

Self-stigmatization and Coping strategies of campus sexual harassment Victims in China

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Abstract. Sexual harassment is frequent on Chinese campuses, and the self-stigmatization of victims has adverse effects on their physical and mental health. The social stigma attached to victims of sexual harassment leads them to magnify the social consequences of the incident and ignore their harm. Fearful of being killed again, they attribute it to their problems, leading to increased self-stigma. In response to campus sexual harassment, the positive intergroup contact between the victim and the public should be increased so that the victim and the public can realize that the victim is not the party at fault. The moral bondage of traditional female images should be broken to help the victim gain social recognition, recognize their value, improve their sense of self-efficacy and stop self-stigma.

Keywords: High school; sexual harassment; self-stigma; youth.

1. Introduction

According to the provisions of the Civil Code and the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women, sexual harassment is usually in the form of sexual content or sex-related language, behavior, writing, images, electronic information, physical behavior and other forms of harassment against a woman's will. Campus sexual harassment refers to sexual harassment that occurs on campus.

The victims of campus sexual harassment are usually students. In 2021, Chen Bing conducted a sample survey of five universities in Guangzhou and found that 169 of 1,062 college students, or more than 10 percent, had experienced harassment [1]. They are still in adolescence, susceptible to the evaluation of the outside world, and have peaceful minds. Still, due to their psychological adjustment ability, they are not mature, they lack social experience, and their self-protection consciousness is weak and more prone to psychological pressure and emotional disorders [2]. They may choose to hide their victims because of their fear of teachers, fear of authority, and fear of the eyes of those around them. They cannot seek help from others, which increases the possibility of self-stigmatization.

In today's China, there is a high incidence of sexual harassment on campus. In the student survey and research activities of Beijing Normal University, the reflected data shows that 44.3% of 1200 female college students have been sexually harassed. However, the public has not reached a consensus on the definition of sexual harassment. The concept of sexual harassment is generally defined by law, which makes it difficult to define sexual harassment. For example, among the 1200 female college students interviewed by Beijing Normal University, about 60 percent believed that the degree of sexual harassment they had suffered was minor. Meanwhile, 40 percent thought the degree was severe, so law enforcement did not adequately punish the perpetrators.

In social life, the Beijing Normal University survey also showed that 40 percent of people think sexual harassment is the victim's problem first. These deficiencies in laws and cognition make campus sexual harassment frequent and ineffective, while the cultural environment's wrong comprehension of sexual assault, the stereotype of sexually assaulted, and the high psychological sensitivity of adolescence make victims of campus sexual harassment prone to self-stigmatization, leading to a series of adverse consequences.

2. Definition and manifestation of self-stigmatization

2.1 Definition of Self-stigmatization

Self-stigma, also known as internalized stigma, means that after an individual feels the negative impression, prejudice and discrimination from the outside world towards his group, he accepts the negative evaluation from the outside world and internalizes it as a part of himself, thus forming the behavioral tendency [3] of self-discrimination and self-demeaning. These internalized emotions manifest themselves in emotional, cognitive and behavioral dimensions [4].

2.2 Stigmatization of Campus Sexual Harassment Victims

In stigmatized groups, victims suffer more psychological stress than their peers and show more depressive psychological states. They may suffer from self-neglect, self-blame, self-hatred [5] and other psychological conditions. Victims may feel that they are being sexually harassed due to being wrong, misbehaving in their relationships, or dressing appropriately. Long-term self-deprecation can lead to more serious psychological consequences, such as anxiety and depressed mood [6]. Victims may feel fear and uncertainty about the future, helplessness and fear. When they see news or reports of sexual harassment, they feel ashamed that they have been sexually harassed [7]. Forming a negative self-concept may even prompt the victim to actively reinforce these behaviors in the negative self-concept [8]. They may develop incorrect emotional or sexual attitudes and choose unhealthy lifestyles or revealing clothing styles. The stigmatization of victims can lead to pessimistic predictions about their future and a feeling that they are the target of rejection. They believe they will be discriminated against by their peers or abandoned by their partners after being sexually harassed. All these factors will seriously affect the victims' standard and quality of life.

3. The impact of self-stigma on the victim of sexual harassment

3.1 Physiological Influence

The victim will be affected physically. If the victim is younger than 14 years old, sexual behavior is easily cause permanent organ damage to the victim. Due to minors' weak reproductive system immunity during development, if they have sex at this stage, it is easy to introduce germs into the vagina, causing a series of vaginal diseases and increasing the incidence of cervical cancer. Research shows that women who marry or have sex before age 20 are four times more likely to have cervical cancer. In addition, if it is a female menstrual period, the uterus is open, sex is easy to allow pathogens to invade the cervix to reach the uterus, and female resistance to menstruation is reduced and accessible to infection. Once infected, easy to cause endometritis, endometriosis, uterine adenosis or pelvic inflammatory diseases, harm women's health, and may lead to infertility. As illustrated in the Korean movie *Sowon*, victims must live with a stool bag for the rest of their lives.

3.2 Trauma of Self-stigma on The Brain

According to research, people who experience interpersonal traumatic events (such as sexual assault, child violence, etc.) are more likely to develop PTSD than those who experience non-traumatic events (such as natural disasters, accidents, etc.). Nearly half of sexual assault victims develop PTSD.

Secondly, the biological factor of PTSD development after sexual assault is the change in Grey matter Density. According to studies, the grey matter content in the brain of sexual assault victims with PTSD significantly increases in the Inferior Parietal Lobule, related to the inferior parietal and behavioral disorders of PTSD and the weakening of cognition and logic. On the other hand, gray matter content decreased significantly in the middle Temporal Gyrus and Fusiform Cortex, which was related to memory impairment and distancing behavior after sexual assault.

3.3 Social Influence

In the context of society's moral values, victims are often conscious of the social context, thus exacerbating self-stigmatization. "Chastity" in Baidu Encyclopedia is the interpretation of a person in moral integrity, psychological innocence, and no stain relative to women's moral concept. In ancient China, if a woman loses her virginity, her family will lose face and feel sorry for herself. She will not be able to marry and will eventually be a widow for a lifetime. And the wreckage of this concept has been passed down to the present day, which can affect the victims' interpersonal relationships. First of all, the victims of sexual harassment will show discrimination against them. Second, the victims themselves will be self-stigmatized and avoid others. Even more extreme, they hold stigmatization traits that make them naturally defensive [9], often hostile to people and having negative expectations or even attacking them. The resulting hostility is not limited to those who were and are discriminating against them but may extend to all those with whom they interact socially daily. And so on, in a vicious cycle.

4. Causes of self-stigmatization of campus sexual harassment victims

Stigma is a cognitive adaptation to avoid potential dangers in social life by excluding people who have different qualities or are perceived to have bad values [10]. Social stereotypes are a source of stigmatization, which occurs when a large part of society rejects a stigmatized group. In general, stigma is triggered by differences in how individuals perceive others and negative stereotypes about the group to which they belong. At this point, the stigmatized person often doubts their worth and value after being stigmatized. This process leads to a lower self-evaluation, affecting the victim's self-esteem and self-efficacy [11].

Usually, there is a subconscious tendency for human beings to seek advantage and avoid harm when attributing. People tend to attribute bad events to external factors and successful ones to internal factors. That lead to our question: how does self-stigma cause the victim to go against the intuitive attribution in human nature?

4.1 Social Stigma on Women's Loss of Chastity Under The Patriarchal Social Discourse System

Social and cultural repression of sex and emphasis on chastity have constructed a restriction and expectation on women to maintain chastity. As a result, society is less tolerant of women in sexual events or behaviors but more responsive and sensitive to women's behavior. For certain sexual events and problematic incidents of sexual behavior, society is more inclined to analyze the relationship between women's behavior and the consequences of their murder. In such a framework of social discourse, influenced by the sensitive perspective of society, we pay more attention to the status of women in this event. However, as the victim, society often blames women as the cause of malignant sexual violence itself.

The public's prejudice and stereotype towards victims of sexual assault, such as wearing exposed clothes, not resisting enough, and getting in close contact with the abuser, will cause more psychological pressure on victims [12]. The social stigma of women victims also affects how they seek help. A survey conducted by Campbell in 2005 found that many victims had negative psychological feelings when seeking help from others, especially when police or other officers contacted them in the formal system. 87% of them had negative feelings about themselves, 89% felt that their privacy had been violated, 71% were prone to depression, and 80% were unwilling to seek help from the outside world again [6]. In addition to the outside world, reactions from family and partners can also hurt them, such as alienation, blame, distrust, etc [13]. All of these are equivalent to the secondary trauma to the victim, affecting the victim's self-recognition and attribution of responsibility, making their self-blame and shame more intense [14].

4.2 Self-stigma caused by social stigma

4.2.1 The Magnifying Effect of Social Consequences of Female Chastity Loss in The Patriarchal Society

In the social culture, people's expectations of women often lead to overemphasis on the impact of sexual assault on a woman's social label or social integration rather than on the physical and mental effects of the incident on the victim. Therefore, people tend to pay much attention to the impact of sexual harassment on women's values and social status, thus ignoring the psychological damage to victims and amplifying social evaluation. When people pay more attention to these assessments -- that is, to women's chastity -- victims are more likely to be blamed. People's attention to social evaluation amplifies victims' crisis thinking about the social consequences of sexual harassment, leading them to pay less attention to their harm. For the victims, the source of their pain is not the event itself but the external evaluation. They tend to feel guilty about the assessment, don't see themselves as victims, and think their sadness or anxiety shouldn't exist. In the process, their acceptance of stigmatization creates self-stigmatization.

4.2.2 The Effect of Just-world Bias and Locus of Control

According to Taylor and Brown, people exhibit three positive illusions: the illusion of control, a self-enhancement bias, and optimism for the future. The belief in a just world (BJW) is an optimistic illusion. BJW is a theory of justice that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get [15]. When someone gets hurt by others, instead of admitting the world is dangerous, people will look to the victim for what they did wrong and think that as long as they do not have the victim's problems, they will never get hurt. From this thinking process, people can gain control of their lives, thus having the importance of security for safety in society. BJW also happens to the victims themselves. When they were hurt and afraid that the same thing would happen again in the future, they would attribute bad events to themselves and admit they caused the sexual harassment to happen, hoping that they could control their destiny and avoid the hurt again. But, undoubtedly, other factors, except the victims' actions, should be attributed to sexual harassment, and this illusion will harm the victims' cognition. To gain a sense of control over their lives, a strong and helpless desire not to be hurt, a willingness to believe that the world is just to avoid experiencing similar incidents again, and then accept self-stigma by attributing the sexual harassment to themselves.

5. A solution to the self-stigma of campus sexual harassment victims

5.1 Increase Psychological and Social Support for Victims

Social groups cause stigmatization of a particular group, and self-stigmatization is internalized by social stigmatization. Therefore, in essence, to solve the problems of self-stigmatization is to solve many trials of social stigmatization. The victims feel affected by the discrimination, dislike, and negative speculation [16] of the people around them because they do not know the victim's group. Without knowing it, most people will stereotype the victim as having problems leading to sexual harassment, resulting in hatred and extended malice towards the victim. Therefore, social groups must change their perception of the victim if social stigma is to be solved. There are two ways to achieve this effect [17]:

5.1.1 Increase Positive Intergroup Contact Between Victims and The Community [18]

The positive intergroup contact between victims and the public should be increased so that the public can truly understand the original image of the victims instead of being misled by social theories and stereotypes. This theory was first proposed in the field of mental disorders, for example, because most people do not understand mental illness and are misled by exaggerated rumors, leading to stigmatizing people with mental disorders. However, when the public discommunicates with some patients, they will find that these patients seem to be just ordinary people who are depressed or excited, no different from themselves, thus reducing stigma. Similarly, proper contact with victims can

effectively address the prejudice against victims of sexual harassment cases and reduce stigma to a certain extent.

5.1.2 Emphasize The Uncontrollability of Campus Sexual Harassment

Self-stigmatized victims of campus sexual harassment tend to think that they are mainly responsible for being harassed, and the external criticism leads them to believe that they are just like what everyone said; even if they are not harassed this time, their problems will inevitably lead to harassment. In most people's perception, women on campus can avoid sexual harassment by disguising their appearance and figure [19], so sexual harassment is controllable. Many women feel the same way, so the ignorant masses often say, "Why doesn't he harass everyone but you." Victims of stigmatization should give themselves the psychological implication that the incident is not controllable or has little control. For example, I can control myself, but the initiator of the harassment is not under my control, and I do not know anything about the preferences of the harasser, so it is not controllable for me to be harassed. Emphasizing uncontrollability helps to make oneself and society aware that the victim is not at fault, thus reducing stigma even more [20]. This knowledge could be popularized in education to emphasize that sexual harassment is uncontrollable and that perpetrators are responsible.

Putting forward boycotts and attacks from the perspective of emphasizing the government and society has a guiding effect on general cognition. The visual center of the public is placed on the perpetrator, and efforts are made to spread the comprehension of the victim's innocence to society, enhance the society's sense of identity, let more people support the victim, and reduce stigma. At the same time, schools should attach importance to this aspect of education, emphasizing crime and lawbreaking rather than the so-called female shame and reputation. A theory of justice can be achieved when the law is good enough to provide a safe environment for people. When the outside world is safe enough, there is no need to find security through victim blaming and self-stigmatization.

5.2 Solutions to Stigma Caused by Social Masses [21] and Traditional Chinese Culture Ills

Society's prejudice against victims of sexual harassment stems from the fact that the victims' experiences are different from their own, and the human categorization instinct automatically classifies the victims into "different" categories. However, in the Chinese tradition, the requirements for women are always almost strict. The ideal female image of the traditional people is always conservative in dress, dignified in words and deeds, and pure in body and mind. However, if the victims' characteristics differ from these, they will also be classified as different [22]. In addition, sexual harassment, a very negative and even ugly experience in the universal values, makes the "alien" victim receive hostility from some people. Eventually, the self-cognition of the victim is also "different" in the ethnic group and self-stigmatization [23]. Thus, the attitude towards difference is the key to dealing with the self-stigmatization caused by social and cultural trash. In the process, victims are stigmatized, in part because the legal position is unclear. In the current society, the official position can effectively influence many people. Therefore, when the law is not strict enough in this respect, people will subconsciously believe there is room for tolerance of sexual harassment. On the one hand, it cannot be effectively reduced, and on the other hand, people will feel that such patience comes from the victim's responsibility. In addition, in traditional culture, people have a stereotype of "sex" and think that "sex" is ashamed to reveal its teeth and is ugly. This cognition comes from the lack of sex education and legal awareness. Therefore, focusing on sex education and cognitively addressing the stigma of women is also a viable approach.

5.2.1 Break The Traditional Moral Bondage of Female Images -- Popularize Sex Education

Different groups in Chinese society have different levels of education. Some middle-aged and older adults and people in some remote areas are uneducated, so their ideas are more traditional and one-sided. The real culprit is the lack of sex education. When women in a group seek unity, and all the women in the group abide by it, there will be an exclusion for women who are different from others, thus forming a social stigma. Suppose the victims' relatives are also in the group and have

conservative thoughts. In that case, the stigmatization of the victims will be amplified, and the self-stigmatization of the victims will be deepened [22]. In such cases, the victim's self-stigmatization is because she has formed a perception that she is contrary to the traditional female image, which indicates that the victim herself is conservative and believes that she is at fault in the first place [24]. If sex education is popularized among teenagers, women's more mature and open cognition of forced sexual behavior can be changed to some extent to avoid excessive shame, self-doubt, and, finally, self-stigmatization. Victims of campus sexual harassment are young and at a stage where their cognition is easy to change. Education and exposure to the outside world can help victims gain social recognition, recognize their value, enhance their sense of self-efficacy and stop self-stigmatization [25].

6. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the causes of self-stigmatization of victims of campus sexual harassment, including the influence of social culture and the particularity of adolescence. It explores the adverse effects of self-stigmatization from psychological pressure and interpersonal communication. Then it points out the ways to help the victims escape the self-stigma, such as changing the victim's view of themselves and eliminating social masses and traditional Chinese cultural dregs.

Due to the sensitivity of Chinese society to sex-related topics and the lack of research on stigmatization in China, there are few literatures and data for reference in this paper. Moreover, due to different national conditions and unequal information between China and foreign countries, the comparison between China and foreign countries is not comprehensive. For a long time, scholars rarely discuss social and psychological phenomena such as sexual harassment and stigma on campus. However, based on the current summary, this paper puts forward the feasibility and prospect, which can trigger a series of relevant, meaningful discussions and extend the feasible methods.

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