



The experience of sexual harassment victims in accessing counseling services at higher education institutions in Samarinda

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand the experiences of sexual harassment victims in accessing counseling services at higher education institutions in Samarinda. The research addresses a gap in the literature, as most previous studies have focused more on the legal, sociological, and psychological aspects of sexual harassment but have not deeply explored the experiences of victims in accessing counseling services at the university level. This qualitative phenomenological research employed the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. The participants consisted of four sexual harassment victims from two universities, one public and one religious-based institution. The findings of this study identified three main barriers. First, a lack of information regarding the counseling services available on campus led to delays in seeking help by the victims. Second, feelings of shame prevented victims from accessing counseling services as they were reluctant to share their traumatic experiences. This sense of shame was often exacerbated by fear of being blamed or perceived as overreacting by others, causing victims to keep their experiences to themselves. Third, the fear of social and academic stigma, including concerns about negative judgment from peers and lecturers, particularly if the perpetrator was a faculty member, became a significant obstacle for victims seeking help. Some victims even expressed concerns about the impact on their academic achievements if the incident became public. The study emphasizes the importance of policies that ensure easy access and clear information about counseling services, as well as efforts to reduce stigma, to encourage victims to seek help.

Keywords: Sexual Harassment; Counseling Services; Higher Education; Psychological Support.

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami pengalaman korban pelecehan seksual dalam mengakses layanan konseling di perguruan tinggi di Samarinda. Penelitian ini mengisi kesenjangan (gap) dalam literatur, di mana sebagian besar studi sebelumnya lebih berfokus pada aspek hukum, sosiologis, dan psikologis pelecehan seksual, namun belum banyak yang mengeksplorasi pengalaman korban dalam mengakses layanan konseling di tingkat perguruan tinggi secara mendalam. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif fenomenologi dengan analisis data melalui pendekatan Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Partisipan terdiri dari empat korban pelecehan seksual dari dua perguruan tinggi, yaitu universitas umum dan universitas berbasis agama (nama kampus disamarkan). Temuan penelitian ini mengidentifikasi tiga hambatan utama. Pertama, kurangnya informasi mengenai layanan konseling yang tersedia di kampus menyebabkan keterlambatan dalam pencarian bantuan oleh korban. Kedua, perasaan malu menghalangi korban untuk mengakses layanan konseling karena mereka merasa enggan menceritakan pengalaman traumatisnya. Rasa malu ini sering diperparah oleh rasa takut akan dipersalahkan atau dianggap berlebihan oleh pihak lain, sehingga korban cenderung menyimpan pengalaman mereka. Ketiga, ketakutan akan stigma sosial dan akademik, termasuk kekhawatiran akan penilaian negatif dari teman sebaya dan dosen, terutama jika pelaku adalah dosen, menjadi penghalang bagi korban untuk mencari bantuan. Beberapa korban bahkan mengungkapkan kekhawatiran akan dampaknya terhadap pencapaian akademik mereka jika insiden tersebut diketahui publik. Studi ini menekankan pentingnya kebijakan yang memastikan akses mudah dan informasi yang jelas mengenai layanan konseling serta upaya untuk mengurangi stigma agar korban lebih terdorong untuk mencari bantuan.

Kata Kunci: Pelecehan Seksual; Layanan Konseling; Perguruan Tinggi; Dukungan Psikologis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment in higher education is not merely an individual issue; it is a systemic crisis that reflects structural inequality and institutional failure in protecting students (Gorsak, 2019). Across the world, colleges and universities serve not only as centers of education but also as communities where individuals interact in various social, academic, and professional contexts. In such environments, sexual harassment becomes a highly complex issue, complicated by power dynamics, social norms, and gender disparities (Gorsak, 2019; O'Connor et al., 2021).

Sexual harassment harms the psychological well-being of students, disrupts their academic performance, and often leaves lasting psychological scars (Potter et al., 2018; Stevenson & Jackson, 2000; Voth Schrag & Edmond, 2018). Victims of sexual harassment in higher education often face a dual challenge: the trauma from the incident itself and the difficulties encountered when seeking help (Holland & Cortina, 2017). Social stigma, fear of retaliation, and lack of awareness about available resources are significant barriers that prevent victims from accessing counseling and support services (Stoner & Cramer, 2019).

In response to this situation, it is crucial for universities to not only raise awareness about sexual harassment but also actively develop and promote assistance programs that are easily accessible to all students. The availability of specially trained counselors to address trauma related to sexual harassment can be a critical step in victim recovery and the prevention of future incidents. However, in reality, universities are often inadequately equipped with sufficient practices to handle sexual harassment, leading to a lack of support and protection for victims (Gorsak, 2019; Sheehy & Gilbert, 2015).

The importance of counseling services in this context cannot be overstated. Access to professional counseling can be a turning point in a victim's recovery, helping them process trauma, rebuild a sense of safety and control over their lives, and support their continued education and personal development (Sabina & Ho, 2014). Effective counseling services also play a crucial role in preventing the long-term impacts of sexual harassment (Potter et al., 2018).

However, to achieve this, universities must address existing barriers and ensure that counseling services are accessible, inclusive, and sensitive to the needs of sexual assault victims (Stoner & Cramer, 2019). This requires a commitment to raising awareness, reducing stigma, and building a robust support system that encourages victims to seek help without fear of retaliation or discrimination (Sabina & Ho, 2014). By creating such an environment, universities are expected to become a safe space for victims of sexual assault.

Research on the experiences of victims in accessing counseling services in universities is crucial in this context. Previous studies have focused primarily on handling sexual assault from legal (Irawan, 2022; Jailani, 2020; Nugroho & Santoso, 2022), sociological (Fitriyanti & Suharyati, 2023; Marfu'ah et al., 2021; Saputra et al., 2024), and psychological perspectives (Daulay et al., 2024; Huang & Palar, 2013). However, from a psychological standpoint, there is a lack of studies exploring the experiences of sexual assault victims in obtaining counseling services at universities.

This study is designed to fill that gap by investigating how sexual assault victims access existing counseling services at universities. By understanding the participants, this research aims to identify the barriers and challenges faced by victims, as well as to design more responsive and effective counseling services in the future.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of victims (Eatough & Smith, 2017). The qualitative method allows researchers to understand the perspectives of victims, including their feelings, thoughts, and life experiences regarding sexual assault and the help-seeking process (DeLoveh & Cattaneo, 2017; Kirkner et al., 2018). The phenomenological approach was chosen to comprehend the essence of the victims' subjective experiences, specifically how they assign meaning to the incidents of assault they encountered and the process of seeking help through counseling services.

According to Tuffour, phenomenology is an approach that aims to capture the "lifeworld" of victims, making it particularly suitable for exploring sensitive themes such as sexual assault. Through this approach, the research focuses on the individual perspectives in describing their experiences, emotionally, cognitively, and socially (Tuffour, 2017). This enables researchers to gain deeper insights into how victims interpret their experiences and how external factors influence their decisions to seek counseling services.

Participants in the study were selected using purposive sampling, where participant selection was based on specific characteristics relevant to the research focus. A total of four participants, who are victims of sexual assault from two universities in Samarinda, were included in this study. The inclusion criteria for participants were:

- a. Victims of sexual assault occurring within the university environment.
- b. Currently enrolled as active students.
- c. Willing to participate in the study by providing informed consent.

The use of purposive sampling ensures that the selected participants have experiences aligned with the study's objectives. To maintain privacy and confidentiality, the participants' names were anonymized to Ani, Yuni, Nisa, and Yuli. In addition, the names of the two campuses have been anonymized as “religious university” and “public university”. Active students were also chosen to obtain more contextual data related to the current situation in universities.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, which were deemed most suitable for uncovering the emotional and psychological experiences of participants. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to allow flexibility in exploring topics that might emerge from participants' narratives. This semi-open structure enables researchers to obtain more detailed and rich information while maintaining focus on the main questions related to access to counseling services.

Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes, depending on the participants' comfort in sharing their experiences. Interviews were conducted in safe and comfortable locations to create an environment conducive to participants speaking freely without feeling pressured or judged. Before the interviews, the researchers explained the purpose of the study, provided participants with the opportunity to ask questions, and obtained their written consent. All interviews were recorded using audio devices with participants' consent. This was done to ensure data accuracy and facilitate deeper analysis. Additionally, the researcher made field notes to document the participants' non-verbal cues or reactions during the interviews, which could also provide additional insights in the analysis process.

The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative data analysis method focused on how participants assign meaning to their experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2017). The analysis process began with verbatim transcription of the interviews, which were then read multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Four participants from two universities, namely a religious university and a public university, shared their stories and experiences after experiencing sexual violence and seeking counseling services. From their narratives, the researcher conducted data analysis and discovered that victims of sexual assault face various barriers in accessing counseling services, including a lack of information about those services, feelings of shame, fear of stigma, fear of not being believed, self-blame, and a lack of social support. However, victims who successfully accessed counseling services reported improvements in psychological well-being and the strength to continue their academic and social lives. Social support, from friends, family, and educational institutions, plays a crucial role in encouraging victims to seek help.

These findings highlight the urgent need for improved communication and information about counseling services in universities, as well as a more sensitive approach to the social stigma surrounding mental health issues in academic environments. Reducing stigma and increasing awareness can encourage more students to seek help without fear of judgment or being viewed differently. The following are the themes of the findings in this research.

3.1. Lack of Information about Counseling Services

This study found that the universities attended by participants lacked an effective communication system to inform students about available counseling services. All participants reported a lack of information regarding counseling services at their universities. Ani, one of the interviewees, stated, *"I didn't know there was counseling available on campus until I was told by a friend, and that was after I had been traumatized for months"*.

This quote reveals two main issues: first, the victim's ignorance about available counseling services, leading to delays in seeking help and psychological recovery; second, the feelings of isolation and lack of support exacerbated by ineffective communication from the university. Delays in accessing counseling services can worsen the psychological impact of sexual assault and prolong the recovery process. This underscores the importance of accessible information and clear communication from educational institutions regarding their counseling services.

A lack of information can directly prevent victims from accessing the support they desperately need for recovery. Without adequate information, victims may be unaware that help is available or may not know how to initiate the process of obtaining assistance. The universities attended by participants did not have an effective communication system to inform students about the available counseling services, indicating a lack of priority regarding students' mental health.

The study's results reveal a significant lack of information about available counseling services at the universities involved. Students, including Ani, indicated that they did not know about counseling services on campus until they heard about them from peers, and this occurred only after enduring trauma for several months. This ignorance led to significant delays in seeking help and beginning the psychological recovery process. This highlights the failure of universities to establish an effective communication system to disseminate crucial information about mental health support, leaving students feeling isolated and unsupported.

Previous research has shown that appropriate and easily accessible resources in universities, combined with a sensitive approach to the unique needs of survivors of sexual assault, can have a significantly positive impact on recovery and well-being (Graham et al., 2021). On the other hand, the presence of counseling service resources at universities does not guarantee that student victims of sexual assault will utilize those services. Research indicates that even when universities have counseling resources to assist victims of sexual violence, many students remain unaware of these services (Franklin et al., 2019).

3.2. Shame

Participants who are victims of sexual assault expressed feelings of shame regarding their experiences. When recounting their cases to the researcher, they exhibited a sense of embarrassment about sharing their stories. This highlights the profound trauma participants feel

regarding what they have endured. In this second finding, the researcher will explore how feelings of shame can influence the help-seeking process for victims and limit their ability to recover from trauma. As Yuni stated, *"Even thinking about explaining my situation to a counselor makes me feel ashamed"*.

This feeling of shame can render the prospect of discussing the incident with a counselor daunting, thereby hindering recovery. Shame essentially carries a judgment against oneself, rather than just the situation. This deep emotional response can significantly inhibit their willingness to openly discuss the incident with anyone, including counselors. The fear of re-traumatization when recounting their stories or the belief that they may be judged by their counselors -even in a professional setting- can make them reluctant to pursue therapeutic opportunities essential for their recovery.

When a victim feels shame, as noted by Yuni, this emotion may compel them to conceal their pain and struggle internally, preventing them from accessing counseling services. Ani also experienced similar avoidance. She expressed, *"I just want to escape and love myself for a while. It's easier to avoid everyone than to face my shame"*.

For Ani, the shame led to withdrawal from social interactions and isolation, which are common coping mechanisms in dealing with trauma. This isolation made it difficult for her to engage with counseling services. This shame also serves as a significant barrier that hinders her from seeking counseling help, further exacerbated by negative societal perceptions.

Participants who are victims of sexual assault reported deep feelings of shame related to their experiences. When speaking with the researcher, many expressed embarrassment when recounting the incidents they experienced. One participant, Yuni, indicated that even thinking about explaining her situation to a counselor made her feel ashamed. This shame is not only about the event itself but also about how they believe they will be judged by others. This hinders the recovery process by making victims reluctant to discuss their experiences and seek professional help. Ani also revealed her desire to avoid social situations and reflect on self-love, illustrating how shame can lead to social isolation.

Findings by Phillips et al., (2019), from a survey conducted among medical students who are victims of sexual assault in Canada, indicate that the impact of sexual assault can lead students to feel ashamed, including shame associated with accessing counseling services. They argue that the persistence of such conditions is due to the normalization of sexual assault, which is often regarded as part of the social and educational environment in medical settings. Furthermore, Phillips et al., (2019) emphasize that sexual assault not only inflicts emotional harm on victims but also obstructs them from seeking help and support due to the shame associated with disclosing and confronting their experiences.

3.3. Fear of Stigma

The fear of stigma is not merely a personal concern but is deeply rooted in societal perceptions and the potential impact on the social and academic lives of student victims of sexual assault. When considering counseling for their experiences of sexual assault, students often grapple with worries about being negatively judged by peers and authority figures, leading to further isolation and pressure. This section explores findings related to the fear of stigma that affects students' decisions to seek counseling services.

Participants expressed that they were afraid to seek counseling on campus due to concerns about being perceived as problematic students. As Nisa stated, *"If I attend counseling, my friends will think I have issues. I fear being labeled as a troublemaker because I might not be able to take care of myself"*.

Nisa articulated that seeking help would result in her being branded as someone with problems. The stigma associated with mental health issues and being a victim can prevent students from utilizing counseling services, leaving their suffering unaddressed. This reflects a broader issue within universities where mental health problems and victimization often carry stigma. Such perceptions can make victims reluctant to seek help for fear of reinforcing negative stereotypes or being treated differently by peers and faculty. The stigma associated with mental health serves as a significant barrier, hindering students from seeking the necessary support that could aid in their recovery.

Another participant, Yuli, expressed, *"I fear that if I share my problems with a counselor or psychologist on campus, the issue will spread to others, even to the university. I worry that I might not be able to finish my studies, especially since the perpetrator is a lecturer, and this could affect my reputation in the future"*.

This participant's statement highlights concerns regarding confidentiality, a critical aspect of counseling services. The fear that their personal struggles will become public knowledge can prevent victims from seeking the support they need, underscoring the necessity for strong privacy protections at university counseling centers.

Yuli's concerns about her problems becoming common knowledge could disrupt her ability to complete her education. Given that the perpetrator is a faculty member, there is apprehension that this could affect her academic evaluations and future career opportunities. This indicates the power dynamics held by faculty members and the potential for abuse of that power, which can lead to long-term consequences for victims.

There are also worries about social stigma and its impact on Yuli's personal reputation. This fear of stigma can deter victims from seeking the help they require, which, in turn, may hinder their recovery from the trauma experienced. The stigma associated with being a victim of sexual assault often serves as an additional burden that victims must confront.

Fear of stigma is a common experience among participants who have been victims of sexual assault. They worry that seeking counseling or other forms of help will label them as troubled individuals in the eyes of their peers and campus authorities. Nisa, one of the participants, expressed her concern that if she attended counseling, her friends would think she had serious problems. Recent research by Farmer et al., (2024) reinforces these findings. Farmer et al., (2024) discovered a strong relationship between public stigma surrounding sexual assault and the negative impact on the psychological functioning of survivors. Public stigma refers to societal negative perceptions associated with individuals who have experienced sexual assault, often involving prejudice, discrimination, and negative stereotypes. This can lead survivors to feel ostracized, stigmatized, or blamed for the events they endured.

4. CONCLUSION

The experiences of sexual harassment victims in accessing counseling services at universities highlight the importance of increasing awareness about counseling services, reducing stigma, and enhancing social support. Universities need to develop policies and

programs that support sexual harassment victims in accessing counseling services more easily and without fear of stigma. This research provides insights for higher education institutions to develop more effective strategies in providing counseling services for sexual harassment victims, including awareness campaigns, training for counselors, and collaboration with external organizations that offer psychological support. Future research can design programs or interventions as well as psychosocial support for sexual harassment victims in universities.

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