

**Bullying and Harassment in Relation to Mental Health: A Closer Focus on Education
System**

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Abstract



This study is aimed at assessing whether the effects of the coeducation system reflect upon the mental health of postgraduate level female students. The relationship of bullying and sexual harassment with mental health regarding coeducation and single-sex learning institutes and gender was specifically explored. A total of 610 male and female students from postgraduate level with the age range of 18-25 years selected from single-sex and coeducation institutes from Haripur, Mansehra, and Abbottabad cities participated in the study. Findings of the study suggested that female students from coeducation settings are frequently exposed to aggressive behaviours by their classmates and teachers. Rates of physical abuse and psychological abuse were 28% and 84%, respectively in this study sample. Correlation analysis indicated a significant negative correlation between scores of participants on the mental health inventory (Veit; Ware, 1983) and adopted version of the Bullying and Harassment scale (Espelage & Holt, 2001). Studying gender base difference, it was found that female students to be more victims of harassment and bullying in a coeducation setting as compared to single sex education institutes. Whereas females from both education systems were less mentally healthy as compared to male students.

Keywords: Coeducation, Single-sex Education, Mental Health, Bullying, and Harassment.

Introduction

Mental health is considered as one of the major determining factors of healthy adjustment which signifies the utilization of appropriate skills and personal abilities for proper responding to the environmental demands (Woodford, Han, Craig, Lim, & Matney, 2014). Generally, basic criteria for measuring mental health include, positive self-concept, adequate feeling of safety, vigilance, non critical self-evaluation, emotional responsiveness, and intact contact with reality (Zhang, Chen, & Tomova Shakur, 2020).

Maintaining mental wellbeing is as important as caring about one's physical entity. Healthy life depends on giving equal importance to physical health, emotional and over all mental health. Canters for Disease Control and Prevention (2017) assessed victimization found that bullying can include both physical aggression verbal aggression (Tappero et al., 2017).

Various factors are reported to affect the mental health of female students; out of which experiences of bullying and sexual harassment put lifelong adverse effects on one's life and personality. Bullying and other peer victimization is positively associated with lower mental health functioning (Garnett, Masyn, Austin, Williams, & Viswanath, 2015; Lin, Wolke, Schneider, & Margraf, 2020).

For females students, particularly with respect to obtaining academic achievement and setting the career goals, the postgraduate level learning experiences are considered to be one of the most crucial phase of life (Espelage, Basile, & Hamburger, 2012; Espelage, Green, & Polanin, 2011). The teaching learning process encompasses various factors, out of which interaction among and between peers, administration, teachers, and parents are found to be significant determinant of student mental health. It is being a hot issue of many debates in education policymaking process and deciding about the effectiveness of single or coeducation system. Single-sex education settings are proved to be more

beneficial for females that allow female students to produce better academic performance, to have a more positive self-concept, and possess less conventional allocated sex role attitudes (Hartman, 2010). Comparing the effect of attending coeducation and single-sex education institutes it was found that females benefited a great deal from the single-sex education settings (Faucher, Jackson, & Cassidy, 2014). Co-ed educational environment bring a drastic effect on psychological health of female students (MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010; Rigby, 2020). Another research study have reported that in Co-ed system female students victims reported being physically bullied, taunted, and teased by male colleagues (Koniewski & Hawrot, 2021).

Across the nation, bullying and harassment have become a major issue at the higher education level, as several research have been conducted to identify the causal factors and their impact on mental wellbeing American College Health Association [ACHA], (2020).

The mental health of female students in the co-education system is threatened by many factors out of which being sexually harassed and bullied is one of the important factors which results in impaired mental status. Study have proved that the issue of bullying and harassment is directly connected with hostile or offensive behaviour and is positively related to coeducation settings (Parsley, 2021). Similarly another study have shown that verbal insult is the most common form of cross-gender aggression (Winiewski, Budziszewska, & Świder, 2019).

Walters and Espelage (2018) found that in coeducational institutes, the gender based violent behaviour significantly negatively affects female's academic performance, personality development and overall mental health. The adverse effects of bullying on victim's physical, mental and social health are well-established (Fullchange & Furlong, 2016). Similarly in another study coeducation setting has founded to be positively related to the female victimization, maltreatment, hostility, bullying and sexual harassment. As compared to single sex, in coeducational settings females are more prone get bullied and harassed (Rosander, Salin, Viita, & Blomberg, 2020).

Analysing the important aspect of mental health, the development of positive self-image is the essential element. It is found that females feel better about themselves when they are educated in single sex education setting (Trickett, Noll, & Putnam, 2011). In co-ed settings most of the time female's self-respect and self-image is sabotaged by their male class fellows (Kenchappanavr, 2012). Same gender education setting is proved to be more beneficial for females with reference to academic performance, mental wellbeing, and healthy personality development. Similarly female attending single-sex educational institutes tends to attain high grades and possesses higher self-esteem. Females benefited a great deal more from the single-sex environment. In single-sex education institutes; females show mental wellbeing, a well-established personality, and a higher level of confidence (Hughes, 2006).

Single-sex education has very strong also social impact on students' lives; it promotes less body-conscious attitudes and fewer eating disorder rates. Single-sex education has been proved to widen students' mental perspective and support them to discover their strengths and interests without feeling inhibited by gender stereotypes (Allison, Roeger, & Reinfeld-Kirkman, 2009; Chen & Huang, 2015; Hyun, 2016; Tiggemann, 2001). As compared to co-ed single-sex education settings, provides opportunity to focus and concentrate on studies without the fear of competition with their opposite gender class-fellows (Peplau, Hill & Rubin 2010).

Number of studies has proved the incidents of bullying and harassment in educational institutes of Pakistan. Mukhtar et al. (2010) stated that the most common forms of bullying reported was verbal abuse and behavioural signals i.e., making face. Similarly, it has been reported that the prevalence of bullying was found to be 52% in the medical students of Pakistan (Lloyd, Mete, & Sathar, 2005; Mukhtar et al., 2010). In Pakistani culture even the policy of suppressing the reported cases of harassment and bullying in educational institutes is still in practice. Bibi, Bibi, Qureshi, Bibi, Taherani, and Ansari (2012) suggest that there is a possibility of significant under-reporting of sexual harassment. Yet, increasingly coeducational institutes come under attack for failing to eliminate environment elements contributing to sexual harassment of female students at their institutions, thus threatening the mental wellbeing of female students educational. Although colleges and universities are motivated with the major objective of protecting their students, they must balance both the rights of the suspected victim and executor while probing the reality of harassment (Molluzzo & Lawler, 2012).

This study will be helpful for the educational policymakers to deal with the major reported problems of insecurity and impaired mental health status of female students in coeducation settings. The results of the study will find out the possible impact of education environment and other related factors which lead to harassment and bullying. Current study will also facilitate and encourage the female students specifically in co-education setting to remain assertive and self-reliant. The study will compare the mental wellbeing of female students in a single-sex and co-educational settings that will unveil the various risks factors of being threatened by sexual harassment. Thus, institutions would be able to facilitate the victims of harassment and bullying and eradicate those conditions in the coeducational setting that is responsible for the increase in the occurrence of incidents of sexual harassment and bullying.

Rationale of the study

Available literature on mental health issues among female student shows that previously only few studies have explored psychological health related issues with reference to number of other variables. The possible impact of education system in context to experienced mental health related issues among postgraduate level female students has remained unchecked. As post-graduate level studies focus mainly on career related skill building and getting excellence in a particular professional field may cause number of adjustment related problems among students. In many cases specifically female students may experience compulsion of studying in co-ed system. In such situations unhealthy adjustment among class fellows, ongoing open competition, and problematic behaviour such as bullying, and harassment has been reported by female students. In present education system scenario, the researchers have realized the importance of mental health of female students and conducted a research study for exploring mental health related issues in context with the education system.

Methodology

Participants

A sample of 610 (male = 305; female = 305) post-graduate-level students studying in single and coeducational institutes were conveniently selected from three cities of Pakistan, Haripur ($n = 215$), Mansehra ($n = 260$) and Abbottabad ($n = 135$). Their age ranged from 18 to 22 years ($M = 18.69$, $SD = 1.16$). For the present study eight post-graduate level educational institutes (4 = coeducational and 4 = single-sex educational institutes) were randomly selected.

Measures

Mental Health Inventory

Mental health inventory (Veit & Ware, 1983) comprising of 38-items with six-point response categories ranging from (1 = *all of the time*; 2 = *most of the time*; 3 = *a good bit of the time*; 4 = *some of the time*; 5 = *a little of the time*; 6 = *none of the time*) was used to assess mental health among students. The reported Cronbach alpha was .85.

Bullying and Harassment Scale

The bullying and harassment scale (BHS; Espelage & Holt, 2001) comprised of thirty-four items with three subdomains named physical condition, psychological health, and Self-image was used. Students were asked to respond to a questionnaire describing how often incidents of bullying and harassment over the past three months had occurred. Response options include *Never*, *1 or 2 times*, *3 or 4*, *5 or 6 times*, *7 or more times*. A higher score indicates more frequent engagement in bullying and harassment behaviour. For the present study, the calculated alpha reliability was .85.

Procedure

For data collection procedure due permission was obtained from heads and administration of education institutes. Potential subjects of the study were approached by the researcher. For getting the consent they were briefed about the objective of the study and after ensuring the confidentiality of information, respondents were provided the questionnaire with the information and instruction. Respondents were asked to decide about the agreement with the statements and mark the relevant response category honestly. The questionnaires were distributed randomly to the subjects with a request to complete and return them.

Results

Table 1

Mean, Standard deviations, and t-value for scores of female students from single-sex and coeducation on Mental Health Inventory and Bullying and Harassment Scale (N = 610)

Variables	Co-ed (<i>n</i> = 305)	Single sex (<i>n</i> = 305)	<i>t</i> (608)	<i>p</i>	95%CI		Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)			LL	UL	
MHI	12.3(8.9)	22.9(21.6)	7.86	.000	1.65	1.80	.64
BHS	28.3(12.2)	19.16(10.7)	9.84	.000	-0.58	2.02	.80
PC	29.03(7.5)	31.3(9.7)	3.21	.000	-0.84	1.11	.26
PSYE	22.1(8.7)	25.9(5.8)	6.29	.000	-0.14	1.50	.51
SI	29.1(9.24)	30.7(10.4)	1.39	.023	-1.21	1.01	.16

Note. MHI=Mental Health Inventory; BHS=Bullying and Harassment scale; PC = Physical Condition; PSYE= psychological Effect; SI= Self image

The mean score of participants on the bullying and harassment screening scale was (*M* = 31; *SD* = 22. 8). The minimum score on BHS is 0 and the maximum score on BHS is 136. As a result, rates of physical abuse, and psychological abuse were 28% and 84%, which are identified in the present sample.

In Table1, notable significant differences exist between mean scores of coeducation and single-sex education, female students on most of the scales assessing bullying and harassment. The difference is nonsignificant in the case of self-image.

Table2

Inter-correlations for scores on BHS and MHI and its subscales (N= 610)

	1	2	3	4	5
1. BHS	-	.26**	.63**	.48**	-.74**
2. PC		-	.28**	.23**	-.57**
3. PSYE			-	-.38**	-.28**
4. SI				-	-.23**
5. MHI					-
<i>M</i>	16.53	9.87	30.1	23.77	57.33
<i>SD</i>	3.08	2.66	6.88	7.11	8.66

Note. BHS = Bullying and Harassment scale; PC = Physical Condition; PSYE = psychological Effect; SI= elf image; MHI = Mental Health Inventory.

In Table 2 as predicted an inverse relationship exists between all three forms of bullying and harassment (physical condition, psychological effect, and self-image) and mental health.

Table 3

Summary of Simple Linear Regression Analysis for mental health of female students (N = 610)

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	95%CI	
PWB	-.65	.008	-.40	-7.35	.000	.15	-.076	-.034
PSYH	-.223	.015	-.664	-17.31	.000	.42	-.263	-.219
NSI	-.029	.017	-.082	-1.69	.091	.007	-.067	-.005
MHI	-.023	.016	.054	10.3	.000	.54	.598	-.717

Note. *p* = Standardized beta; CI = Confidence Interval; PWB = Physical wellbeing; PSYH = psychological health; NSI=Negative Self-image; MHI= Mental Health Inventory.

In Table 3, a simple linear regression analysis is performed. Bullying and harassment are taken as the independent variable and measures of mental health, as the dependent variable. Findings indicate that bullying and harassment significantly affect the physical well-being, psychological health, and mental health scores of participants.

Conclusions and Discussion

The findings of this study will add up to the growing body of evidence indicating a negative association between bullying, harassment, and mental health of female students from the coeducation system. Earlier studies have proved coeducation setting to be positively related to the female student's victimization of maltreatment, hostility, and sexual harassment (Faucher et al., 2014).

The present study suggests that all the three formats of the adverse effects of bullying and harassment (physical condition, psychological effect, and self-image) were experienced by female students. The rates of bullying and harassment and experience of adverse effect i.e., the physical condition was 28% and the psychological effect was 84% respectively. The finding of the present study is in line with previous studies suggesting the adverse effects of bullying on victim's physical, mental and social health in coeducation settings (Walters & Espelage, 2018). Studies have shown that single-sex education institutes; promotes females mental wellbeing, healthy personality and higher level of confidence (Hand & Sanchez, 2000) higher test grades, higher self-esteem . A co-educational

learning environment brings a drastic effect on female students (Espelage et al., 2011; Qureshi et al., 2012).

Results have also shown that bullying and harassment are significantly associated with adverse mental health in this study sample. The findings of the present study are consistent with previous studies suggesting a positive relationship between bullying and harassment and co-education setting (Hand & Sanchez, 2000). In coeducation institutes, female victims reported being physically bullied, taunted, and teased by males (Winiewski et al., 2019). In coeducation institutes rates of bullying and harassment are high (Hand & Sanchez, 2000), female students are more bullied (Sacco, 2012).

The findings of the present study displayed a significant difference between coeducation and single setting institutes with reference to incidents of bullying and harassment. Results have shown that female students in the coeducation system are more subjected to harassment and bullying. This is following the statistics reported by previous surveys (Hand & Sanchez, 2000; Woodford et al., 2014). This was assumed based on prior shreds of evidence, that suggest that bullying and harassment result in negative mental conditions. Comparing the effects of attending co-ed and single-setting institutes it was found that females benefited a great deal more from the single-sex environment (Faucher et al., 2014; Holt et al., 2014). It has been indicated that most of the parents hesitate to send their daughter to a co-educational setting fearing the bad reputation in coeducation and fear of their daughters being sexually harassed and raped (Espelage et al., 2012).

Simple linear regression analysis indicated that bullying and harassment significantly predict negative self-image, adverse physical condition, and psychological effects on victimized female students. The regression analysis carried out in the present study also supports previous study findings by showing that 54% of the variation in mental health scores was explained by bullying and harassment incidents. It was presumed that bullying and harassment will be significantly associated with increased negative self-image and decreased psychological health of female students from the coeducation system.

Present study findings not only add to prior evidence but also raise questions about the impact of the coeducation system on females' mental health. Coeducation setting negatively affects female students' mental development self-image and self-esteem. By the time 2021 this study was designed and conducted no data was available from Pakistan which has specifically assessed the psychological health of female students in coeducation settings. This study is aimed at assessing whether the effects of the coeducation system reflect upon the mental health of postgraduate level female students. This study will help enhance female mental health at post-graduate and specifically in coeducational settings. This will be helpful to education policymakers in taking measures against bullying and harassment. Pakistan is an Islamic country and must promote healthy treatment of female students to ensure giving the said prestige of females in Islam.

Based on the findings of the current study it is safe to conclude that female students in coeducation institutes are vulnerable to mental health related problems because they are regularly exposed to bullying and harassment by male students. Similarly, female students in co-education institutes are more victimized by harassment and bullying. It is suggested that services of clinical psychologists may be provided for maintaining effective and healthy education environment. It is also suggested that effective harassment and bullying preventive measures and intervention strategies should be available for female students at institutes with co-education system. The present study would be an important contribution in controlling bullying and harassment culture at universities/post-graduate colleges coeducational settings.

Recommendations

1. As findings show that female students in co-ed system are more vulnerable to develop mental health related issues (i.e., stress, anxiety, and depression) it is, therefore, suggested and recommended that for healthy adjustment and to cope with the environmental stressors proper psychological support and assistance may be provided to female students.
2. In this study, the findings demonstrate co-ed system as significant determinant of mental health related issues, it is therefore suggested that in co-ed education institutes, education policy reforms may be implemented mainly focusing on controlling and eliminating mental health related issues among students.

3. In order to minimize the incidents of bullying and harassment it highly suggested that public awareness campaigns may be initiated regarding practicing human rights and ethical code of conduct for students.

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