An Invisible Gender-based Violence

Exploring Iranian male university students’ thoughts on street harassment

A qualitative study in Tehran, Iran

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Abstract

**Background and Aim:** Street harassment is an international and trans-cultural phenomenon that has short and long-term negative effects on its individual targets impacting millions of people, mostly women and young girls, everyday. Most studies on the subject have been focused on defining the problem from a law point of view leaving a knowledge gap on how social structures and the various political, economic, and cultural means interact to (re)produce and perpetuate this social phenomenon. This study aims to explore the thoughts of young men in Iran in order to discover possible underlying mechanisms reinforcing street harassment.

**Methods:** A qualitative study consisted of four focus group discussions, with male university students, was conducted in Tehran, Iran. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data with social constructionism as the theoretical lens.

**Results:** Two candidate themes were developed: “Normalization and trivialization of the problem” and “Socio-cultural and political silence”. The first theme represents the discussions about street harassment as normal, inevitable, and harmless. The second theme embodies the systematic silence around the subject of sexual harassment. Both normalization and the silence construct street harassment as an invisible problem not only to men who are not directly harmed by it, but also to the society as a whole which led to developing the overarching theme describing street harassment as “an invisible gender-based violence” in Iran.

**Conclusion:** The participants were unaware of the relation between power, gender inequality, and the concept of patriarchy, which in itself is a sign of an androcentric culture. Street harassment was conceptualized as normal and invisible since it doesn’t concern them. However, most participants were eager to discuss the topic developing their arguments as the discussion went on and stating that this topic needs to be discussed and studied which confirms that just providing a safe space and the opportunity for discussions can raise people’s awareness of this social problem.

**Key words:** Street harassment, male university student, conceptualization, Iran
Glossary

*Street harassment: defined by Stop Street Harassment (SSH)*
“Street harassment describes unwanted interactions in public spaces between strangers that are motivated by a person’s actual or perceived gender, sexual orientation, or gender expression and make the harassee feel annoyed, angry, humiliated, or scared. Street harassment can take place on the streets, in stores, on public transportation, in parks, and at beaches. It ranges from verbal harassment to flashing, following, groping, and rape. It differs from issues like sexual harassment in school and the workplace or dating or domestic violence because it happens between strangers in a public place, which at present means there is less legal recourse.”

*Gender Inequality Index:*
“A composite measure reflecting inequality in achievement between women and men in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment and the labor market”.

*Patriarchy:*
“A system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women”.

**List of abbreviations**

SBU: Shahid Beheshti University
SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals
FGDs: Focus Group Discussions
SSH: Stop Street Harassment (a nonprofit organization aiming to document and end gender-based street harassment worldwide)
WHO: World Health Organization
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background

Street harassment is a widespread and trans-cultural phenomenon that has short and long-term negative effects on its individual targets including: "shame, anger, restricted mobility, depression, reduced self-esteem, self-objectification, anxiety, and fear of navigating public spaces" (Lennox, R. & Jurdi-Hage, R., 2017). Logan (2015) explains it as one moment on “a continuum of violence against and oppression of femininities”, a significant moment that, "if ignored and trivialized, serves to normalize sexually predatory behaviors, socializes men to dominate women, and perpetuates women's subordination and marginalization" (Logan, 2015).

Gardner (1980) argued that denying women privacy in public spaces positions them as “open persons” meaning they are acting “out of role” in some form therefore they are “open” to be intruded upon in public with privacy invasions such as comments and gestures (Gardner, 1980). The practice of street harassment engenders women’s autonomy making them live with the reality of regular privacy intrusions no matter how they choose to react (Benard & Schlaffer, 1984; Davis, 1994).

The continuous vulnerability to “low-level” victimization in public due to street harassment increases victims’ overall fears of violence which causes “rape awareness” and anxiousness in public (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Ferraro, 1996; Macmillan et al., 2000; Pain, 1997). The fear women experience in navigating public spaces significantly affects their day-to-day functioning. Many alternate their routines and hobbies, change their jobs, keep away from public transport, leave neighborhoods, don’t walk alone, and don’t leave the house because of fear of rape. Women’s autonomy, mobility, and use of public space become limited as a result of these practices (Koskela, 1999; Lenton, Smith, Fox, & Morra, 1999; Thompson, 1994; Wesselmann & Kelly, 2010).

These negative impacts of street harassment (limiting women's access to public space and mobility, denying women respect and autonomy, fears of rape and sexual victimization), in turn, affect their psychological well-being. An association between the experience of sexual harassment and anxiety and depression has been established through research, which could be the results of being persistently objectified by comments like “nice legs” or “nice ass” (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). Self-objectification can also lead to other harmful impacts including eating disorder and body shame (Wesselmann & Kelly, 2010).
Cumulatively these numerous effects of street harassment function as a form of gender socialization placing women in a disempowering and marginalized position in society. Being the constant subject of objectification, sexualisation, and evaluation teaches women to associate their identities (female/feminine) with feelings of disempowerment, shame, and victimhood (Kearl, 2010; Laniya, 2005). This shows how public spaces could become “genderised” and function as social control in a way that public domain becomes a “male domain” in which verbal violence would be used to punish women for trespassing. (Davis, 1994; Koskela, 1999; Laniya, 2005; Lenton et al., 1999). This is why Bowman (1993) described street harassment as an “informal ghettoisation” of women that relegates them to the private sphere (Bowman, 1993).

Despite the well documented negative effects of street harassment, the interdisciplinary academic work is still limited which could be due to several reasons, such as: the difference in rules of conduct in public places compared to private places (Gardner, 1995; Goffman, 1990; Lenton, Smith, Fox, & Morra, 1999); normalization (Bowman, 1993; Larkin, 1997); and trivialization (Tuarkheimer, 1997; West, 1987). Interdisciplinary research is also challenging due to the differences in defining and conceptualization of street harassment used by different disciplines such as law studies, social studies, and health and communication studies.

**Conceptualization and definition of “street harassment”**

The subject of men's violence against women was first raised by key feminist writers during the 1970s. According to Kelly (2012), both feminist research and activism during the late 1980s and 1990s collectively constructed the knowledge base and the theoretical frameworks for understanding men's violence against women. Brownmiller (1975) theorized rape as a social control and Greer (1971) used "petty rape" as a concept in order to explain that the assumed rare incidents of men's intrusion are connected in different ways. The risk of referring to these practices as unusual behaviors by a minority of abnormal men was pointed out by a number of authors highlighting the importance of paying attention to the everyday forms of men's violence (Hanmer & Saunders, 1984; Kelly, 1988; Stanko, 1990; Wise & Stanley, 1987). The concept of ‘sexual harassment’ was brought into everyday language mostly by the ground breaking works of Mackinnon (1979) and Farley (1978). Although the concept focused on occupational sexual harassment, it later expanded to educational institutions. The urgency of developing the concept into the language of law and policy resulted in the exclusion of public places and everyday life as the context in discussions regarding sexual harassment. Fitzgerald, Gelfand, and Drasgow (1995) proposed that sexually harassing behaviors can be divided in to three groups: sexual coercion;
unwanted sexual attention; and gender harassment. Maxwell and Wharf (2010) developed a toolkit for working in schools defining similar behaviors while emphasizing on repeating the behavior over time and the intention to hurt. Still these three conceptualizations of ‘sexual harassment’ would not be adequate to capture women's experiences on the streets. It would be difficult to define practices like calls to ‘cheer up’ or wolf-whistles as sexual harassment using any of these definitions. These practices may not even be considered as harassing by all women in all contexts, and not even by the same woman in different situations.

Another major challenge is the terminological difficulties, considering the knowledge base developments in other areas of men's violence against women. The survey methodologies and comparison between studies on street harassment are very problematic and complicated due to the disagreements on what this phenomenon should be called, what exactly constitutes it, and how the harms should be conceptualized.

Davis (1993) chose “the harm that has no name” to explain African-American women's experiences of street harassment and embodiment. Many researchers have put the emphasis on the location which is in public space and use terms such as: ‘public harassment’; ‘public sexual harassment’; and ‘sexual harassment in public places’. Others came up with their own terms including: ‘gender based public harassment’; ‘street hassling’; ‘street remarks’; and ‘offensive public speech’ (Vera-Gray, 2016). Other terms have been used in order to put the emphasis on frequency, including: ‘commonplace intrusions’ (Kelly, 1988); ‘everyday unwanted sexual attention’ (Esacove, 1998); ‘everyday stranger harassment’ (Fairchild, 2007). The most common terminology however is ‘street harassment’ (Bowman, 1993; Davis, 1993; Fileborn, 2013; Fogg-Davis, 2006; Kearl, 2010; Kissling, 1991; Laniya, 2005; Larkin, 1997; Lenton et al., 1999; Macmillan et al., 2000; Nielsen, 2000; Oshynko, 2002; Rosewarne, 2005; Thompson, 1994; Tuerkheimer, 1997; Walkowitz, 1998)". Some of these terms limit the inclusion of other genders being harassed, racist harassment, sexual orientation harassment, and other non-sexual harassment such as body-weight harassment. But the term ‘street harassment’ may also shift the attention from other public spaces (including online public space) or the gender-based aspect of the phenomenon. Naming and defining street harassment has remarkable political and policy values, as it is the first step to understanding the scope and consequences of this social phenomenon. No matter how difficult it is to name the different forms of violence against women, the discussion is necessary to combat the historical silencing. The lack of a consistent term in the literature highlights the need of an explicit debate. There have been similar discussions on other terms including "violence" (Dobash&Dobash, 1998) and "paedophil" (Kelly, 1996) before.
Bowman (1993) used these criteria: "Although street harassment encompasses a wide variety of behaviors, gestures, and comments, it has some defining characteristics: (1) the targets of street harassment are female; (2) the harassers are male; (3) the harassers are unacquainted with their targets; (4) the encounter is face to face; (5) the forum is a public one, such as a street, sidewalk, bus, bus station, taxi, or other place to which the public generally has access but (6) the content of the speech, if any, is not intended as public discourse." Tuerkheimer (1997) also considered the target being just women writing “Street harassment occurs when a woman in a public place is intruded on by a man’s words, noises, or gestures. In so doing, he asserts his right to comment on her body or other feature of her person, defining her as an object and himself as a subject with power over her.”

These definitions caused the criticisms of some feminist legal theories' inability to account for other gender’s harassment experiences since they define the targets as only women. Franke (1997) established a revised conceptualization of sexual harassment that suggests harassment is not only about the subordination of women by men, but it is also a means of regulating and policing of gender norms to prevent women deviating from their approved feminine and men from their approved masculine gender role (Franke, 1997). This shows the importance of the role that social norms, specifically gender norms, play in the construction of ‘street harassment’ as a persistent social problem. So far, most research on street harassment has focused on the definition and effects from a legal point of view rather than, as Lennox and Jurdi-Hage (2017) explains, on evaluating “the role of social structures in producing social phenomena, and consider, for example, the various political, economic, and cultural means through which the patriarchal gender order is (re)produced and perpetuated” (Lennox&Jurdi-Hage, 2017).

“Street harassment” in Iran

While much of the research has examined sexual harassment in western countries, mostly the United States, few studies have been conducted in non-western settings with different cultural assumptions and social guardianship that create divergent patterns (Parish et al. 2006). Menon and Kanekar (1992), for example, suggested that sexual harassment may be seen as part of the natural order in Indian culture and other similar cultures, in which women are expected to be shy in sexual matters and men are aggressors (Sigal & Jacobsen 1999). Lahsaeizadeh and Yousefinejad (2011) disagreed with the statement Drew et al. (2004) made in the Iranian chapter of the “International encyclopedia of sexuality” about sexual harassment not being frequent in Iran since “the general pattern of sex segregation makes opportunities for sexual harassment rare”. They instead argued
that although the sexes are separated by adolescence “there is no separation in streets, as they encounter each other in public places” (Lahsaeizadeh & Yousefinejad, 2011). They also suggested that recent increase in modern elements entering the society through media has created a sense of “duality and imbalance” between the traditional rules and modernity. Authors explain that Iran is an Islamic society with strong traditional rules especially for women who “have to wear long and dark dresses with no makeup and behave with seriousness and dignity in public places; laughing, wearing short dresses (although it is always with pants), and heavy makeup are considered as signs of unchastity” and if a women don’t obey these rules she pays the price by being harassed in public places (Lahsaeizadeh & Yousefinejad, 2011). However being harassed is not the only punishment women face in Iran. The author of “How the hijab has made sexual harassment worse in Iran”, an article published in The Guardian (2015), explains: “The irony of a system that goes to great lengths to “protect women’s bodies” is that while harassers are acting freely, stalking and groping under the eyes of all, the moral police is arresting women for “bad hijab”, skimpy manteaus or tight leggings.”

There is an Islamic penal code (article 619) stating that “anyone who harasses children or women in public places and passages or insults them with remarks or behaviors which are contrary to dignity and honor will be sentenced to prison from 2 to 6 months or 74 lashes.” However, women rarely complain to the courts about street harassment due to lack of awareness about this law, time-consuming process of complaining, the experience of street harassment being normal, and fear of being blamed (Lahsaeizadeh & Yousefinejad, 2011).

Chubin (2015) employs the method of auto-ethnography to narrate her lived experiences as an Iranian woman in order to demonstrate “how women negotiate their survival from sexual harassment on a daily basis in the streets of Tehran” and explains how social interactions reinforce the culture of shame which encourages women to remain silent about the harassment and how this silent could also be considered as a resisting method (Chubin, 2015). The fact that talking about sexual matters is taboo in Iran and any related issue should remain silent is the reason why there are very few reports or studies on street harassment in Iran despite the fact that it happens frequently.

**Rationale for the study**

Despite the lack of official national statistics on the prevalence of street harassment, the phenomena is believed to be widespread in Iran due to the country’s androcentric environment and specific circumstances such as compulsory hijab, sex segregation at schools and public transport, and
gender inequality. Iran is ranked 118 on the gender equality index in the UN human development report.

One study from Isfahan city in Iran reported that 98.25 percent of its respondent had witnessed street harassment for others. The study found that observed street harassment was significantly correlated with crowded places, traffic time, and used transport (Hashemianfar & Golstan, 2015). In another study of social aspects of experiencing sexual harassment in public places in Iran, Lahsaeizadeh and Yousefinejad (2011), found a significant correlation between experiencing sexual harassment and presence in public places, acceptance of gender rules, mother’s education and kind of women’s dressing and make up (Lahsaeizadeh & Yousefinejad, 2011).

Considering the normalization of street harassment and the fact that this gender-based violence is systematic, it would be interesting to see how young men from a patriarchal society would define and conceptualize street harassment. As Laniya puts it: “By recognizing that these acts are committed by ordinary men, a challenge arises to understand and change those normalized behaviors, encouraged by underlying systems, which influence the average male in society to act in this manner” (Laniya, 2005). Besides, examining the thoughts and perceptions of men would provide an opportunity to link the understanding of individuals to the larger social context in order to identify possible overlooked structures and mechanisms. This would also allow for comparison of divergent findings and maybe revealing mistaken beliefs.

**Study aim and objectives**

The aim of this study is to explore the thoughts of Iranian male university students about 'street harassment' in Iran. The main objectives are to investigate the ways men conceptualize the issue and discuss the factors influencing this conceptualization.

The research question is “What Iranian male university students think about street harassment in Iran?”
Theoretical framework

The premise that science and everyday human activities produce social construction of reality was first elaborated in the book: “The Social Construction of Reality” by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in 1967. This book functioned as the academic primer on social constructionism and sociology of knowledge. The authors argue that people in interplay generate society and that the way we perceived this society is constructed and therefore society is an objective reality that is subjectively created and perceived (Dahlgren, 2007). Berger and Luckmann argue that the sociologist needs to understand how the constructions are accepted as reality. What is concerned in the sociology of knowledge is the association between knowledge and its resulting social context since the constructions, eventually, turn into knowledge and “common sense”.

In any given social context, the members of society constantly interpret meanings. Through these interpretation, they form an idea about what reality is, what knowledge is, what is or isn’t important, and what is or isn’t a problematic issue. This applies to how sexual harassment is interpreted and perceived in a society. As mentioned in the introduction, feminists of the 1970s were the first to interpret sexual harassment as a problem and recognized it as a social issue which resulted in creating legal protection against sexual harassment by policymakers. The fact that sexual harassment became legitimized as a legal issue by legal institutions is referred to as institutionalization or reciprocal typification by Berger and Luckmann. Raising the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace by feminist theorists such as Katherine MacKinnon turned it into a well-known construction and a phrase with a shared meaning. This is a typification, as Berger and Luckmann describe it, which is solidified through language, signs, and shared meanings. The literature review outlines the history of how ideas of sexual harassment have evolved with the cultural paradigms concerning women, gender inequality, and sexuality.

Considering the connection between feminist movements, sexually aggressive behavior, and gender inequality, one needs to view sexual harassment not only through a social constructionism lens but also through a lens of feminism as well. Feminists in general construct sexual harassment as a result of the structure of patriarchy, and more recently, rape culture which is a by-product of patriarchy. Rape culture, a feminist theoretical concept, points out that societies support sexually aggressive behavior including rape by normalizing the ideas of gender inequality, rape myths, and victim blaming. However, unlike social constructionism, reality is viewed as objective by feminist theories. Since sexual harassment was born out of feminist movements, it is still studied as a feminist issue and mostly in law studies. MacKinnon’s (1979) idea that sexual harassment is used
to maintain power over women has been affirmed in other works; however this theory makes a heterosexist assumption that sexual harassment only happens between a man and a woman.

Undoubtedly, street harassment is a complex social issue that needs a complex form of investigation which Lennox and Jurdi-Hage (2017) argue is possible through applying critical realism (CR). The authors assert that CR considers the interplay of structure and agency, the theoretical, and the empirical realms at the same time which enables this approach to produce structural accounts which are “accounts of social reality that evaluate the role of social structures in producing social phenomena, and consider, for example, the various political, economic, and cultural means through which the patriarchal gender order is (re)produced and perpetuated” (Lennox & Jurdi-Hage, 2017). Arguing that street harassment is the empirical manifestation of patriarchy as an underlying structure which is actualized through different generative mechanisms, Lennox and Jurdi-Hage use “familial gender socialization” as an example to demonstrate how CR can be useful in understanding complex social problems. (See figure 1.)

Social constructionsim and some of the concepts from CR were used as a lens in analyzing and discussing the data in order to find possible mechanisms that may reinforce or counteract the ultimate manifestation of street harassment in a patriarchal society.

![Diagram of casual explanation for the study of street harassment](source: adapted from Sayer (2010: 109).

Fig. 1. The structure of casual explanation for the study of street harassment (Lennox & Jurdi-Hage, 2017)
CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

Research design

Qualitative research is known as a method that can mirror reality in data as a starting point providing an opportunity to discover new concepts, hypotheses or even theories (Dahlgren, 2007). Relevant variables can be identified through qualitative methodology to be used in later investigations. This method also provides the opportunity of clarifying and illuminating our understanding of the associations between these variables. In addition, as Dahlgren (2007) states “qualitative methodology can also contribute to the often very complex connection between contextual properties and individual behavior patterns” which makes this methodology appropriate for this study aiming to explore how norm-systems in the social environment can be internalized by the participants affecting their conceptualization of street harassment.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were chosen as the data collection method because they allow utilization of the group interactions in order to explore people’s knowledge. FGDs also provide an opportunity to know what and how people think about a specific problem and to explore how their views are constructed (Dahlgren, 2007).

Pilot study

The idea to interview only male participants was based on a pilot focus group discussion done earlier on the same subject with both male and female participants. However, the male participants from the pilot study seemed uncomfortable and rather quiet during the discussion. As a result, I decided not to be present at FGDs of this study since the presence of a woman could influence the richness of the data. It was assumed that participants would share and discuss their views more freely and honestly if they were all male. In order to provide a safe and trusting environment for the participants, a psychology student, from the same university, where the study was conducted, carried out the FGDs. This was also culturally appropriate because of the taboo around the subject of sexual harassment and the common practice of sex segregation in Iran. I also hid my gender by only using my initiative on the information sheet and consent forms.

Research context

At first glance, the status of women’s rights in Iran might appear contradictory since women’s participation in the work force or in parliament is one of the lowest in the world despite both low birth rates and women’s high levels of education. Tohidi (2016) offers an interesting overview of
the feminist movement and women's rights in Iran in one chapter of her book. The author draws attention to how socioeconomic developments, political trends, and cultural contexts (at national and international levels) have affected the movement's strategies, demands, effectiveness, and achievements (Tohidi, 2016).

Some of the main achievements of women’s movements, such as women entering the diplomatic and political organizations as ministers and judges and the “Family Protection Law” (equal rights in marriage, divorce, and child custody, increasing the minimum age of marriage to 18 for women and 20 for men, and eliminating polygamy), vanished after the Islamic revolution of 1979. The rights that women had gained under Shah’s regime, the previous government, were systematically removed by introducing new legislations, such as compulsory hijab. The “Family Protection Law” was also abolished since it was considered to be against Islam. The campaign of “One Million Signatures”, launched in 2006, might be the most notable women’s rights movement after the Islamic revolution which seeks to collect one million signatures in support of repealing the discriminatory laws against women in the country. However, many activists of the movement have been arrested, attacked, and jailed by the authorities. Another recognized movement is the online campaign called “My Stealthy Freedom” which originated as a Facebook page where Iranian women share their photos without hijab. This intuitive, started in 2014 by Iranian-born journalist Masih Alinejad, has received wide international and national coverage.

There have been different forms of "morality police" after the Islamic revolution in Iran but the current one is called Gasht-e Ershad (Guidance Patrols). Supported by Basij militia, Gasht-e Ershad’s main task is to enforce Iran's Islamic code of conduct in public, focusing on hijab. They can caution suspects, impose fines or arrest members of the public. Mobile apps with check points have been created to avoid encountering them. Tohidi (2016) reminds the readers that despite all the challenges, women's movement in Iran continues to grow and that civil society plays a central role in guaranteeing equal rights and gender justice.

**Research setting**

Based on the data from the World Bank, Iran is the second largest economy (GDP: US$412.2 billion, 2016) in Middle-East with population of 78.8 million people in 2015. Iran has a young population (64% - 30 years old and younger, 2010) with a high rate of youth unemployment (around 30 percent, 2016).

The study was conducted in the city of Tehran, the capital of Iran. Tehran has a cosmopolitan atmosphere and is home to diverse ethnic groups from around the country. Tehran is the most
populous city of Iran with around 9 million people living in the city and 16 million in the wider metropolitan area, the majority of this population being officially Shia Muslim. Tehran is also the educational center of Iran with nearly 50 major colleges and universities in the whole province.

Shahid Beheshti University (SBU), where the study was conducted, is among major educational institutions located in Tehran. This university that was established in 1959, today has 69 Bachelor’s, 208 Master’s, and 136 PhD programs in different fields such as Architecture and Urban Planning, Banking and Economics, Literature and Human Sciences, Basic Sciences, Law, Earth Sciences, Statistics and Informatics and Education and Psychology. The main campus, located in northwestern part of Tehran, is approximately one million square meters.

![Political map of Iran](http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/iran_map.htm)

Data collection

Dr. Bagherian, the dean of the social psychology department at SBU, was initially contacted in regards to obtaining an ethical clearance; however the head of the department’s interest in the research question led to collaboration in terms of data collection with the condition that the data would be shared with the research team of the social psychology department. The department
helped with obtaining necessary permissions needed for conducting the interviews and also with selecting a male interviewer.

A third year psychology student volunteered to conduct the focus group discussions as an extra activity for a course he had with Dr. Bagherian. A total number of 5 meetings were held, each between 1-2 hours. At the first meeting, the topic of street harassment and the specific aim of the study were explained to see if the interviewer was comfortable with the subject and to reach a verbal agreement on the teamwork. Second meeting was spent on discussing qualitative research, focus group discussions, being a moderator, and ethical considerations. We went through the focus group guide, the information sheet, and the consent forms double-checking my translations from English to Farsi, at the third meeting. The next meeting was held after conducting the first FGD discussing questions about how to better moderate the group discussions. Some of the questions were also edited. There was a short meeting with Dr.Baghrian at the same day discussing the implications of some of the Farsi words. The last meeting was held after the second FGD discussing time management and how to prevent someone from dominating the discussion. A present was offered to the interviewer as an appreciation for his time and effort. The audio-recorder that was bought for the FGDs was left with Dr.Baghrian to be used at the department.

Missing the opportunity to take notes of the body language of participants and to ask further questions for clarifications were the disadvantages of not being present at FGDs; however familiarity with the cultural expressions facilitated identifying some reactions such as: excitement, anger, shyness, seriousness, and sarcasm trough listening to the audio records. Two devices, one phone and one audio-recorder, were used to record the FGDs.

All four FGDs were conducted under a two-week period between 24\textsuperscript{th} of October and 4\textsuperscript{th} of November, 2016. Two focus groups were conducted at the computer department’s empty classrooms in the afternoon were all classes were finished. The other two were conducted at the study room at the students’ dormitory on a Friday (Friday is the weekend in Iran). Each FGD lasted between 45-60 minutes. An extra 15 minutes was allocated for offering beverages and snacks before the discussion began as a warm up time for the participants and also for reading the information sheet and signing the consent forms.

**Participants and sampling**

The target population for this study was young male participants who would want to talk about street harassment. In order to meet the need of focusing the discussion for richer deeper data and also to ease the situation for the participants considering the sensitivity of the subject, the groups
were chosen to be homogenous concerning age and educational level. As a result, male university students were chosen as the sample for this study. In addition, students are generally easy to access and usually have more spare time which is important especially in conducting FGDs. Recruiting participants from SBU provided the opportunity to have people from different cities, ethnicities, and backgrounds since many students from all over the country compete very year to get to Tehran’s important universities, including SBU.

Being a university student at SBU was the only criteria for selecting the participants. Participants were selected from different departments at SBU through the snowballing method. Four focus group discussions were conducted in total with 5 participants in each group. Participants were between 20-24 years old, from 13 different cities, and 9 different study majors including computers, electronics, law, economy, microbiology, and etc. Almost all students that were approached agreed to participate and the lack of time was the only reason mentioned by those who didn’t participate.

**Analysis**

Thematic analysis (TA) was used as the qualitative analytical method because it is flexible enough to be combined with other methods while allowing the researcher to identify, analyze and report patterns within the data. TA also enables the researcher to interpret various aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Prior to the transcription process, each FGD was listened to twice for initial familiarization with the data. At the next step, the whole data set was transcribed word by word in Farsi and notes were taken of any related concept that came to mind regarding the discussions. Initially the text was divided into English meaning units. The first two FGDs were coded in details and some initial themes and sub-themes were developed based on the surface meanings of the data. The next step was to look for explanations and underlying mechanisms that could explain the initial sub-themes by coding the other two FGDs accordingly. The theory of social constructionism was used as a lens through the whole data set in order to make sense of the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations about street harassment.

The sub-themes were renamed and rearranged in accordance to candidate themes several time to make sure they are coherent and non-overlapping. In search for a common thread to use as a narrative, one that could include and explain all findings, “Invisibility” was found as the overarching theme. “Invisibility” both represents how the participants conceptualize street harassment and explains some of the underlying mechanism of why the issue remains a problem in Iran. The table below shows some examples of the process of analysis.
... this person has some needs and men, considering their genetics and their nature [...] get sexually aroused easier than women... and he can’t get married so he satisfies his need this way ...

- Men are naturally easy to get sexually aroused
- Men need to satisfy their sexual desires

Normalisation and trivialization of the problem

It is because in our society everyone thinks that silence is a sign of agreeing. Right? But imagine you are a girl and I’m following you in a crowded street and you can’t say anything, you don’t want to make a scene, and the harasser thinks she likes it that is why she isn’t saying anything...

- Women are ashamed of speaking up
- Blaming the victim for not reacting

The culture of shame and prejudice

Socio-cultural and political silence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning unit</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Candidate theme</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>... this person has some needs and men, considering their genetics and their nature [...] get sexually aroused easier than women... and he can’t get married so he satisfies his need this way ...</td>
<td>- Men are naturally easy to get sexually aroused</td>
<td>Gendered stereotyped perception of men’s entitlements</td>
<td>Normalisation and trivialization of the problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is because in our society everyone thinks that silence is a sign of agreeing. Right? But imagine you are a girl and I’m following you in a crowded street and you can’t say anything, you don’t want to make a scene, and the harasser thinks she likes it that is why she isn’t saying anything...</td>
<td>- Women are ashamed of speaking up</td>
<td>The culture of shame and prejudice</td>
<td>Socio-cultural and political silence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Blaming the victim for not reacting</td>
<td>Patriarchal representation of femininity and of sexuality</td>
<td>Normalisation and trivialization of the problem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Ethical considerations**

Taking into consideration that the subject of the study is taboo in Iran, participants were informed what the project is about through a written information sheet before they signed the consent form. Additionally it was mentioned in the information sheet that the participants’ identities will be kept confidential and due to the nature of group discussions they were encouraged not to share anything too personal if they didn’t want to. They were also notified that the group discussions were going to be audio-recorded. The researcher is responsible for keeping the transcriptions in a safe private place for ten years. Written consent forms were obtained before the group discussions. Participants were also informed that there was no actual benefit in participating, nor would they be in any danger.

The formal ethical clearance was approved by the secretary of ethics committee of Shahid Beheshti University with the code of ethics SBU.ICBS.95/1007.
Reflexivity

As the researcher is considered to be the main instrument, the awareness of one’s role in the practice of research, process and outcomes of research is essential. Researcher and the object of study mutually and continually affect each other in the research process.

Leaving Iran as a young woman and going back after several years of living in a culturally, socially, and politically different context provided me with a position as part insider and part outsider. Growing up in the context and experiencing the subject of the study first hand for over 20 years were among the reasons for choosing the topic of street harassment so I had to be aware of my personal relationship with the subject reminding myself to stay objective. However, experiencing living in a more gender-equal context as an adult woman helped me to sharpen my observation noticing otherwise “normal” social interactions in the research context related to the subject of the study. For example, in one incident, I was observing students’ interactions with each other while waiting for one of the FGDs to end at what time I was called different because I was looking up and around. I had never noticed before that there are social gender norms on how one should look around or make eye contact in public. This experience may have pushed me towards using social constructionism as the theoretical lens for analyzing the data.

I also experienced some incidences of street harassment while I was in Iran collecting data. Although I reacted actively each time trying to reclaim my autonomy and my right to not be bothered in public space, I still felt frustrated and remembered why I had always chosen passive responses in the past. This might have influenced my view as a researcher to be more sensitive about the silence surrounding the topic of street harassment.

Analyzing the data felt overwhelming as I tried to distance myself from my feelings while listening and reading participants’ conversations which reminded me of my lived experiences of street harassment in Iran. Although these experiences might have burden me as a researcher trying to stay objective towards the data but they also has offered me an insight on the subject and the context that is not achievable through reading and studying theories.
CHAPTER THREE: RESULTS

An overarching theme, connecting two candidate themes, was developed which are illustrated in a chart. (See fig. 3) First candidate theme represents the discussions around normalization and trivialization of street harassment (normal, inevitable, and harmless) as a possible effect of gender-unequal values and social norms. This theme has two sub-themes: “Patriarchal representation of femininity and of sexuality” and “Gendered stereotyped perception of men’s entitlements”. The second candidate theme embodies the systematic silence around the subject of sexual harassment. Although participants lacked the skills to identify and discuss the structural reasons reinforcing the social problem of street harassment, they mentioned some of the socio-cultural and political aspects when they were discussing the reasons. Three sub-themes are included in this candidate theme: “The absence of discussion on definition and conceptualization”; “Ignoring the subject through Policies”; and “The culture of shame and prejudice”. Both normalization and the silence construct street harassment as an invisible problem not only to men who are not directly harmed by it, but also to the society as a whole.

Furthermore, a common thread among all FGDs was that participants started the discussions very defensively but moved towards logically discussing reasons and possible solutions. They eagerly expressed and defended their ideas, but also questioned and changed them at some point along the discussions. In addition, some of them mentioned that this was the first time that they were talking about an issue like street harassment and that one hour wasn’t enough for talking about it. The element of surprise when asked to specifically talk about street harassment as a problematic issue can further underline the invisibility of this gender-based violence. Based on two candidate themes and this common thread, the overarching theme was developed which describes street harassment as “an invisible gender-based violence” in Iran.

The meaning of signs used in the quotes:
Short silences [...] 
Explaining a word or a phase (    )
Text that is not shown    ...
Fig. 3. The findings: the overarching theme, the candidate themes, and their sub-themes

Normalization and trivialization of the problem

Patriarchal representation of femininity and of sexuality

One of the most dominant topics in discussing both the definition and the reason of street harassment was the perceived belief that women, maybe not all but most, like the attention they receive from stranger men viewing it as a compliment and a reassurance of their femininity. This implies the idea that women need and seek men’s approval in order to feel desirable.

Conversation:

- I can give you an example, I was walking on a crowded street and I saw 2-3 girls coming towards me, one of them took off her head scarf (Hijab) to adjust it and I accidently looked at her while passing, then I heard one of them telling others about how everyone stares at
her if she takes of her scarf for a second. She was saying that with happiness and excitement.

- When she wants it to happen, it can’t be called harassment.

- It’s relative. Maybe if someone gets a phone number, they think this is a sign that shows I have good manners that I could attract someone from the opposite sex and it shows that I am a social person.

- Some people enjoy these behaviors, I don’t want to judge, I just want to say that those who are like this, that like to see these behaviors […] they come outside (being in public) with a particular appearance, we all know that. If you see a woman wearing Chador (long Islamic Hijab) you would never think that she likes it, right?

- Harassment happens when the person shows potential

- I’m saying the same thing, we have two groups. Some really enjoy these behaviors and harassments….But we shouldn’t judge based on the way they dress because maybe they grew up in a place where everyone dress more freely…how can we tell these two groups apart?

–FGD 2 (00:30)

It is interesting how after talking for a few minutes, participants start to realize that even if some women enjoy these intrusions, it is not logical nor reasonable to assume that based on their appearances. This can show how some social norms and values are accepted blindly.

While discussing the definition of street harassment, the dominant idea was that lack of consent is necessary in defining any action as harassment.

What does harassment mean? It means, look, sexual harassment is when someone from the opposite sex, for example a girl for me as a boy, I want to […] harass her, it can be in different forms, from rubbing to offering sex or other things, right? If that girl isn’t willing it is called harassment but if she is willing then there is no harassment involved. –FGD1 (00:52)

This way of conceptualizing street harassment combined with the patriarchal belief system that most women enjoy or seek these intrusions place the responsibility and thus the blame of being the target of street harassment on the victims.
In my opinion, when me as a young man go out, I look down, god forbid, I look up, god help, I really don’t know [...] don’t know what to do, it’s the devil, I think this way of dressing by women affects our boys and stimulate them [...] it is the reason boys might do something naughty. –FGD 2 (00:07)

The most important factor is covering (the way one dresses). The second important factor that allows someone to harass her is her behavior and attitude. With my behavior and attitude I let you get close to me and harass me. These two, in my opinion, are the main reasons our young people let others harass them. –FGD3 (00:41)

Blaming the victims for being harassed in public places trivializes the problem by shifting the responsibility from harassers on to the victims meaning that women can easily avoid these intrusions by dressing and behaving according to the acceptable gender-unequal norms and values. This, consequently, conceptualizes most street harassment practices as normal and harmless, and not worthy of paying attention to.

It happens in the society, it’s natural. I think if this doesn’t happen in a society, there is something wrong with that society. How is it possible that there is no harassment? I can’t imagine that! –FGD 2 (00:40)

I don’t think street harassment is a critical issue, we have bigger problems. –FGD 3 (00:29)

Gendered stereotyped perception of men’s entitlements

Men’s sexual need was, by far, the most discussed topic. Participants viewed their sexual needs as an instinctual part of their nature, which if not respondent to, will have consequences. Many considered religious and cultural limitations as the main reasons for sexual frustration in Iran which they theorized as an explanation for street harassment. Some even used a very specific phrase to show the extent of this frustration calling Iran “the land of sexual hunger”.

Conversation:

- They say for example that Iran [...] is the land of sexual hunger, I think this is true because [...] this need isn’t responded to and it is one of the most fundamental human needs and when it’s not correctly responded to we surely go the wrong way.

- Men genetically and instinctually are people that [...] really [...] are sexually aroused easier than women....unfortunately in our country men get sexually aroused seeing the
smallest naked part of a woman’s body but it shouldn’t be like this….this feeling makes people crazy because it’s men’s instinct [...] then he tries to satisfy himself….even prophet Joseph was saved by God, let alone us, ordinary people.

–FGD 1 (00:14)

The reason for all these problems is the policies of our government. For example, they decided to segregate universities as well, only girls university and only boys university. If this happen society’s thirst will increase, it means sexual thirst of the society will increase which means these problems will get worse. –FGD 4 (00:14)

At the end of the quote above, participant mentioned a common religious story about a religious figure called Joseph who was sexually tempted by a married woman and needed God’s help to control himself. This shows how religious or cultural stories encourage and reinforce the masculine gender stereotypes portraying men as sexual predators unable to control their lust unless a miracle happens.

Not being able to get married at younger ages due to economical difficulties was initially discussed as another major reason for sexual frustration.

The right way is to get married if you have the conditions, have a job. He may want to get married but he can’t so he gets depressed. He thinks with himself that [...] this society that I’m living in [...] can’t respond to my need so I do something damaging in return. I see a girl I have to satisfy my need somehow, so I catcall or sexually harass her because I need something from society and it can’t respond to it so I do it in another way... right now people get married so late, at 30, that it doesn’t matter anymore [...] they have already done what they wanted to do. – FG D1 (00:20)

Since sex before marriage is not socially acceptable in Iran, I argue that participants mainly meant having sex when they talked about marriage.

Conversation:

- I’m saying the root of the problem is somewhere else. I say there is harassment because there isn’t marriage.

- But there are other ways for marriage.

– FGD 2 (00:41)
Later in the discussions participants had to face the fact that married men also harass women so no getting married can’t be the reason, however some tried to explain the problem as a bad habit that single men can’t quit after marriage. Others blamed it on the disappointment when marriage does not fit men’s sexual expectations.

Men have a natural ability to satisfy their needs by their imagination, women don’t have this ability…then in married his wife doesn’t match his imaginary woman, for example he says why my wife [...] we are all guys here [...] why doesn’t my wife kiss me like that, so he is not satisfied. –FGD1 (00:27)

In discussing solutions for those who can’t get married (can’t have sex), participants suggested “cabaret” and “Sighe”. By “cabaret” they meant places where they could buy sexual favors from prostitutes. “Sighe” is a religious term for temporary marriage and has its own rules and instructions. Participants further discussed the advantages, being recognized by law in Iran, and disadvantages, being a social taboo, of “Sighe” and called it the best solution to reduce street harassment.

You should get married by 19-20 and if you don’t have money you need to wait until 28, after 28 years there is nothing left of your sexual lust….so what do we do here? To preserve our sexual lust we use “Sighe”. –FGD 2 (00:56)

The masculine gender stereotypes make men feel entitled to sex and services from women whether it’s through marriage, “Sighe” (temporary marriage), prostitution, or street harassment. They also feel an entitlement to the public space where the very presence of women makes them uncomfortable. This way of viewing their sexual needs as important and natural means street harassment is a normal consequence of women’s presence in the public sphere.

Well it might be more comfortable for that woman to come and sit in the public section with men but is it comfortable for me as a man in that wagon? What am I supposed to look at? – FGD 2 (00:10)
Socio-cultural and political silence

The absence of discussion on definition and conceptualization

Defining street harassment was a challenging task for participants. They discussed the prevalence, different types, places, and preconditions in defining an act as street harassment, however there were some disagreements. The initial disagreement was about the prevalence of street harassment in Iran, ranging from rare to very common, and then about comparing the situation in Iran to other countries, mostly high-income western countries based on what they had seen in movies.

Conversation:

- *We see even countries with more freedom have these problems. We can’t say that it happens more often in Iran because there is no freedom. I don’t know, it happens everywhere, in the west, in the US. I don’t think their rape cases are fewer than ours.*

- *What we see in the west is transparent, right? But in our country so many things aren’t clear, many rape cases are kept quiet due to prejudice and honor culture. We only see a small fraction.*

- *These things that media is showing us that in western countries they have rapes, they only show us those cases not the whole picture.*

–FGD 1 (00:44)

Although everyone agreed on lack of consent and insisting after rejection being the most important preconditions for an action to be considered harassment, they disagreed on whether harassment is a relative or a universal concept.

Conversation:

- *I’m saying maybe in as a girl in Iran if a boy even talks to me, it would be considered harassment but outside of Iran, if someone talks to you it is normal*

- *This is not a problem, it’s not harassment*

- *It depends on my perspective of the receiver; it doesn’t depend on the person’s action, the guy is doing the same thing*

- *The other one is with consent, harassment doesn’t happen with consent*
- So it depends on your perception of that action

- Harassment means one person is rejecting while the other one is insisting

- Because we are more religious even if I ask the time she gets upset but not outside of Iran

- That is just one person’s idea, street harassment is street harassment everywhere in the world.

–FGD 3 (00:12)

Lack of official statistical reports and low awareness of the prevalence of street harassment have many reasons; however, the main problem is that this absence of a unified definition and statistics assist the historical silence of this gender-based violence. I also noticed an absence of proper discourse regarding the concept of rape. There is a word that is used for rape in Farsi “tajavoz”; however, this word when literally translated to English means intrusion so to be more specific when using it to describe rape it actually means sexual intrusion since this word is also used when describing intrusion of private space.

Conversation:

- I’ve never seen any rape (tajavoz) in metro, neither in buses…

- Do you mean harassment by that?

- Yes, harassment, intrusion of private space…..

–FGD 2 (00:13)

**Ignoring the subject through Policies**

Participants mentioned two main policies when discussing the reason of street harassment. A dominant idea in all four FGDs was that the sex segregation policy in Iran, specially segregated schools has limited the interactions between boys and girls resulting in distance, unfamiliarity, miscommunication, and getting more curious about each other.

Conversation:

- One of our problems is that we have public sections in metro (both men and women are allowed) which means providing opportunity for harassment, right? If there were no mixed wagon...
Do you want to sex segregate the streets as well?

Culture is important but we need to reduce the opportunities...

This is actually wrong...you can’t separate the streets...the more you close the environment (more control) the more closed minded people get...then you see the consequences somewhere else.

This is the exact way of thinking that made us be separated in elementary and high school, and then suddenly at university we are together

If we made a revolution in minds then there is no need for separate wagons

If this happens there is no need for sex segregation, we can all live in peace together.

Sex segregation is deleting the problem instead of solving it

–FGD 2 (00:19)

This sex segregation policy both reinforces and being reinforced by the familial gender socializations since any form of interactions between boys and girls are discouraged also by most families.

It is because our culture and family upbringings in a way that they portray boys as dangerous for girls...her father tells her not o talk to any boy, boys talk to you for this reason, with this intention. –FGD 3 (00:14)

Some cultured families teach well-mannered boys and girls...you see them at the university comfortably talking to everyone...without having a relationship...it all depend on the culture of the society and families. –FGD 3 (00:25)

The lack of sex education, both at schools and in families, was also discussed. Similar to sex segregation, the absence of sexual education, or any discussion around sexual topics, is ignoring the issues instead of trying to solve them.

Conversation:

Education is essential, they shouldn’t feel shy, the father, the mother, even the teachers shouldn’t be shy [...] we used to have family planning course which explained these issues more openly but now they only teach religion and life, which means not only we did not improve our education level, but also went backwards.
- You are right; education is the base of everything. We are human, we have brains, and there is a way for everything.

– FGD 1 (00:59)

These ignoring ways of dealing with sexual issues not only reinforce the silence on these subjects but also have eventual irreversible effects on sexual health and the quality of life so many people. Participants also mentioned compulsory hijab as a way of ignoring the real issue and in fact reproducing the gender-unequal values and norms.

Coversation:

- In Iran when media wants to discuss street harassment they only show girls with less strict hijab being harassed.

- They want to promote hijab

- They are like if you wear chador (long Islamic hijab) then

- Then everything is solved, this is shallow perspective...this is exactly deleting the problem... they show the boys as innocent people and girls as tempting that boys come forward because they are tempted by this girl so if you, lady, cover up yourself the society wouldn’t have this problem while this problem has deeper roots.

– FGD 3 (00:52)

The culture of shame and prejudice

The culture of shame that encourages women not to react and stay silent is another mechanism through which street harassment is reinforced. This is even more important considering participants’ perception of consent as a central factor in defining street harassment. Almost all participants described lack of consent as a loud and noticeable reaction to the harassment, such as yelling, screaming, and fighting.

For example, one of my friends was in a ceremony and he went [...] for example [...] he did something standing behind a woman [...] for example rubbing himself on her, then the point is that sometimes in the reaction of this harassment that you say [...] most of these are harassment but sometimes they don’t show any special reaction which means they were ok with what happened. We can’t say that only men are sick, our society has become sick. – FGD 1 (00:49)
If you bother me once I would stop you with an assertive reaction then you wouldn’t dare to talk to me again but if you bother me once and I asked you to stop while smiling, you would think you can bother me again. –FDG 3 (00:43)

However, some participants seemed to be aware of the effect that the culture of shame has in constructing the misconception that silence is a sign of consent.

There is this saying in this society that silence is sign of consent, right? Then imagine you are girl and I’m following you and catcalling, you pass and you can’t say anything, you just get angry in a crowed street where many people are walking. You think it is going to make me look bad, let’s not say anything. Then the harasser thinks that you liked it since you didn’t complain so he continues and at the end that woman accepts the phone number just to get rid of the guy. –FGD 4 (00:33)

Although participants mentioned most types of street harassment with examples, they were more aware of less physical one such as staring, catcalling, following, and groping compare to flashing and public masturbation. The opening story contained an example of flashing which shocked most participants explaining that they had never seen or even heard of such behavior. Public masturbation wasn’t mentioned at all. The fact that all participants were male can explain why they had never seen more serious forms of street harassment since they tend to happen in more isolated place than in crowded places. However, the fact that none of them had heard about flashing could prove that women don’t talk about their experiences of street harassment. Besides the culture of shame, this could be also explained by another cultural phenomenon called “gheyrat” which means prejudice which is considered a masculine norm.

Conversation:

- Then there is this issue called “gheyrat” (prejudice). We had a sister and a brother in our neighborhood, then one day the sister was right outside their house when a boy catcalled her while passing by, her brother saw this and killed that boy right there. Maybe it is not that common any more but I think many fights happens due to this concept of “gheyrat” ...it’s even worse in the south part of the city (lower socio-economic status), it could be critical.

- I don’t see this as a problem [...] fighting is a problem [...] but if we are careful so nobody catcalls is not a problem.

–FGD 2 (00:37)
Concepts, shame and “gheyrat”, are examples of how cultural gender norms can reinforce the silence around sexual harassment and how this silence help this gender-based violence to perpetuate by making it invisible.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

Like any other social phenomenon, street harassment, is the outcome of complex processes impacted by different structures and countless mechanisms. The findings of this research seem to be in agreement with previous scholarly work, arguing that street harassment is a manifestation of the structure of patriarchy.

Patriarchal representation of femininity and sexuality and gendered stereotyped perception of men’s entitlement to sex are also mentioned in comprehensive review of factors related to the perpetuation of violence against women by Hagemann-White et al. (2010). However, the participants in this research appeared totally unaware of the structural power relations which left them unable to answer their questions in discussing street harassment in the groups. They didn’t even once mention patriarchy, men’s entitlement, or gender inequality. This is in contrast with the findings from the pilot FGD that included female participants who mentioned patriarchy right in the beginning of the discussion. While the unequal gender power is obvious to women, it seems to be invisible to men. They might not even be aware that they are exercising such power which is being actualized through many different generative mechanisms. This further highlights the importance of discovering the underlying mechanisms, their relations to each other, and the conditions in the society that reinforce or counteract each mechanism.

Gender socialization is one of these mechanisms that manifests as gender-unequal values and norms in the society. Women enjoying men’s attention and men’s entitlement to sex were identified as gender values that play the main roles in men’s conceptualization of street harassment. How these two gender norms are being socialized in Iran requires more research. Bowman (1993) argues that the reason some women report perceiving street harassment as complimentary is the androcentric environment that invisiblizes and trivializes the harms of street harassment since men are not affected by them. Under this androcentric culture women are conditioned to view street harassment as a reward, inevitable, inoffensive, and harmless which is known as the phenomenon of “false consciousness” a manifestation of women’s lack of autonomy within male hegemony. (Daavis, 1994; Laniya, 2005). So not only do we need to delegitimize narratives describing street harassment as harmless flirtation and a behavior that women enjoy, we also need to raise women’s
awareness of this false consciousness. This is in line with Lennox and Jurdi-Hage (2017) suggesting that women should share the true nature of street harassment loudly and widely visible in order to change the discourse. This can be the counteract mechanism of gender socialization.

The finding from this study about men’s entitlement to sex suggests that while controlling oneself is an essential part of feminine gender norms, masculine gender norms aren’t concerned with control and responsibility. The way participants extensively discussed the importance of their sexual need without considering the consequences of their actions shows that they are conditioned to feel free instead of feeling the responsibility of controlling themselves. Deeper digging needs to be done to find out the underlying mechanisms and structural interactions that socialize the gender-unequal values and norms of entitlement, control, and responsibility in the discourse of sex and sexual needs. Cultural, political, and religious structures of the context play important roles in both reinforcing and counteracting these mechanisms. As a tradition in Iran, brides are asked three times before they say “I do” while grooms answer the first time. This simple and seemingly harmless tradition can reinforce the norm that women should be shy and careful in making decisions while men don’t need to. This could also partly explain Iranian men’s insisting and ignoring the rejection because they believe the rejection is just part of submitting to a gender value.

While feminist activists in the west has concurred the silence around sexual harassment, the issue remains very silent in Iran specially since the Islamic revolution in 1971 which set a regressive path for feminist activities and achievements. Some of the socio-cultural and political interactions that are reinforcing the systematic silence around the issue of sexual harassment came up in this research’s discussions. The fact that silence and lack of discussion about the definition, conceptualization, and prevalence of this gender-based violence will only lead to more silence is not surprising. Previous studies have established the importance of naming and defining street harassment. Policy makers’ ignorance towards sexual issues has led to useless and harmful policies such as sex segregation, no sex education, and compulsory hijab. The interaction between social, political, and religious structures and their roles in persevering or transforming these policies are beyond the measure of this thesis. However, their roles in reinforcing the systemic silence around street harassment are undeniable.

The most important contribution of this study, however, might be the last finding regarding women’s passive reaction of silence to street harassment. Kelly (2012) conceptualized women’s passive responses as “safety work” in order to account for watchfulness, cognitions, and decision-making processes employed by women when facing street harassment. Chubin (2014) explains how social interactions encourage Iranian women to stay silent about street harassment by reinforcing
the culture of shame. The author argues that “women’s silent reaction to these experiences is both the result of such subjugation and also a strategic form of resistance.” Acknowledging the fact that women’s passive reactions are in fact full of calculated actions to avoid escalation, sending refusal signals, and not satisfying the harasser by giving him a response is very important; however, to the participants in this study these passive reactions seemed totally invisible. This is especially important since lack of consent was viewed as the most important precondition in defining any action as street harassment by almost all participants. They conceptualized an act as street harassment only if it leads to assertive and clear objections such as yelling, screaming, fighting, and complaining. This implies that passive reactions, although sometimes necessary for safety, aren’t able to get the message across. Besides, years of practicing silence, in the hopes of men recognizing the indifference and gradually getting tired, have proved to be ineffective. So women’s active reaction to street harassment is a counteract mechanism for the culture of shame that encourages women to be silent.

Lastly, I noticed a very hetero-normative discourse throughout the whole dataset such as, the opposite sex, the two sexes, boys and girls, men and women, and etc. In addition, no one mentioned transgender community as a target of street harassments despite the fact that Iran has one of the highest rates of sex-reassignment surgeries and even encourages homosexuals to go through the surgery since being homosexual is a crime in Iran. To learn whether this silence is selective or due to lack of knowledge necessitates further study.

Producing change

In order to understand how structures affect everyday life, it is critical that we learn to think sociologically. This is not limited to views about gender inequality but can also inform views about race, class, and other issues that need to be considered critically. Understanding feminism is important to everyone. It is important to girls and women so they understand and de-normalize the harassment they face. It is also important to boys and men so they understand the role of structural power so they can shift their views that street harassment is the result of individual factors enabling them to take responsibility for their actions. They also need to understand that the unequal-gender norms and toxic masculinity have also negative consequences for men in terms of adapting high-risk behaviors. Perhaps, the current political atmosphere in Iran isn’t very accommodating to any feminist movement but the recent technological advances can be utilized as platforms for providing information and opportunities for discussions. More importantly, experiences of street harassment need to be visibly shared and registered as a gender-based violence and a violation of human rights.
Limitations and future research

The primary limitation to this research was the homogenous sample. Although having a homogenous group allows a more focused and deeper discussion, the choice was partly due to the time and budget limitation of this study. A larger more diverse sample size is recommended for future research. The second limitation was using an interviewer. Although using a male interviewer provided a safer space for the participants, some subjects mentioned in the groups could have been discussed further if the researcher was present at the FGDs. Another limitation of this study was that the questions were very broad in order to explore freely and not limiting the participants, however this led to discussions getting away from the main subject. As a complex social issue, street harassment has many different aspects that need to be addressed in research so the recommendation for future studies is that only one area of interest should be chosen in order to achieve richer data. Last but not least, is the lack of discussion on religion, especially in this context where religion plays an essential role in political decision making. This is due to the researcher’s lack of knowledge on the subject. Although to draw a clear line between political, cultural, and religious factors in Iran is almost impossible, it is essential to better understand the ways through which religion as a structure influences the discourse of sexual harassment and gender norms in Iran.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Iranian male university students are inadequately aware of the definition, conceptualization, and prevalence of street harassment and lack knowledge and skills to discuss the structural and social interactions that perpetuate this gender-based violence in Iran. They mainly discussed their sexual need and blamed women, sex segregation, and lack of education as the main reasons and suggested education and temporary marriage as the solution with most potential. However, few mentioned culture and policies without any deeper discussion. The data indicates that they are totally unaware of the relation between power, gender inequality, and the concept of patriarchy, which in itself is a sign of an androcentric culture. Street harassment was conceptualized as normal and invisible since it doesn’t concern them. However, most participants were eager to discuss the topic and tried to view it from a logical point of view. They developed their arguments as the discussion went on and admitted that this topic needs to be discussed and studied which confirms that just providing a safe space and the opportunity for discussions can raise people’s awareness of social problems.
The possible underlying mechanisms that were identified based on the data partly explain how gender-unequal values and socio-cultural structures can play a role in the normalization, trivialization, and the silence regarding street harassment in Iran. What appears to be essential at this point to fight street harassment in Iran is to be loud. Defining street harassment, accessing statics nationally and globally, identifying culture specific mechanisms (reinforcing and counteraction patriarchy), raising awareness and changing the discourse trough activism, reacting actively when possible, and bridging the gap between all genders by providing discussion opportunities are some of the possible ways towards a more gender-equal and a safer society. Any discussion on the topic of sexual health and rights and violence against women in Iran is a step forward.
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Focus Group Discussion Guide

Exploring the perception of male university students about street harassment in Iran

Aim:
The aim of this focus group discussion is to explore what male university students think about street harassments in Iran.

Participants:
A total number of 4-6 focus group discussions would be conducted with 5-7 participants in each group. Participants would randomly be selected among university students from 6 different universities at different parts of the city. The discussions would be conducted by a male interviewer who I would train about the subject and about being a moderator in focus group discussion.

Place and the planned duration:
The university administration would be contacted to ask for a private and quiet room for maximum 90 minutes. The focus group discussion would take 45-60 minutes and some extra time is considered for participants to get to know each other before the discussion starts (coffee/tea and sweets would be offered).

Introduction:
The introduction includes: information about the moderator (a male interviewee) and the field of study; information about the anonymity, the choice to leave the group at anytime, verbal consent on audio recording; and information about group discussion rules such as: to be respectful and tolerant, to not interrupt others, and etc.

Topics to be discussed:
The main question would be introduced through a news report.
The main subject is about street harassments in Iran, from physical touches till verbal harassments and even just an inappropriate look and etc. Two Italian women who visited Iran for two weeks published a report on their trip to Iran on social networks after returning to Italy. The text of the report along with the release of six shots from the market, the subway and the streets of Iran, showed the sexual harassment the two women faced by Iranian men. These women have claimed that the man who cleaned the Mosque in Isfahan, displayed his genitals from a little distance and then walked in front of them, or some man touched their hips in Kashan, and a boy in Tehran Metro offered them sex. The report was reflected in Italian media, including a famous newspaper "Corriere della Sera" and "libero" and quickly attracted the attention of social media users. The Iranians response to the report in social networks is interesting. Some users denied sexual harassment of the two Italian women and called it a lie and others acknowledged that there are some problems in Iran, but that they’ve exaggerated it in the report and the situation is not that serious. On the other hand many Iranian women shared their experiences of street sexual harassment by men confirming the existence of this problem, they also believe that every woman face similar problems so many times from early ages.

Main Question:
What do you think about the street sexual harassments in Iran?

Prompting questions or areas of probing:
- What are we talking about when we say street harassment? What would you consider as street harassment?
- Is street harassment a problem in Iran? How serious do you think this problem is?
- Why do you think men do this? What are their motivations?
- Do you have any experiences regarding street harassment?
- Why don’t we see more women stand up against street harassment when it happens?

Closure:
I’d like to thank you all for an interesting discussion and for sharing your personal experiences and thoughts. Does anyone want to add something or ask a question?
I would like to provide participants with an educational short film about street harassment!
راهنمای (FGD)

Focus Group Discussion

بررسی درک دانشجویان پسر در مورد آزار و اذیت های خیابانی در ایران

هدف:

هدف از انجام این بحث گروهی کشف و بررسی درک و دیدگاه دانشجویان پسر است در مورد آزارهای خیابانی در ایران.

شرکت کنندگان:

بین 5 تا 6 بحث گروهی انجام خواهد شد که در هر کدام 7 شرکت کننده حضور دارند. شرکت کنندگان به صورت تصادفی از بین دانشجویان پسر انتخاب خواهد شد. ترجیحاً از بین دانشجویان رشته های فنی برای کاهش شامل شدن شاخص دانش دانشجویان مطالعات و اطلاعات علمی در مورد پیشنهادهای اجتماعی و در نتیجه نزدیک تر بودن به نرم های اجتماعی عمومی.

بحث های گروهی توسط یک مصاحبه کننده خانم مرد در مورد درک خواهد شد که در مورد موضوع تحقیق و چگونگی اداره کردن یک بحث گروهی آموزش خواهد دید.

مکان و مدت زمان برنامه ریزی شده برای بحث های گروهی:

به مناسبت دانشگاه برای دسترسی به یک اتاق خصوصی و آرام به مدت 90 دقیقه برای هر گروه در مدت 90 دقیقه می‌تواند زمان مورد نظر باشد. مدت زمان هر بحث گروهی بین 30 تا 60 دقیقه باشد. وقت اضافه در نظر گرفته شده برای آشنا شدن شرکت کنندگان با یکدیگر پیش از شروع بحث. (پذیرایی از شرکت کنندگان با چای و شیرینی)

مقدمه:

در اولین مرحله یک سری اطلاعات در اختیار شرکت کنندگان قرار خواهد گرفت، شامل: اطلاعات در مورد مصاحبه کننده و زمینه تحقیق، اطلاعات در مورد بی‌نام بودن (anonymity) و امکان ترک کردن گروه در هر زمان، گرفتن رضایت کلامی و ثبت آن توسط صوتی و اطلاعات راجع به ترتیب و مدت زمانی که نظرات شما در مورد موضوعات مختلفی از جمله: احترام گذاشتن به دیگر افراد گروه و تحمل شنیدن نظرات مخالف، قطع نکردن حرف دیگران، و غیره...

بحث مورد بحث:

موضوع و پرسش مورد نظر به وسیله یک گزارش خبری معرفی می‌شود.

موضوع اصلی این گزارش آزارهای خیابانی در ایران، این آزارها می‌توانند فیزیکی، کلامی یا حتی یک نگاه نامناسب باشند. دو زن ایتالیایی که به مدت دو هفته به ایران سفر کردند به مورد سفرشون گزارشی نوشتند که در شبکه‌های اجتماعی و روزنامه‌های ایتالیا منتشر شد. این گزارش در مورد هشت‌گانه با گزارش می‌شود که در مورد مسجدی در اصفهان موردی در حالی که این امر نمایی می‌کرد. این آزارهای جنجالی در مورد های خیابانی عمومی و حصرتند. در این گزارش ادعایی که در مسجدی در اصفهان موردی در حالی که اورت نمایی می‌کرد. این آزارهای جنجالی در مورد های خیابانی عمومی و حصرتند.
کرده و یک پسر در مترو تهران بهشون پیشنهاد سکس داده. بازتاب این گزارش در رسانه‌های مطرح ایتالیا از جمله "Corriere della Sera" و "libero" باعث شد که کاربران شبکه‌های اجتماعی به این گزارش واکنش نشون دهن.

و اکتش کاربران ایرانی در شبکه‌های اجتماعی به این گزارش جالب بود. بعضی‌ها این گزارش ها را انکار کردن و معتقد بودن این خانم‌ها دروغ گفتن، تعدادی ثبت کردن مشکلاتی در ایران وجود داره و لی این گزارش افراد آمیز بوده و مشکلات اونقدر چند نیست. از طرف دیگر خیلی زن‌های ایرانی شروع کردن به اشتراک گذاری تجربه‌های شخصی مشابهی که داشتند و تایید کردن که این یک مشکل جدی و روزمره در ایرانه و منتقد بودن که تقریباً همه زن‌ها از سن کم با مشکلات مشابه رویروی هستند.

پرسش اصیل:

شما در مورد آزارهای خیابانی یا همون آزارهای جنسی در مکان‌های عمومی چه نظری دارید؟

Prompting questions:

بکنی می‌گذرم آزارهای خیابانی در مورد چه کسی صحبت می‌کنیم؟

از این آزارهای خیابانی مشکل اساسی و جدای ای در ایرانه؟ یا چه موضوعی می‌توانم بگم این مسئله تبئید به یه مشکل می‌شیه؟

به نظر شما چطور جامعه دیجیتال این مشکل می‌شیشه؟ اگرچه افراد زاویه‌نگر چی می‌تونه باشه؟

به نظر شما رویکرد کمی این مشکلات مواجه می‌شین؟

به نظر شما واکنش مناسب در مقابل آزارها چی می‌تونه باشه؟

به نظر شما چرا زن‌های بیشتری در مورد واکنش نشون نمی‌دهند وقتی که داره اتفاق می‌افتد؟

آیا شما تجربه‌ی با داستانی در مواجهه‌ی نزدیک با یک مرد در داشته‌ای؟

خاتمه:

می‌خواهیم از همگی برای یک بحث جالب مسئله‌ی زناشویی کم، همینطور به خاطر به اشتراک گذاری تجربه‌ها و دیدگاه‌های شخصیت‌های چیزی اضافه کنیم یا پرسشی داره؟
APPENDIX B: INFORMATION SHEET FOR FOCUS GROUPS

Information Sheet

*Exploring the perception of male university students about street harassment in Iran*

My name is N.Biglarbegi, an “International Health” master student at Uppsala University. I’m doing a research on what men think about street harassments in Iran as my master thesis. I’m going to give you some information and invite you to participate in a group discussion along with 4-6 other male participants. Mr. … a colleague of mine would be conducting the interviews which I would transcribe and analyze later. The participation is totally voluntary and you should read this information sheet carefully before you decide if you want to participate or not, although you also have the right to leave the study whenever you want. You can talk to anyone you want or ask any question you have about this project.

Women all over the world face harassments on streets or public places which can include unwanted whistling, persistent requests for someone’s name or number, name callings, comments and demands, following, flashing, public masturbation, groping, sexual assault, and rape. We are trying to find out what young men think about this issue.

Each group would include 5-7 participants (18 - 40 years old) and it would take about 45 minutes. I would provide some questions for ex. “How would you define street harassment?” and you would discuss your ideas and point of view with the other participants.

We will not share your information with anyone outside of the research team. The group discussions would be audio-recorded, which would be destroyed after analyzing the data is done. The transcriptions would be kept in a safe private place for ten years by the researcher and all the information would be kept private. Any information about you would only be displayed with a number and only I would know who the number belongs to. The result of this study would be made public at the university library.

We ask everyone in the group not to talk to others about what is said in the discussion, but we can’t guarantee that so if there is any personal story that you don’t want anyone to know think twice before sharing it.
برگه اطلاعات

پروپوزال دانشجویان پس در مورد آزارهای خیابانی در ایران

من ن.بگلربگی هستم، دانشجوی کارشناسی ارشد در رشته "بهداشت جهانی" از دانشگاه اوپسالا در سوئد. من تصمیم گرفتم برای بررسی درک دانشجویان پسر در مورد آزارهای خیابانی در ایران، این پروپوزال را درک کنم. من نیازمند اطلاعاتی در مورد تحقیق خود هستم و همچنین از شما دعوت می‌کنم تا در یک بحث گروهی همراه با ۴ یا ۵ نفر دیگر شرکت کنید. اگر اطلاعات را ارائه دهیم، باید گروه‌ها و دیگر افرادی که جزئی از کنندگان هستند در این‌سانه حاکی از اینکه شما این پروپوزال را به دقت مطالعه کنید. شرکت کردن در این تحقیق جامعه ویژه ایجاد شده است و شما این حق را دارید که در هر زمانی این تحقیق را ترک کنید.

زن ها در همه جای دنیا روزانه با مزاحمت‌هایی در خیابان یا مکان‌های عمومی مواجه هستند، شامل: سوت زدن، اصرار بر گرفتن نام و شماره تلفن، شنیدن اسامی ناخواسته، کامنت و درخواست، دنبال کردن، اورت نمایی، خود ارضایی، دست زدن، تعارض جنسی، و تجاوز. ما می‌خواهیم تلاش کنیم تا نظر مردان را در این باره بدانیم. هر گروه بین ۵ تا ۷ شرکت کننده خواهد داشت (در بازه سنی ۱۸ تا ۴۰ سال) و بحث گروهی حدود ۴۵ دقیقه تا ۱ ساعت زمان خواهد برد.

تعدادی سوال مطرح خواهد شد روی آزارهای مختلف بوده و شما همچنین می‌توانید در این مورد با بهترین ها و افرادی که چه کسی نیستند مشورت کنید با هم. یکی از سوالات مطرح خواهد شد که بعد از انجام انالیز از بین بردید. اطلاعات نوشته‌ای شده به مدت ۱۰ سال در مکانی امن توسط ما ارائه خواهد شد. به طور کلی اطلاعات در مورد شما فقط با یک شماره مشخص می‌شود و تنها از همکارانی که می‌دانند شما هستید می‌توانند به شما برسند. اظهارات شما مکتوب می‌مانند و اطلاعات نوشته‌ای شده به هیچکسی باقی نمی‌ماند.

ما اطلاعات و نظرات شما را با هیچکسی خارج از گروه تحقیق درمیان نمی‌گذاریم. بحث گروهی به صورت ضبط خواهد شد که بعد از انجام انالیز از بین بردید. اطلاعات نوشته‌ای شده به مدت ۱۰ سال در مکانی امن ارائه خواهد شد. به طور کلی اطلاعات در مورد شما فقط با یکی از کارکنان گروهی ارائه خواهد شد و تنها از همکارانی که می‌دانند شما هستید می‌توانند به شما برسند. نتایج این تحقیق قبل از کتابخانه دانشگاه اوپسالا قابل دسترس خواهد بود.

ما اطلاعات و نظرات شما را با هیچکسی خارج از گروه تحقیق درمیان نمی‌گذاریم. بحث گروهی به صورت ضبط خواهد شد که بعد از انجام انالیز از بین بردید. اطلاعات نوشته‌ای شده به مدت ۱۰ سال در مکانی امن ارائه خواهد شد. به طور کلی اطلاعات در مورد شما فقط با یکی از کارکنان گروهی ارائه خواهد شد و تنها از همکارانی که می‌دانند شما هستید می‌توانند به شما برسند. نتایج این تحقیق قبل از کتابخانه دانشگاه اوپسالا قابل دسترس خواهد بود.

شما می‌توانید از طریق ایمیل به من تماس بگیرید و هر سوالی داردید پرسید. آدرس ایمیل من:

nbiglarbegi@gmail.com
APPENDIX C: Consent forms

Consent form for participants

Participants Copy

I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print Name of Participant__________________

Signature of Participant ___________________

Date ___________________________

Day/month/year

Statement by the researcher/person taking consent

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant, and to the best of my ability made sure that the participant understands all the information about this project. I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Print Name of Researcher/person taking the consent___________________________

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent___________________________

Date ___________________________

Day/month/year

Contact information:  E-mail address nbiglarbegi@gmail.com  Phone number +46-704068683

* Templates for informed consent adapted from WHO (World Health Organization)
Consent form for participants

Research team Copy

I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print Name of Participant__________________

Signature of Participant ___________________

Date ___________________________

Day/month/year

Statement by the researcher/person taking consent

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant, and to the best of my ability made sure that the participant understands all the information about this project. I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Print Name of Researcher/person taking the consent_____________________

Signature of Researcher/person taking the consent_____________________

Date ___________________________

Day/month/year

Contact information: E-mail address nbiglarbegi@gmail.com Phone number +46-704068683

* Templates for informed consent adapted from WHO (World Health Organization)
فرم رضایت برای شرکت کنندگان

(کپی تیم تحقیق)

من اطلاعات فوق را خوانده ام، یا برای من خوانده شده است. من این فرصت را داشته ام تا سوالاتم را بپرسم و از جواب سوالات پرسیده شده راضی هستم. من به صورت داوطلبانه رضایت می دهم که یکی از شرکت کنندگان در این تحقیق باشم:

نام شرکت کننده: .......................................
امضاء شرکت کننده: ..................................
تاریخ: ...................................................

اطلاعات تماس:

E-mail address nbiglarbegi@gmail.com
Phone number +46-704068683

* Templates for informed consent adapted from WHO (World Health Organization)
فرم رضایت برای شرکت کنندگان

(کپی شرکت کننده)

من اطلاعات فوق را خوانده ام و یا برای من خوانده شده است. من این فرصت را داشته ام تا سوالاتم را بپرسم و از جواب سوالات پرسیده شده راضی هستم. من به صورت داوطلبانه رضایت می دهم که یکی از شرکت کنندگان در این تحقیق باشم:

نام شرکت کننده: ....................................
امضاء شرکت کننده: ..................................
تاریخ: ....................................................

اطلاعات تماس:

E-mail address  nbiglarbegi@gmail.com
Phone number +46-704068683

* Templates for informed consent adapted from WHO (World Health Organization)