ranged from 14% to 38% (Abutayeh & Abu-Zaitoon, 2024). These findings indicate a substantial burden of SH in Jordanian universities, particularly among women. However, despite growing documentation of SH prevalence, little attention has been paid to how students appraise and experience these behaviors, limiting

understanding of whether similar experiences carry comparable meanings and consequences across gender.

Recent efforts have advanced the measurement of SH in Jordan. The Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ), one of the most widely used measures of SH, (L. F. Fitzgerald et al., 1995), was adapted and validated for use among students in a Jordanian university (Spencer et al., 2022). The adapted measure demonstrated strong reliability and a unidimensional factor structure, and initial measurement invariance analyses suggested that the scale functioned similarly for women and men when SH was operationalized as behavioral exposure (Spencer et al., 2022, in press). Although the SEQ was developed with the understanding that perceived harm and psychological consequences were central to SH victimization (L. Fitzgerald et al., 1997), SH measurement over the past several decades has largely operationalized it as behavioral exposure. Consequently, prior applications of the SEQ and other SH measures have not accounted for psychological distress, a central appraisal process through which SH is interpreted, experienced, and understood. As a result, it remains unclear whether gender equivalence persists when victimization is operationalized as both behavioral exposure and the psychological distress associated with those experiences.

The present study examines whether gender equivalence holds when psychological distress is incorporated into the operationalization of SH victimization. Using tests of measurement invariance, we assess whether incorporating distress challenges assumptions of gender equivalence previously observed when SH is measured solely through behavioral exposure. In doing so, we examine whether gender differences in distress appraisals have implications for how SH victimization is conceptualized, measured, and compared across groups, advancing a more theoretically, culturally, and gender-informed approach to SH measurement.

Methods

Overview

Data were collected in June 2019 from 785 students (72% female) at one Jordanian university. Surveys were administered in randomly selected classes which were required for all students across faculties. All enrolled students were eligible; only two declined. Details on scale development, sampling, and data collection are available elsewhere (Spencer et al., 2022, in press).

Measures

Sexual harassment-associated distress, perceived appraisal of distress and harm upon SH exposure, was assessed with 27 items that were adapted from the SEQ, validated among female university students in Jordan (Spencer et al., 2022). A value of '0' was assigned to distress scores for those who did not report experiencing the corresponding SH item. The adapted SEQ includes four dimensions of SH: unwanted sexual attention (12 items), sexual coercion (9 items), gender harassment (3 items), and physical SH (3 items) (Spencer et al., 2022). Items included experiences like being grabbed or pinched in an unwanted

way; being offered a reward for cooperating sexually; and being threatened for not cooperating sexually. Item responses were dichotomized with 0 = 'Never', 1 = 'Once or More' in alignment with prior research (Cortina, 2001; L. Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Spencer et al., 2022).

Those who reported experiencing harassing behavior once or more were asked to rate the level of distress they experienced from that specific event. For example, if a participant experienced the item 'Said things to insult your gender/sex in general,' they were then asked, 'How distressing was this experience?' Responses were provided on a scale from 0 (Not distressing) to 10 (Very distressing).

Statistical Analysis

Item frequencies and missing values for the adapted SEQ were previously reported (Spencer et al., 2022). We extended this work by classifying participants who reported '0' distress in response to an SH event as not having experienced SH, consistent with the study's operational definition of SH victimization, to create a measure of SH-associated distress. Descriptive statistics (means, skewness, and kurtosis) were computed for each distress item to assess normality and summarize distress levels by SH item for men and women.

To test the underlying structure of SH-associated distress, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted with a robust maximum likelihood estimator and the original continuous response options for distress (range 0–10). Due to the skewed distribution of distress scores and poor initial model fit, we categorized distress into four levels – none (0), low (1–4), medium (5–7), and high (8–10) – and used a mean- and variance adjusted weighted least squares estimator (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). Model fit was evaluated using established criteria: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) < 0.06, comparative fit index (CFI) > 0.95, and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) > 0.95 (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Shi et al., 2018). While chi-square tests and p-values are reported, they were not used to assess model fit due to their susceptibility to Type I errors in large samples (Xia & Yang, 2019; Yuan & Chan, 2016).

Given the larger number of female respondents, prior evidence supporting a unidimensional structure, (Spencer et al., 2022), and the aim of testing measurement invariance across gender through multi-group CFA, a CFA was conducted first on the female sample and then on the male sample. In instances of nonconvergence, items with the lowest variance were sequentially removed until convergence was achieved. When model fit was poor, we examined factor loadings and sequentially removed items with the lowest loadings below 0.4 to guide item retention and identify poorly performing items (Xia & Yang, 2019). A sensitivity analysis was also conducted on both men and women across the retained 20 items that found measurement invariance in a prior study on the same sample (Spencer et al., in press). All data management and descriptive analyses were conducted using STATA 19.0 while CFAs were performed in Mplus version 8.10 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017; StataCorp, 2025).

Ethics

This study was approved by the [Blinded Institute] Institutional Review Board (IRB) with administrative approval from the university study site in Jordan through a reliance agreement in [Blinded Institute]'s IRB. Per the Declaration of Helsinki, written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection.

Result

Descriptive Statistics of Sample

The sample included 785 university students (565 females; 71.97%) with a mean age of 19.85 years. Most participants were single (95.92%) and either in their freshmen (43.42%) or sophomore (27.84%) years. Most were Jordanian nationals (88.70%) and identified as Muslim (96.40%).

Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Among individuals who reported both SH event and psychological distress, female students reported the highest mean distress scores for: *'Made unwanted attempts to establish a relationship with you despite your efforts to discourage it'* (Item 22; *M* = 9.56, *SD* = 1.04, *n* = 18), *'Said crude sexual things to you or in front of you'* (Item 21; *M* = 9.40, *SD* = 1.25, *n* = 15), and *'Commented on your looks or dress in a sexual way that made you uncomfortable'* (Item 19; *M* = 9.34, *SD* = 1.42, *n* = 47) (Table I). The lowest mean distress scores for female students were reported for: *'Told you a joke or storyline with unwanted sexual content or told it in your presence'* (Item 16; *M* = 7.60, *SD* = 3.11, *n* = 30), *'Referred to you in an overly familiar way (e.g., 'my love' or 'moon')'* (Item 13; *M* = 8.20, *SD* = 2.32, *n* = 71), and *'Treated you poorly for refusing to be sexually cooperative'* (Item 25; *M* = 8.21, *SD* = 2.78, *n* = 14). While these represent the lowest distress scores, they still indicate considerable distress.

Among male students who reported on both SH events and psychological distress, the highest mean distress scores were reported for: *'Spread sexual lies or rumors about you'* (Item 18; *M* = 10.00, *SD* = 0, *n* = 3) and *'Touched you on parts of your body when you didn't want it'* (Item 26; *M* = 10.00, *n* = 1). The lowest mean distress scores were reported for: *'Told you a joke or story with unwanted sexual content or told it in your presence'* (Item 16; *M* = 5.25, *SD* = 3.40, *n* = 4) and *'Referred to you in an overly familiar way'* (Item 13; *M* = 5.44, *SD* = 2.70, *n* = 9). Female students reported higher mean distress across all items (*M* = 8.70) than male students (*M* = 7.24), highlighting gender differences in the psychological impact of SH experiences.

Male respondents had low endorsement of distress for 16 SH items, which were endorsed by less than five participants thus, these findings should be interpreted with caution. The most frequently endorsed SH items by male respondents for distress were: '*Made gestures or used body language of undesirable sexual nature*' (Item 1, *M* = 7.08, *SD* = 2.62, *n* = 24), '*Looked at you in an uncomfortable way*' (Item 23, *M* = 6.36, *SD* = 2.66, *n* = 11), and '*Bump into or touch you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable*' (Item 2, *M* = 7.10, *SD* = 1.73, *n* = 10).

Combined Patterns of SH and SH-Associated Distress

Overall, female students reported higher prevalence of SH experiences and higher levels of psychological distress compared to male students. Notably, the most prevalent SH items were more distressing for female students compared to male students. Across the 27 items, there was a moderate negative association between SH prevalence and distress average for male students ($r = -.507$, $p = .007$), indicating that higher prevalence SH items were associated with lower average distress levels. However, there was no significant association between SH prevalence and average distress for female students ($r = -.099$, $p = .623$), due to a narrower range of mean distress scores for female versus male students.

Among female students, distress levels were elevated across all SH events, with mean distress scores starting at $M = 7.60$, compared to $M = 5.25$ for men. Their most frequently reported SH items; Items 23 (*Looked at you in an uncomfortable way*), 11 (*Whistled or made uncomfortable remarks*), and 13 (*Referred to you in an overly familiar way*); were accompanied by mean distress ranging from $M = 8.20$ to $M = 9.01$. In contrast, male students' most frequently reported SH items; Items 16 (*Told an unwanted sexual joke*), 23, (*Looked at you in an uncomfortable way*), and 1 (*Used sexual gestures or body language*); were accompanied by moderate mean distress, ranging from $M = 5.25$ to $M = 7.08$. Additionally, the overall frequency of SH events was higher among female students (47.00%) than male students (19.60%), underscoring the gender disparity in SH exposure, these findings are reported elsewhere (Spencer et al., 2022, in press).

For female students, the highest mean distress scores were reported on less prevalent SH events. Item 22 (*Made unwanted attempts to establish a relationship despite efforts to discourage it*) was reported by 6.25% of the respondents and had a mean distress of $M = 9.56$, Item 21 (*Said crude sexual things to you or in front of you*) was endorsed by 4.28% of participants, with a mean distress of $M = 9.40$. Item 19 (*Commented on your looks or dress in a sexual way*) was reported by 15.45% and had a mean distress of $M = 9.34$. Even the least prevalent SH item; Item 12 (*Threatened you with negative consequences if you didn't cooperate sexually*), was endorsed by only 1.96% participants but had a notably high mean distress of $M = 8.56$. These findings indicate that infrequent SH experiences can elicit substantial psychological distress; the emotional impact of SH is not necessarily tied to how often it occurs.

A similar pattern was observed among male students. The least prevalent SH items; Items 12 (*threatened with negative consequences*), 4 (*Threatened with retaliation*), and 25 (*Treated poorly for refusing to cooperate sexually*); all fell within the domain of sexual coercion, and had higher distress scores, ranging from $M = 6.67$ to $M = 8.50$. This suggests that sexual coercion may be especially distressing for men and, as with women, that distress is not determined solely by the frequency of SH.

Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Given the unidimensional factor structure identified by Spencer et al. (2022), we first conducted a CFA on the sample of female students, who had a larger sample size ($n = 565$). The model fit statistics for the

CFA were as follows: χ^2 (324) = 507.85 ($p < 0.001$), RMSEA = 0.03, CFI = 0.96, and TLI = 0.95 (Table II). The range of standardized loadings in the CFA was between 0.58 and 0.91. CFA results support a unidimensional model for the female sample, showing acceptable standardized factor loadings (≥ 0.4) and good model fit (Shrestha, 2021).

CFA was then conducted on the male sample, where the 27-item unidimensional model failed to converge. Due to poor model fit, items were sequentially removed. Items 12 (*Threatened you with negative consequences if you didn't cooperate sexually*) and 18 (*Spread sexual lies or rumors about you*) were dropped first due to limited variability, as both had only two response categories for distress. Next, Items 19 (*Commented on your looks or dress in a sexual way that made you uncomfortable*, standardized loading 0.061), 4 (*Made you feel threatened with some sort of retaliation for not being sexually cooperative*, standardized loading 0.206), and 22 (*Made unwanted attempts to establish a relationship with you despite your efforts to discourage it*, standardized loading 0.281) were sequentially removed due to low factor loadings (< 0.4). The remaining 22-items had factor loadings above 0.4; yet model fit remained poor: χ^2 (209) = 919.97 ($p < 0.001$), RMSEA = 0.12, CFI = 0.72, and TLI = 0.69.

A sensitivity analysis of the 20 items retained in a prior study to assess measurement invariance was then conducted, which revealed poor model fit across all indices for male students, while model fit for female students was acceptable and consistent with results from the 27-item model used in the current study (Spencer et al., in press). Thus, ultimately, we retained a 27-item unidimensional measure of SH that demonstrated good fit for female students but not for male students (Table II). These findings indicate a lack of configural invariance between genders, suggesting that while both men and women experience SH, their distress responses and underlying interpretations of these experiences differ. We had aimed to assess measurement invariance across gender using multi-group CFA to test configural, metric, and scalar invariance; however, because configural invariance could not be established, further invariance testing was not warranted.

Discussion

This study advances research on SH by demonstrating the importance of appraisal processes in understanding and measuring victimization. Prior research has shown that experiences of SH are interpreted through appraisals of threat, harm, and distress that are shaped by social and gender norms, however, these processes have typically been treated as outcomes of victimization rather than components of its measurement (L. Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Huerta et al., 2006; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Settles et al., 2011; Wasti & Cortina, 2002). While the adapted SEQ previously demonstrated measurement equivalence across gender when SH was operationalized as behavioral exposure alone, this equivalence was not maintained when psychological distress was incorporated into the construct (Spencer et al., in press). Thus, these findings suggest that distress responses to SH capture gendered social, psychological, and normative processes that are not reflected in exposure-based measures, raising questions about the validity of gender comparisons based solely on behavioral exposure to SH.

Conceptualizing distress as a constitutive component of SH may provide a more valid assessment of victimization across genders and diverse contexts.

Our findings align with extensive evidence showing that SH experiences are not uniform, with women experiencing higher rates of SH, reporting greater psychological harm, and more likely to perceive SH as threatening than men (Athanasiades et al., 2023; Christopher et al., 2024; Donovan & Drasgow, 1999; Hehman et al., 2022). Across university settings, globally and within Jordan, women are more likely than men to both witness and experience SH and to suffer its academic and psychological consequences, including reduced academic performance and heightened stigma and victim-blaming (Athanasiades et al., 2023; Bergenfeld et al., 2022; Ranganathan et al., 2021; Spencer et al., in press; Telfils et al., 2024). Qualitative research from Pakistan further suggests that women may anticipate broader social consequences following SH, including pressure to leave university, forced marriage, and concerns about protecting personal and family honor (Shakil et al., 2026), highlighting how social norms may shape the perceived threat and consequences of SH. these findings suggest that behavioral exposure alone may not fully capture the gendered meanings and consequences of SH, particularly in contexts where social norms shape perceptions of threat, harm, and victimization. These patterns reinforce that relying on exposure-based comparisons may overlook key gender differences in how victimization is experienced and appraised across gender and across diverse contexts.

Gender differences in the recognition and appraisal of SH help contextualize these findings. Prior research has shown that frightening appraisals (i.e., threat-related) and bothersome appraisals (i.e., annoyance-related) mediate the relationship between SH experiences and psychological distress, with these processes operating differently for women and men (Settles et al., 2011). Our findings extend this work by suggesting that appraisal processes are not only consequences of SH but may also shape how victimization is recognized, interpreted, and measured. SH in university settings often manifests through ambiguous behaviors, such as sexual gestures, comments, or unwanted attention, that may be interpreted differently across individuals and contexts (Athanasiades et al., 2023; Shakil et al., 2026). Behaviors dismissed as collegiate “banter” by some may be understood by others as boundary-testing, exclusionary, or threatening interactions (Christmas & Fylan, 2018; Christopher et al., 2024; Rice & Searle, 2022).

Women, especially, may be more likely than men to appraise these experiences as distressing, whereas men may be less attuned to these interactions, less aware of their harmful impact, and less likely to interpret them as SH. Across U.S. university students’ perceptions of SH, over 80% of both male and female students agreed that an ambiguous comment made by a man toward a woman should be considered SH, suggesting shared recognition of male-initiated ambiguous behaviors as implying sexual interest or advance (Hehman et al., 2022). However, this consensus did not extend to identical comments made by a woman toward a man; women were significantly more likely than men to perceive such comments as harmful, attributing greater intent and insult and less humor (Hehman et al., 2022), suggesting that perceptions of SH are shaped by both the gender of the victim along with the gender of the perpetrator. Identical behaviors may be more likely to be perceived as threatening when perpetrated

by men than by women, reflecting broader social beliefs about gender, power, and vulnerability (Hehman et al., 2022; Kessler et al., 2020). Such asymmetries can normalize male-perpetrated behaviors while minimizing female-perpetrated behaviors, contributing to gender differences in SH appraisal (Athanasiades et al., 2023; Berdahl et al., 1996; Bergenfeld et al., 2022; Gutek et al., 1990).

Men may also underreport experiences of victimization because of stigma, shame, and fears of not being believed, particularly when female-perpetrated SH does not align with normative expectations of threatening behavior, which may be particularly salient in gender inequitable contexts (Alsawalqa, 2023; Wareham et al., 2022). Men who disclose SH are often viewed less favorably and perceived as suffering less harm than female victims, which may further suppress disclosure and contribute to lower reported distress (Cesario, 2020). These normative processes may shape appraisals of SH and help explain why distress associated with the same behaviors differed for women and men in our study.

Consistent with this literature, our findings show that SH experiences that were relatively infrequent carried greater distress among both men and women. However, women consistently reported higher levels of distress across SH experiences. Prior qualitative research suggests that common forms of SH may be minimized or rationalized over time, whereas rarer or more overt experiences may be more psychologically disruptive (Jenkins et al., 2022). These dynamics may particularly be exacerbated in patriarchal contexts where gender-based violence and unequal gender norms are normalized.

A key finding in our study is that, measurement invariance across gender, in prior research (Spencer et al., in press), was not maintained when distress was incorporated into its operationalization, suggesting similar experiences may carry different meanings, levels of threat, or degrees of distress across gender. Several factors may contribute to this difference. The original SEQ was developed primarily from women's experiences and, more broadly, reflects a long-standing emphasis on women's victimization within violence prevention research (L. Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Gelfand et al., 1995; Jewkes et al., 2015). The Jordanian adaptation similarly relied on predominantly female samples during qualitative scale development and quantitative validation (Bergenfeld et al., 2021; Spencer et al., in press). Thus, the scale may be better equipped to capture forms of SH that women recognize and experience as harmful than those that are most salient to men.

While very few studies have examined the measurement invariance of adapted SEQ across gender within specific contexts, similar challenges have been documented. For example, the U.S. Department of Defense adaptation assessed measurement equivalence across men and women and found that it did not function equivalently across genders (Donovan & Drasgow, 1999). Only four items; *'Treated you differently because of your sex*,' *'Made offensive sexist remarks*,' '*Put you down or was condescending to you because of your sex*,' and '*Stared, leered, or ogled you in a way that made you feel uncomfortable,'* formed a scale that operated similarly across genders.

In our study, several commonly reported items did not appear to carry equivalent meaning across gender. Item 23 (*Looked at you in an uncomfortable way*) was the most prevalent SH item among female students and the second most among male students. Despite high prevalence, this item failed to load

adequately for men in CFA, suggesting that common SH experiences may carry different psychological meanings across genders. These findings raise concerns that SEQ items, developed primarily from women's experiences, may not fully capture how men experience SH, an issue compounded by the limited research examining men's appraisals of SH and associated distress.

Male students, in our study, reported the highest distress levels in response to more invasive and overt sexual behaviors, including sexual rumors, unwanted touching, gestures of a sexual nature, retaliation for refusing sexual cooperation, and insults directed at their sex. These findings suggest that the experiences men perceive as most threatening differ from those most frequently captured by existing SH measures. More broadly, the co-occurrence of exposure and distress, rather than either alone, may provide a more informative basis for future item selection and scale development. However, given the small number of men reporting distress across many items ($n < 5$ across 16 items), these patterns should be interpreted cautiously and require replication in larger samples.

In contexts where masculine dominance and violence are normalized, individuals may internalize or downplay distress, contributing to underreporting and distorted prevalence estimates. Although these dynamics are relevant globally, they may be particularly salient in Jordanian universities, where students widely view SH as common yet inadequately addressed, suggesting that its normalization stems, in part, from its pervasiveness within campus and social life (Bergenfeld et al., 2022; Jewkes et al., 2015). These dynamics may contribute to the normalization of male-perpetrated abuse, minimization of female-perpetrated abuse, and gender differences in how SH is appraised.

Our findings suggest that measurement approaches relying solely on behavioral exposure may not fully capture forms of victimization that are meaningful or distressing to men, particularly when social and gender norms shape how experiences are appraised and reported. When psychological distress is incorporated into the operationalization of victimization, gender differences that remain hidden in exposure-based assessments become visible, highlighting the importance of considering the normative and appraisal processes through which experiences are interpreted as harmful across diverse populations and cultural contexts.

Limitations

Our findings should be considered alongside their limitations. The small male sample may have compromised model convergence. We also did not have data on perpetrator characteristics (e.g., sex), which could have added nuance to SH experiences. Additionally, the original study did not explore participant characteristics such as disability status or other intersecting vulnerabilities that may shape SH risk and perception (Christopher et al., 2024; Rosen & Nofziger, 2019). These dimensions remain underexamined and may help explain SH experiences among men, in contexts where traditional gender norms and power dynamics prevail.

Future research

Future research should explore how men in different contexts appraise SH, particularly given the limited literature on men's experiences of SH. It is also important to examine how men interpret SH, including which behaviors are normalized and which are experienced as distressing, given that certain behaviors may be accepted within male peer groups. Additionally, collecting data on the sex and gender identity of both perpetrators and victims is essential for understanding the gendered dynamics of SH. Future studies should also examine whether appraisal-related processes operate similarly across diverse cultural settings and social groups, and whether incorporating distress into SH measurement improves the validity of victimization assessments. Qualitative research with male university students is especially needed to explore their perceptions of threat and distress; such inquiry would provide more nuanced insights into men's SH appraisals and help inform the development of more inclusive and gender-sensitive SH measurement tools.

Implications

Our findings suggest that current SH measures may overlook a critical dimension of victimization: how experiences are appraised as distressing. Although appraisal of harm is recognized as critical to understanding SH victimization, it is rarely incorporated into the measurement of victimization. Social norms, gender expectations, and power relations shape perceptions of harm and influence whether experiences are appraised as distressing thus, incorporating psychological distress into SH measurement may provide a more comprehensive understanding of victimization and improve the validity of gender comparisons. This may be particularly salient across measurement and conceptualization of SH and gender-based violence across diverse populations and normative contexts. SH victimization that accounts for appraisal processes may strengthen victim identification, improve prevalence estimates, and enhance the validity of cross-group comparisons.

Prevention and policy efforts should be informed by formative research that captures social and gender norms and students' understandings of SH. Such work can guide culturally responsive adaptations of SH measures and campus climate surveys. Pairing behavioral exposure to SH with distress appraisal may provide a fuller understanding of victimization, reveal groups whose experiences are currently overlooked, and support more targeted prevention and support services. Collecting data on perpetrator characteristics may further clarify how gendered social norms shape appraisals of SH and influence its measurement across contexts.

Conclusion

This study highlights that SH victimization is shaped by exposure to harmful behaviors and how those behaviors are experienced and appraised as distressing. Our findings suggest that exposure-based SH measures may overlook gender differences in victimization because they do not capture the psychological and normative processes through which experiences are understood as threatening or benign. These appraisal processes are shaped by gendered social norms, which influence how individuals recognize and respond to SH. Incorporating distress into the assessment of SH may provide a more valid understanding of victimization across genders and cultural contexts. Future research

should continue refining SH measures to better account for gender differences in how experiences are appraised and experienced, ensuring that victimization is measured in ways that reflect the diverse realities of both women and men.

Declarations

Conflicts of interest:

Authors have no competing interests to disclose.

Availability of data and material:

Data available on request from the senior author.

Code availability:

Available upon request from the corresponding author.

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Tables

Table I: Item responses of the Adapted SEQ and SH-Associated Distress among male and female university students in Jordan (*N* = 785)

		Female Students (*n* = 565)				Male Students (*n* = 220)			
		SH	SH-Associated Distress			SH	SH-Associated Distress		
No.	**SH Items**	**%**	**Mean**	**SD**	***n***	**%**	**Mean**	**SD**	***n***
1	Made gestures or used body language of undesirable sexual nature	27.76	8.59	2.10	130	14.61	7.08	2.62	24
2	Bump into or touch you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable	22.99	8.55	2.25	53	12.79	7.10	1.73	10
3	Made unwelcome attempts to drag you into a discussion about sexual matters	10.89	8.81	2.17	31	12.33	6.50	2.39	8
4	Made you feel threatened with some sort of retaliation for not being sexually cooperative.	4.45	8.31	2.95	13	2.29	8.50	2.12	2
5	Pursued, stalked, or tracked you.	25.93	8.41	2.40	61	10.05	7.50	2.56	8
6	Try to get you alone with an inappropriate intention	9.07	8.62	2.25	26	4.55	7.50	3.53	2
7	Said things to insult your sex in general.	13.57	8.84	1.90	31	5.94	8.50	1.29	4
8	Grabbed or pinched you in an unwanted way.	6.25	8.89	2.38	19	8.22	6.56	2.19	9
9	Blocked your way or cornered you in an unwanted way.	8.59	8.74	1.86	23	3.64	7.40	2.41	5
10	Make you feel like you will get a reward or better treatment for being sexually cooperative	4.29	8.93	1.94	15	5.48	6.67	2.31	3
11	Whistled, made remarks, or comments that made you uncomfortable.	41.94	8.49	2.05	94	7.27	8.00	2.71	4
12	Threatened you with negative consequences if you didn’t cooperate sexually	1.96	8.56	2.30	9	2.27	8.00	.	1
13	Referred to you in an overly familiar way (e.g., as 'my love' or 'moon')	29.64	8.20	2.32	71	13.64	5.44	2.70	9

14	Displayed or distributed images or videos with inappropriate content.	4.44	8.38	3.15	13	7.31	6.67	3.06	3
15	Put you down or was condescending to you because of your sex.	12.83	9.12	1.71	33	7.27	8.33	2.08	3
16	Told you a joke or storyline with unwanted sexual content or told it in your presence	10.14	7.60	3.11	30	19.63	5.25	3.40	4
17	Continued to ask you to go out with you on dates even after you refused	11.11	8.35	2.30	26	5.91	7.20	1.92	5
18	Spread sexual lies or rumors about you	4.26	8.80	2.57	10	4.57	10.00	0	3
19	Comment on your looks or your dress in a sexual way that makes you uncomfortable	15.45	9.34	1.42	47	8.18	8.00	2.28	6
20	Treated you poorly because of your sex (e.g., gave you more difficult or less meaningful tasks or assignments)	5.90	8.53	1.96	15	5.02	7.50	3.54	2
21	Said crude sexual things to you or in front of you	4.28	9.40	1.26	10	8.68	6.75	2.36	4
22	Made unwanted attempts to establish a relationship with you despite your efforts to discourage it.	6.25	9.56	1.04	18	5.48	5.50	2.65	4
23	Looked at you in an uncomfortable way	46.96	9.01	1.96	87	17.35	6.36	2.66	11
24	Offered you a reward or special treatment if for being sexually cooperative	3.05	8.70	2.41	10	4.57	6.67	3.06	3
25	Treated you poorly for refusing to be sexually cooperative	3.92	8.21	2.78	14	2.73	6.67	3.06	3
26	Touched you on parts of your body when you didn't want it.	4.27	9.25	2.32	16	4.55	10.00	.	1
27	Made unwanted phone calls to you or sent you unwanted text messages.	13.14	8.63	2.35	32	7.80	5.80	2.95	5

Table II: Model Fit Statistics and Measurement Invariance for the 27-item SH-Associated Distress (*N* = 785)

Female Students	Model Fit Statistics				Range of standardized loadings
(*n* = 565)	χ^2	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	
CFA	507.85 (*p*<.001)	0.03	0.96	0.95	0.58 - 0.91