

Workplace Harassment and Political Participation among Representatives to the Union Parishads in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to explore the relationship between victimisation from workplace harassment and political participation among the elected peoples' representatives to the rural local governance, namely the Union Parishads in Bangladesh. A questionnaire was completed by 821 representatives (412 women, 409 men). The mean age was 42.5 years ($SD = 6.5$) for women and 44.2 ($SD = 6.3$) for men. The results showed that women were significantly more victimised from verbal, nonverbal, and rational appearing aggression, social isolation, and indirect social manipulation than men. For women, the most common type of victimisation was rational appearing aggression, followed by social isolation, and verbal aggression. For men, the most common type of victimisation was from verbal aggression, all the other types of victimisation appeared rarely. Representatives with low political participation scored significantly higher than those with high participation on all six types of harassment. Five of the six types predicted active political participation negatively. Women were more victimised from five types of workplace harassment than men. Victimization from workplace harassment predicted low political participation.

Keywords: Workplace harassment, political participation, sex differences, Union Parishads, Bangladesh

Received 24 May 2020/Accepted 10 August 2020 ©Author all rights reserved

Introduction

The aim of the present study was to explore the relationship between victimisation from workplace harassment and political participation among the elected peoples' representatives to the rural local governance, namely the Union Parishads, the lowest tier of local governance of Bangladesh. Gender and age differences in effective political participation of the representatives to the Union Parishads have previously been reported (Talukdar, Österman, & Björkqvist, 2018). Females were found to

have significantly less influence on political decisions than men. Influence on political decisions varied according to age group for females but not for males. The oldest women scored significantly higher than women from all other age groups on influence on political decisions.

Workplace Harassment

Workplace harassment or workplace bullying may take several different forms, it can e.g. be physical, verbal, nonverbal, sexual, rational appearing, socially isolating, indirect social manipulation, degrading treatment, or attitudinal. No single definition covers the concept fully. It can include subtle long-term psychological aggression directed towards a person who is not capable of defending him or herself in a particular situation (Einarsen, 2005). It might be directed toward a single individual or toward a group. Imbalance of power between the victim and the bully has been conceived to be a central feature of workplace bullying (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003). A power imbalance between men and women has also been found in organizations across the globe; at the governance level, this type of power imbalance, intermingled with gender issues, has been found to be common (Boer & Mashamba, 2007).

Any dysfunctional behavior conducted by a colleague against another can be considered to be workplace harassment. The concept of dysfunctional behavior has been described from diverse perspectives. It has been defined as an organizational deviance; as counterproductive, antisocial, or unethical behavior (O'Leary-Kelly, Duffy, & Griffin, 2000). Both public and private organizations in a variety of countries have been shown to have a dysfunctional organizational climate (Pheko, Monteiro, & Segopolo, 2017). Studies have been conducted on the prevalence and cause-effect relationships of organizational climate. In a multi-occupational study from Spain, it was found that 14% of the workforce had experienced workplace bullying (Trijueque & Gómez, 2010). In a study on National Health Service staff in the United Kingdom ($N = 2,959$) it was found that 20% of the employees had been bullied, and that 43% had witnessed bullying (Carter et al., 2013).

Women as Victims of Workplace Harassment in the Union Parishads of Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, many studies have been conducted on women's active political participation to the local government, but few have addressed dysfunctional organizational behaviours directed against them by male colleagues. Female representatives to the Union Parishads have been found to be

victimized from sexual harassment within their organization (Talukdar, Österman, & Björkqvist, 2019). Female representatives between 29 and 45 years old were significantly more victimised than those between 51 and 61 years old. Reports by females on how often they were victimised were found to be significantly higher than reports by males on how often they had observed that their female colleagues were harassed. The most common types of workplace harassment in Bangladesh have been found to be verbal, attitudinal, and sexual harassment (Begum, 2012), and spreading negative rumors about female sexuality (Panday, 2008). In the case of sexual, verbal, and attitudinal harassment, a repressive organizational culture has been found to be one of the central causes (Prodip, 2014). It has been found to be an institutional obstacle which keeps females apart from decision making and other functions (Hossain, 2012). Beside victimization from sexual harassment, victimization from verbal and attitudinal harassment carried out by male colleagues has also been found among females in 19 union councils in the different sociocultural zones in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2014). In the study, the core cause of the harassment was found to be a repressive and unfriendly organizational culture.

Patriarchal social structures foster unequal power relations between males and females which suppress women and discourage them from active participation in the political arena (Begum, 2012). Domination, hegemony (Rahman, 2014), and a rigid division of labour (Begum, 2012) have been reported to keep women apart from many political activities. If women are viewed as women rather than as individuals, it is assumed that they are not capable of doing the same tasks as men are able to do (Panday, 2008). Hegemonic attitudes in a society also leads to proxy participation where a husband can take part in the activities of the councils on behalf of his wife who is the actual elected representative; this also deprives women from active participation (Hossain, 2012). In the Narayangonj City corporation in Bangladesh, patriarchal power relations have been found to be the cause of systematic exclusion of female councilors from the routine activities of the urban local governmental body (Zaman, 2012). Women have also been found to be victims from extreme threats from their male colleagues. In some studies, it has been found that female representatives were harassed by their male colleagues and chairmen when they tried to raise their voice to protest illegal and unequal distribution of the projects (Begum, 2012; Panday, 2008). It has also been reported that there is an insufficient legal basis for women to challenge the work environment that promotes hostility and abusive practices against them (Begum, 2012). Less access to information has

been found to be common, with female representatives not being informed about meetings (Shamim & Kumari, 2002) and not provided with sufficient information about their responsibilities (Islam & Islam, 2012; Prodip, 2014). Women have also reported that they do not get enough scope of raising their voice in the discussion at the meetings (Shamim & Kumari, 2002; Zaman, 2012). Being assigned with unimportant tasks (Zaman, 2012), systematic bias (Khan & Ara, 2006), indirect threats, being laughed at, and insulting gestures (Zaman, 2012) have commonly been reported.

Originality of the Study

Sex and age differences in six types of workplace harassment: verbal, nonverbal, rational appearing, social isolation, indirect social manipulation, and degrading treatment has not previously been investigated among representatives to the Union Parishads of Bangladesh (c.f. Begum, 2012; Hossain, 2012; Panday, 2008; Prodip, 2014; Rahman, 2014).

Method

Participants

A questionnaire was completed by 821 representatives (412 women, 409 men) from eight Union Parishads, the rural local governance, of Bangladesh. The data were collected with informed consent from the participants. The mean age was 42.5 years ($SD = 6.5$) for women and 44.2 ($SD = 6.3$) for men; the age difference was significant [$t_{(819)} = 3.85, p < .001$]. The respondents were divided into six age groups. They were as follows (numbers of women and men respectively in brackets): age group I = 29–35 yrs ($n = 61, 39$), II = 36–40 yrs ($n = 136, 109$), III = 41–45 yrs ($n = 99, 96$), IV = 46–50 yrs ($n = 63, 101$), V = 51–55 yrs ($n = 45, 54$), and VI = 56–61 yrs ($n = 8, 10$).

Instrument

The questionnaire included questions for measuring victimization from six types of work harassment, these were: verbal aggression, nonverbal aggression, rational appearing aggression, social isolation, indirect social manipulation, and degrading treatment. They were all subscales of the Work Harassment Scale (Björkqvist & Österman, 1992). The response alternatives were on a five-point scale (0 = never, 1 = seldom, 2 = sometimes, 3 = very often, 4 = always). For single items of the scales and Cronbach's alphas, see Table 1.

Table I

Single Items and Cronbach's Alphas for the Six Work Harassment Scales (N = 821)

Verbal Aggression (6 items, $\alpha = .96$)

Being unduly disrupted, being ridiculed in front of others, words aimed at hurting you, being shouted at loudly, accusations, direct threats.

Nonverbal Aggression (4 items, $\alpha = .91$)

Insinuating glances and/or negative gestures, refusal to hear you, refusal to speak with you, being sneered at.

Rational Appearing Aggression (4 items, $\alpha = .99$)

Being unduly criticized, belittling of your opinions, having your work judged in an incorrect and insulting manner, having your sense of judgment questioned.

Social Isolation (3 items, $\alpha = .97$)

Being treated as non-existent, unduly reduced opportunities to express yourself, being isolated.

Indirect Social Manipulation (5 items, $\alpha = .90$)

Lies about you told to others, insulting comments about your private life, having sensitive details about your private life disclosed, having malicious rumours spread behind your back, accusations of being mentally disturbed.

Degrading Treatment (2 items, $\alpha = .88$)

Being given meaningless tasks, being given insulting tasks.

The six measures of workplace harassment were furthermore added together to a total score of victimisation from work harassment, and divided by six in order to keep the response range between zero and four.

Active political participation and initiatives were measured with a scale consisting of seven items: (a) in meetings, I express my opinion freely, whether or not solicited, (b) I have expressed my disagreement verbally at a meeting, (c) I have participated actively in project implementations, (d) I have participated actively in relief allocations, (e) I volunteer to undertake specific tasks, (f) I make initiatives of different kinds, and (g) my initiatives have led to concrete actions or decisions. Response alternatives for all the items were on a five-point scale (never = 0, seldom = 1, sometimes = 2, very often = 3, always = 4). The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .96.

Procedure

The respondents were approached in the rural local governance units in Bangladesh. Since female representatives are a minority in the rural governance, participants were selected for the study using purposive sampling in order to secure an even distribution between female and male respondents. For a detailed description of the procedure see Talukdar et al. (2019).

Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to the principles concerning human research ethics of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013), guidelines for responsible conduct of research (Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity, 2012), and the general data protection regulation of the European Union (European Commission for Data Protection, 2016).

Results

Correlations between the Work Harassment Scales

For both women and men, all six scales measuring victimisation from work harassment correlated with each other on a $p \leq .001$ -level (Table 2). The highest correlation for women was between rational appearing aggression and social isolation ($r = .98$); for men, the highest correlation was between verbal and nonverbal aggression ($r = .95$).

Table 2

Pearson's Correlations between Six Work Harassment Scales. Self-Reports of Women ($n = 412$, above the Diagonal) and of Men (below the Diagonal, $n = 409$)

Workplace Harassment	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Verbal Aggression	-	.89 ***	.96 ***	.95 ***	.90 ***	.30 ***
2. Nonverbal Aggression	.95 ***	-	.87 ***	.88 ***	.84 ***	.40 ***
3. Rational Appearing Aggression	.91 ***	.91 ***	-	.98 ***	.89 ***	.28 ***
4. Social Isolation	.83 ***	.84 ***	.88 ***	-	.89 ***	.31 ***
5. Indirect Social Manipulation	.83 ***	.80 ***	.86 ***	.74 ***	-	.55 ***
6. Degrading Treatment	.56 ***	.59 ***	.67 ***	.49 ***	.71 ***	-

*** $p \leq .001$

Comparisons between the Six Types of Work Harassment

A within-subjects multivariate analyses of variance (WSMANOVA) showed that for women, the most common type of workplace harassment they were exposed to was rational appearing aggression ($m = 3.2$), followed by social isolation ($m = 3.0$), and verbal aggression ($m = 2.6$). The least common types were indirect social manipulation ($m = 2.3$), and nonverbal aggression ($m = 2.2$) [$F_{(5, 407)} = 195.63, p < .001$]. For men, the most common type of workplace harassment they were exposed to was verbal aggression ($m = 0.2$), all the other types had scores that were below 0.16 [$F_{(5, 404)} = 8.06, p < .001$].

Single Items Measuring Victimization from Workplace Harassment

The results of six within-subjects multivariate analyses of variance (WSMANOVA) revealed that the two most common single verbally aggressive behaviours were “to be exposed to words aimed at hurting” and “being unduly disrupted” (both $m = 1.7$). For the other scales, the most common behaviours were as follows. Nonverbal aggression: “refusal to hear the other person” ($m = 1.8$); rational appearing aggression: “belittling of the other’s opinions” ($m = 1.8$); social isolation: “unduly reduced opportunities to express oneself” ($m = 1.8$); indirect social manipulation: “having sensitive details about one’s private life disclosed” ($m = 1.6$); and degrading treatment: “being given meaningless tasks” ($m = 0.4$).

Age Differences in Victimization from Workplace Harassment and Political Participation

Two separate multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were conducted, one for women and one for men. Age group was used as the independent variable and the total scores of work harassment and political participation were used as dependent variables. The multivariate analysis was significant for age group in the case of both women and men (Tables 3 and 4). The univariate analyses were significant for both women and men, in the case of both dependent variables. Scheffé’s test showed that women between 46 and 50 years of age had been significantly less victimised from workplace harassment than women between 29 and 35 years old (IV < I–III), and women between 51 and 55 years old had been significantly less harassed than those between 36 and 45 years old (V < II, III) (Fig. 1). Women in the oldest age group, between 56 and 61 years old, had been significantly less victimised compared to all other age groups (VI < I–V). Women who were 46–50 years old had significantly higher scores on active political participation compared to women 29–

45 years old, and also higher than those 51 – 55 years old (IV > I-III, V). Women in the oldest age group, between 56 and 61 years old, had the significantly highest scores on political participation (VI > I-V).

Table 3

Results of a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) for **Women Only**, with Age Group as Independent Variable and Victimization from Work Harassment and Political Participation as Dependent Variables, (N = 412). Cf. Fig. 1

	F	df	p ≤	η_p^2	Scheffé's test
Effect of Age Group					
Multivariate Analysis	12.08	10, 812	.001	.129	
Univariate Analyses					
Victimization from Work Harassment	24.36	5, 406	.001	.231	IV < I-III V < II, III VI < I-V
Political Participation	21.13	"	.001	.206	IV > I-III, V VI > I-V

Note: I = 29–35 yrs, II = 36–40 yrs, III = 41–45 yrs, IV = 46–50 yrs, V = 51–55 yrs, VI = 56–61 yrs

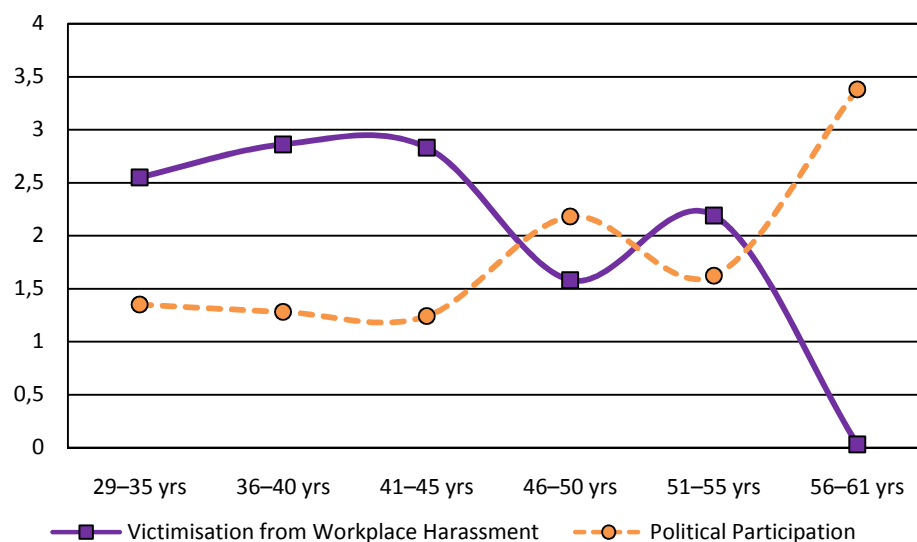


Figure 1. Mean values for victimization from work place harassment and active political participation for women in six age groups (N = 412).

For men, Scheffé’s test showed that the age group of 56–61 years-olds had been significantly more victimised from work harassment compared to all the other age groups. This age group also reported significantly lower political participation than all the other age groups (Table 4., Fig. 2).

Table 4

Results of a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) for **Men Only**, with Age Group as Independent Variable and Victimization from Work Harassment and Political Participation as Dependent Variables, (N = 409). Cf. Fig. 2

	F	df	p ≤	η_p^2	Scheffé’s test
Effect of Age Group					
Multivariate Analysis	4.0	10, 806	.001	.047	
Univariate Analyses					
Victimization from Work Harassment	4.96	5,403	.001	.087	VI > I V
Political Participation	7.69	”	.001	.058	VI < I V

Note: I = 29–35 yrs, II = 36–40 yrs, III = 41–45 yrs, IV = 46–50 yrs, V = 51–55 yrs, VI = 56–61 yrs

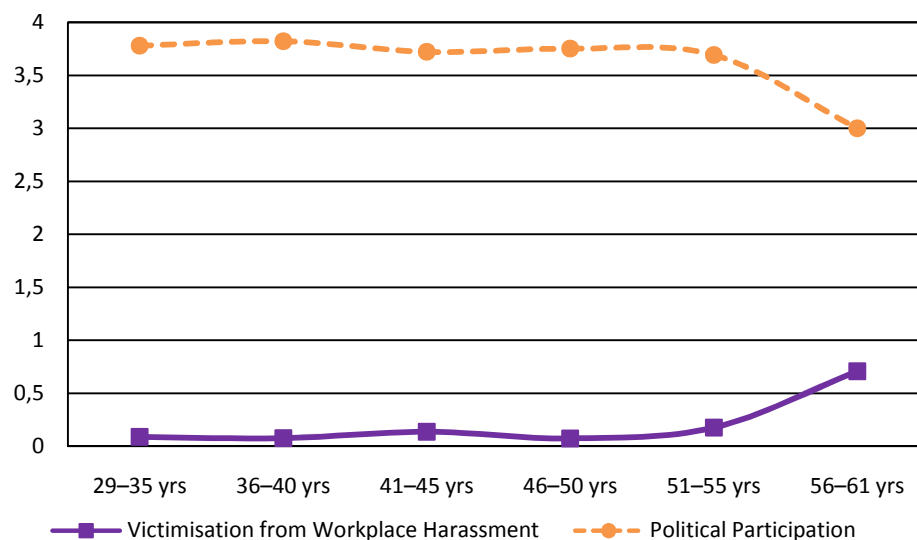


Figure 2. Mean values for victimization from workplace harassment and active political participation for men in six age groups (N = 409).

Workplace Harassment: Differences Associated with Sex and Level of Active Political Participation

The scale measuring active political participation was standardised into z-scores, and a new dichotomous variable was created (high vs. low political participation) with scores above zero (high participation) and below or equal to zero (low participation). A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with sex and political participation group (high/low) as independent variables, six scales measuring victimisation from workplace harassment as dependent variables, and age as covariate. The multivariate test was significant for sex, political participation group, and the interaction between them (Table 5).

The univariate test showed that women were significantly more victimised from verbal aggression, nonverbal aggression, rational appearing aggression, social isolation, and indirect social manipulation (Fig. 3). For degrading treatment, no sex difference was found.

Representatives belonging to the low political participation group scored significantly higher than those belonging to the high participation group on all six measures of victimisation. Women belonging to the high participation group reported the overall lowest scores ($m = 0.00$) on five of the measures of work harassment. Only on victimisation from indirect social manipulation did they report a higher score than zero ($m = 0.22$). The mean age for the women pertaining to the high political participation group was significantly higher than for women in the low participation group (47.6 vs. 41.7 years) [$t_{(410)} = 6.62, p < .001$]. For men, the opposite was found: men in the high political participation group were significantly younger than those in the high participation group (44.1 vs. 47.9 years) [$t_{(407)} = 2.07, p = .039$].

Table 5

Results of a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) with Sex and Political Participation Group (High/Low) as Independent Variables, Victimization from Six Types of Work Harassment as Dependent Variables, and Age as a Covariate (women N = 412, men N = 409). Cf. Fig. 3

	F	df	p ≤	η_p^2
Effect of Age (Covariate)	1.83	6, 811	.090	.013
Effect of Sex				
Multivariate Analysis	24.07	6, 811	.001	.151
Univariate Analyses				
Verbal Aggression	25.77	1, 816	.001	.031
Nonverbal Aggression	24.07	"	.001	.029
Rational Appearing Aggression	52.29	"	.001	.060
Social Isolation	46.95	"	.001	.054
Indirect Social Manipulation	92.48	"	.001	.102
Degrading Treatment	1.93	"	ns	.002
Effect of Political Participation Group (High/Low)				
Multivariate Analysis	106.28	6, 811	.001	.440
Univariate Analyses				
Verbal Aggression	568.49	1, 816	.001	.411
Nonverbal Aggression	378.97	"	.001	.317
Rational Appearing Aggression	597.98	"	.001	.423
Social Isolation	530.02	"	.001	.394
Indirect Social Manipulation	300.27	"	.001	.269
Degrading Treatment	21.58	"	.001	.026
Interaction Effect of Sex and Political Participation Group				
Multivariate Analysis	12.88	6, 811	.001	.087
Univariate Analyses				
Verbal Aggression	35.95	1, 816	.001	.042
Nonverbal Aggression	29.36	"	.001	.035
Rational Appearing Aggression	58.96	"	.001	.067
Social Isolation	54.67	"	.001	.063
Indirect Social Manipulation	56.26	"	.001	.065
Degrading Treatment	1.85	"	ns	.002

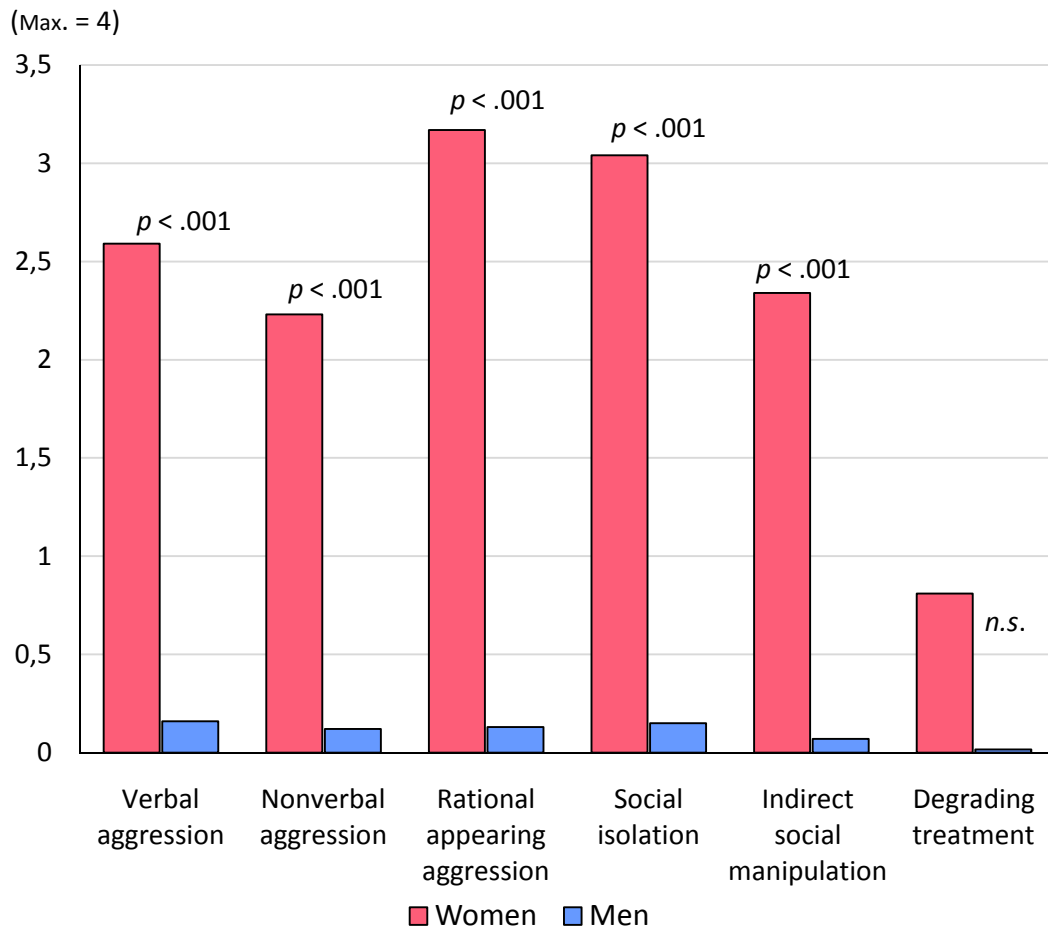


Figure 3. Mean values for representatives (412 women, 409 men) from eight Union Parishads, of Bangladesh on victimisation from six types of work harassment.

Victimization from Six Types of Work Harassment as Predictors for Low Political Participation

It was found that five of the six types of victimization from workplace harassment predicted active political participation negatively. The strongest predictors were victimization from verbal aggression, and nonverbal aggression. They were followed by social isolation, indirect social manipulation, and degrading treatment [$R = .91$, $R^2 = .83$, $\text{Adj. } R^2 = .83$, $F_{(6, 814)} = 671.13$, $p < .001$] (Table 6).

Table 6
Results of a Regression Analysis with Six Types of Victimization from Work Harassment as Predictors for Active Political Participation (N = 821)

Workplace Harassment	β	$p \leq$
Verbal Aggression	-.27	.002
Nonverbal Aggression	-.23	.001
Social Isolation	-.19	.048
Indirect Social Manipulation	-.15	.025
Degrading Treatment	-.05	.037
Rational Appearing Aggression	-.06	ns

Discussion

The aim of the study was to explore the relationship between victimisation from six types of work harassment and active political participation and initiatives among representatives to the rural local governance of the Union Parishads in Bangladesh. In the present study, it was found that women had been more victimised than men from verbal, nonverbal, and rational appearing aggression, as well as from social isolation, and indirect social manipulation.

Two previous studies (Begum, 2012; Panday, 2008) have found women in the local governance of Bangladesh to be more victimised from work harassment than men, which is in agreement with the present study. Begum (2012) found that verbal, attitudinal, and sexual harassment, and spreading negative rumours, were frequently experienced types of harassment by women of the local governance. Begum's findings are thus in close agreement with those of the current study. Attitudinal harassment, as described by Begum (2012), appears to have similarities with what in the present study has been referred to as rational appearing aggression.

Women were mostly found to be victimised from rational appearing aggression, followed by social isolation and verbal aggression. Victimization from indirect social manipulation and nonverbal aggression were experienced to a lesser degree by the women in the study. Men were found to be

victimised mostly from verbal aggression; all the other types of harassment were experienced only to a very low degree.

In general, women experienced less work harassment the older they became. Women in the oldest age group, between 56 and 61 years of age, had been significantly less victimized from work harassment compared to all other age groups. It should be noticed that women from the same age group, between 56 and 61 years old, have also been found to score higher on active political participation than younger women (cf. Talukdar, Österman, & Björkqvist, 2018). Representatives in the same age group have also been found to be less victimized from sexual harassment than female representatives between 29 and 45 years (c.f. Talukdar, Österman, & Björkqvist, 2019). The number of participants in the oldest age group was low, therefore conclusions must be drawn cautiously.

In the case of men, an opposite trend could be observed. Men from the age group of 56–61 years-of age had been significantly more victimized from work harassment compared to all the other age groups. This age group also reported significantly lower political participation than all the other age groups.

Overall, representatives who experienced more work harassment received lower scores on political participation. Regression analyses also showed that the six types of work harassment contributed as predictors of low political participation. Despite many legal provisions of the government to empower the women who take part to the local governance process of the country, the study showed a scenario of discrimination experienced by women in this arena. The laws passed to prevent violence against women are not being able to prevent silent aggression heeded towards women in the local governance. Ensuring the role of law, increasing the vigilance of the central government, intervention of the civil society, and empowering women more with providing legal commission could improve this situation.

Conclusions

From the perspective of good governance initiatives, the government of Bangladesh has made use of different legal and administrative tools in order to prevent female workplace harassment and increase the effective and equal participation of women to the governance process. It is evident from the present study that this purpose in the Union Parishads is yet to be achieved. The patriarchal social environment, the institutional culture, and an overall gender biased work environment is in need of huge initiatives worth taking by the central government as well as the civil society in order to change.

Considering the high level of work harassment experienced by the women in the local governance, and their generally low level of participation in the core activities of the UPs, it seems obvious that work harassment and its impact on female participation has become an established institutional practice in the local governance.

Only mutual trust, honour, and equal participation can ensure a harmonious institutional environment in the UPs, which is crucial to ensure functional governance in rural communities. The goal number five of the Sustainable Development Goals, which strongly emphasises the participation of women to all the streams of the state machinery, can be achieved through equal participation in the overall governance process. This can foster our overall development and enable the country to develop.

Acknowledgement

The assistance of Jannatul Ferdous Bonna in the collection of the data is gratefully acknowledged. The study was supported by a grant from Högskolestiftelsen i Österbotten, Vasa, Finland.

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