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Motivations and Behavioral Patterns of Sexual Harassment Perpetrators: A Qualitative Study in Bandung City, Indonesia

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Abstract

Background: Sexual harassment is a persistent social and public health problem, particularly in urban contexts where complex social interactions and power relations are prevalent. While existing research has largely centered on victims' experiences, limited attention has been directed toward understanding the motivations and behavioral patterns of perpetrators, especially within the Indonesian sociocultural context.

Objective: This study aimed to explore the motivations, behavioral processes, and cognitive patterns underlying sexual harassment perpetration based on perpetrators' own perspectives in Bandung City, Indonesia.

Methods: A qualitative study employing a phenomenological approach was conducted among individuals convicted of sexual harassment and currently serving sentences in a correctional facility in Bandung City. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes related to motivations, behavioral development, rationalization strategies, and moral awareness.

Results: Six interrelated themes emerged from the analysis. Sexual harassment behavior was driven by internal psychological factors, including sexual desire, curiosity, emotional dysregulation, and low self-control. Social and cultural environments that normalized harassment reinforced these behaviors. Power imbalances between perpetrators and victims facilitated domination and reduced resistance. Harassing behaviors typically developed gradually, starting with minor boundary violations and escalating over time. Perpetrators employed cognitive rationalization and strategic risk management to justify their actions and avoid detection. Moral awareness and remorse varied and often emerged only after legal consequences were experienced.

Conclusion: Sexual harassment perpetration is shaped by a complex interaction of individual, social, and structural factors. Understanding perpetrators' motivations and behavioral patterns is crucial for informing comprehensive prevention strategies, rehabilitation programs, and policy development. Integrating perpetrator-focused education on consent, emotional regulation, and ethical behavior alongside victim-centered approaches is essential to effectively reduce sexual harassment.

Keywords: behavioral patterns; motivation; qualitative study; sexual harassment perpetrators

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment remains a significant social and public health problem globally, including in Indonesia. It occurs across multiple settings—such as workplaces, educational institutions, public spaces, and digital environments—and is closely linked to unequal power relations and gender norms embedded in social structures (1,2). In urban contexts like Bandung City, dense populations and intensive social interactions further increase vulnerability to sexual harassment. Although Indonesia has enacted Law No. 12 of 2022 on Sexual Violence Crimes, reported cases continue to rise, suggesting that legal measures alone are insufficient to prevent recurrence (3).

Most existing research on sexual harassment has focused on victims, particularly on psychological impacts and barriers to reporting (4,5). While this focus is essential, it provides limited insight into the motivations and behavioral processes that sustain perpetration. Studies examining perpetrators' perspectives especially using qualitative approaches remain limited, particularly in the Indonesian context.

International studies indicate that sexual harassment is often motivated by power, dominance, emotional regulation, and internalized patriarchal norms rather than sexual desire alone (6,7). Perpetrators commonly employ grooming strategies, manipulation, and cognitive rationalization to normalize their behavior and minimize perceived harm (8). Prison-based qualitative research in several countries further demonstrates that moral awareness and remorse often emerge only after legal consequences, highlighting the limitations of punitive approaches (9-11).

However, comparable qualitative studies exploring the narratives of sexual harassment perpetrators in Indonesia remain scarce. Therefore, this study aims to explore the motivations and behavioral patterns of sexual harassment perpetrators involved in cases occurring in Bandung City, Indonesia. By examining perpetrators' lived experiences, this study seeks to contribute contextualized evidence to inform nursing practice, offender rehabilitation, and preventive policies addressing sexual harassment more effectively.

METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences, motivations, and behavioral patterns of sexual harassment perpetrators. The phenomenological approach was selected to capture participants' subjective meanings and interpretations of their actions within specific social and cultural contexts, allowing an in-depth understanding of how sexual harassment behaviors are constructed and rationalized (12,13).

Participants

Participants were individuals legally convicted of sexual harassment and serving sentences in a correctional facility in Bandung City, Indonesia. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants with direct experience of the phenomenon and the ability to provide rich, relevant, and reflective accounts (14). Inclusion criteria were: (1) adults aged 18 years or older, (2) convicted perpetrators of sexual harassment, (3) willingness to participate voluntarily, and (4) ability to communicate experiences clearly. Individuals with severe mental disorders or those unwilling to provide informed consent were excluded. Sample size adequacy was determined by data saturation, defined as the point at which no new themes or insights emerged from successive interviews, consistent with contemporary qualitative research standards (15,16).

Data Collection

Data were collected through face-to-face, in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in a private and secure setting within the correctional facility. Participants were recruited through coordination with facility authorities and provided written informed consent prior to data collection. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the study objectives and relevant literature on sexual harassment and qualitative inquiry (12). The guide consisted of four sections: (1) introductory questions to build rapport, (2) core questions exploring motivations and behavioral patterns, (3) probing questions to elicit deeper explanations and contextual examples, and (4) closing questions to allow reflection and additional input. All questions were open-ended and non-leading to promote

rich narratives and minimize response bias (17,18).

Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission, and field notes were taken to capture contextual details and non-verbal cues. All data were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (19). This method was chosen for its flexibility and suitability in identifying patterns of meaning related to motivations and behavioral processes in qualitative data. The analytical process included: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) development of candidate themes, (4) review and refinement of themes, (5) definition and naming of themes, and (6) interpretation of findings in relation to the research objectives. Analysis was conducted manually to ensure close engagement with the data and reflexive interpretation.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured through multiple strategies, including member checking, peer debriefing, and maintenance of an audit trail. These strategies supported credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings in line with established qualitative research standards (20,21). Divergent or contradictory data were examined and integrated into the analysis to enhance interpretive rigor.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles for research involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the Health Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Health Sciences and Technology, Universitas Jenderal Achmad Yani Cimahi. Prior to participation, all participants received a clear

explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits, and provided written informed consent. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to refuse or withdraw at any time without consequences. To protect confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the data, and participants were assigned coded identifiers. Interviews were conducted in a private setting to minimize discomfort, using a respectful, empathetic, and non-judgmental approach. Participants were informed of their right to decline answering any questions they found uncomfortable and were made aware of available support services should emotional distress arise. All procedures complied with the Declaration of Helsinki and principles of Good Clinical Practice.

RESULTS

Based on the demographic data (Table 1), all participants in this study were male (100%, n = 8). The participants were within the range of early adulthood to middle adulthood. They came from diverse occupational backgrounds, including security services, education, religious volunteer work, informal labor, and student populations.

All participants were individuals who admitted involvement in sexual harassment behavior as revealed through in-depth interviews. The age range of participants was between 22 and 39 years. The diversity of social roles and occupational backgrounds provides a comprehensive depiction of the motivations and behavioral patterns of sexual harassment perpetrators in an urban context.

Based on the results of thematic data analysis presented in Table 2, the researchers identified eight main themes that describe the motivations and behavioral patterns of sexual harassment perpetrators. These themes reflect the psychological, social, and behavioral dynamics underlying sexual harassment behavior.

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Participants

No.	Initials	Age (Years)	Occupation	Marital Status
1	I1	27	Private Employee	Single
2	I2	25	Informal Worker	Single
3	I3	39	Security Officer	Married
4	I4	35	Daily Laborer	Married
5	I5	24	University Student	Single
6	I6	30	Private Tutor	Single
7	I7	33	Social Volunteer	Married
8	I8	22	University Student	Single

Table 2. Final Themes of the Study

No.	Final Themes
1	Internal Motivations of Sexual Harassment Perpetrators
2	Social and Cultural Influences on Sexual Harassment Behavior
3	Power Relations and Social Inequality between Perpetrators and Victims
4	Gradual Behavioral Patterns in Sexual Harassment
5	Strategies Cognitive Rationalization and Strategic Risk Management by Perpetrators
6	Perception, Moral Awareness, and Remorse of Sexual Harassment Perpetrators

Theme 1: Internal Motivations of Sexual Harassment Perpetrators

This theme illustrates that sexual harassment is driven by internal psychological motivations such as sexual desire, curiosity, emotional release, and personal gratification. These motivations are often accompanied by weak self-control and limited moral restraint, which enable perpetrators to justify repeated behavior.

"Sometimes it just felt like an urge that was hard to control, especially when there was no immediate consequence." (I1)

"At first it was curiosity, but later it became something I wanted to repeat because it gave satisfaction." (I3)

Theme 2: Social and Cultural Influences on Sexual Harassment Behavior

Social environment and cultural norms strongly shape perpetrators' perceptions of acceptable behavior. Exposure to permissive peer groups, sexual jokes, and normalized harassment reduces moral sensitivity and reinforces abusive actions.

"In my circle, comments like that were considered normal jokes, so I didn't think it was a big deal." (I2)

"Everyone around me did similar things, so it felt acceptable." (I5)

Theme 3: Power Relations and Social Inequality between Perpetrators and Victims

Power imbalance allows perpetrators to exploit vulnerable positions and minimize resistance from victims. Sexual harassment is often enacted as a form of dominance rather than purely sexual desire.

"I knew they wouldn't dare to report it because they depended on me." (I4)

"Being in a higher position made me feel safer doing it." (I6)

Theme 4: Gradual Behavioral Patterns in Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment behavior develops progressively, starting with minor boundary violations and escalating over time. Early acts function as "tests" to assess victims' reactions.

"It started with jokes, then touching, because there was no clear rejection." (I1)

"I kept going further once I felt it was tolerated." (I4)

Theme 5: Strategies Cognitive Rationalization and Strategic Risk Management by Perpetrators

Perpetrators employ cognitive rationalization and strategic risk management to justify their actions and minimize potential consequences.

They often neutralize guilt by minimizing harm, blaming victims, and reframing harassment as harmless or consensual behavior, while simultaneously taking calculated steps to avoid detection.

"I thought it was just flirting, not harassment." (I2)

"If they didn't say no clearly, I assumed it was okay." (I7)

"I only did it in places where no one could see." (I6)

"I stopped whenever I felt the situation became risky." (I1)

Theme 6: Perception, Moral Awareness, and Remorse of Sexual Harassment Perpetrators

Perpetrators construct subjective perceptions of their actions and demonstrate varying levels of moral awareness and remorse. They often interpret harassment as jokes, expressions of interest, or harmless behavior, which diminishes perceived severity and reduces accountability. Remorse, when it occurs, often emerges only after negative consequences, while weak self-control and low moral regulation contribute to repeated misconduct.

"I didn't see it as harassment, just a way to show interest." (I3)

"It felt normal to me, not something serious." (I5)

"I only realized it was wrong after it became a serious problem." (I4)

"I felt guilty, but it didn't always stop me." (I7)

DISCUSSION

Self-control theory posits that individuals with diminished self-regulatory capacity are more susceptible to engaging in deviant behaviors, including sexually inappropriate conduct, due to their limited ability to inhibit impulses and consider long-term consequences (22). In the context of sexual harassment, low self-control manifests as difficulty resisting immediate urges, heightened impulsivity, and a tendency to prioritize short-term gratification over ethical considerations. This theoretical framework helps explain why perpetrators may continue engaging in harassment despite awareness of potential social, legal, or moral repercussions. The absence of effective internal restraints allows momentary

desires or emotional impulses to override normative behavioral standards.

The findings indicate that perpetrators are driven by internal motivations such as sexual desire, curiosity, emotional release, and personal gratification, often accompanied by weak self-control. Consistent with self-control theory, diminished impulse regulation increases vulnerability to deviant behavior by prioritizing immediate gratification over moral or legal consequences. Similar findings have been reported in previous studies showing that low self-regulation and poor emotional control contribute to persistent sexually abusive behavior (23,24).

Social learning theory explains that behaviors are acquired through observation and reinforcement within social contexts (25). Empirical studies have confirmed that permissive environments, including peer groups that normalize sexual jokes or misconduct, significantly increase the likelihood of sexual harassment (26,27). Such environments reduce moral sensitivity and reinforce abusive behaviors, making perpetrators more likely to adopt harmful patterns that are perceived as socially acceptable. These findings underscore the role of social and cultural contexts in shaping individual behavior and the importance of addressing these factors in prevention efforts.

Consistent with this perspective, Muharomah et al. (28) demonstrated that animation-based sexual violence prevention education can effectively improve adolescents' knowledge and attitudes toward sexual violence. Educational interventions like this can reshape social perceptions and challenge cultural norms that tolerate harassment, highlighting the potential for preventive strategies to reduce sexual misconduct in communities. These approaches emphasize that addressing both individual behavior and broader social influences is essential for meaningful and sustainable prevention.

Feminist power theory emphasizes that sexual harassment is not merely a matter of sexual desire, but functions as a mechanism to maintain control and assert dominance over the victim (29). Within this framework, harassment serves to reinforce the perpetrator's superior position, whether socially, economically, or professionally, leaving victims in a vulnerable position with

limited capacity to resist. This theory highlights that gender power imbalances and social hierarchies are fundamental factors underlying harassment, demonstrating that structural contexts shape individual perpetrator behavior.

Recent research further supports this perspective, showing that hierarchical power relations significantly increase the risk of sexual exploitation (30,31). Individuals in higher positions tend to leverage their power to exploit victims who are dependent on them, whether in work, educational, or other social contexts. Understanding these dynamics of power is crucial for designing effective prevention and intervention strategies, as efforts to reduce the risk of harassment must consider the social structures that enable inequality and abuse of authority. These findings highlight the importance of a comprehensive nursing perspective that addresses gender norms, power relations, and social environments that enable the normalization of sexual harassment. In line with this, Rahayu and Susanti (32) emphasize that nurses play a crucial role in preventive and educational interventions aimed at reducing sexual violence through gender-sensitive and community-based approaches.

Deviance escalation theory explains that harmful behaviors often begin with minor violations, which over time become normalized and increasingly severe (33). In the context of sexual harassment, initial actions such as inappropriate jokes, gestures, or small boundary violations may seem harmless to the perpetrator but set the stage for more serious offenses. This progressive pattern allows perpetrators to test limits and gauge the reactions of victims, gradually eroding social and moral barriers that might otherwise inhibit abusive behavior.

Empirical studies support this notion, indicating that sexual harassment rarely occurs as a single isolated incident and is more commonly characterized by a gradual escalation (34-36). Repeated exposure to minor harassment can desensitize both perpetrators and bystanders, reinforcing the belief that such actions are acceptable. Recognizing this progressive pattern is critical for early intervention, as addressing minor infractions promptly can prevent the development of more severe and repeated abusive behaviors.

Neutralization theory provides a framework for understanding how individuals engaged in

deviant behavior, such as sexual harassment, maintain a positive self-concept despite acting contrary to social norms. By employing cognitive strategies, perpetrators can minimize the perceived severity of their actions, shift blame onto the victim, or reinterpret their behavior as acceptable or consensual. Recent research indicates that these cognitive distortions are central to the continuation of sexually abusive behavior, as they allow offenders to reconcile their actions with personal and societal moral standards, thereby sustaining misconduct over time (37,38).

In parallel, rational choice theory explains that offenders often engage in calculated decision-making to reduce the likelihood of detection and punishment (39). Sexual offenders frequently assess environmental cues, select opportunities with minimal risk, and adapt their behavior strategically to avoid consequences, demonstrating a deliberate and goal-directed component to their actions (40,41). Together, these theories suggest that sexual harassment is maintained not only by internal justifications but also by strategic consideration of external risks, highlighting the complex interplay between psychological rationalization and behavioral planning in sustaining deviant conduct.

Symbolic interactionism posits that individuals construct meanings through their interactions with others and the interpretations they derive from these interactions (42). In the context of sexual harassment, perpetrators often develop subjective perceptions that normalize or trivialize their behavior, framing it as harmless, humorous, or as a demonstration of interest rather than recognizing it as a violation of others' rights. Recent studies emphasize that such distorted perceptions play a central role in sustaining sexually abusive behavior, as they allow offenders to rationalize their actions and reduce feelings of guilt or accountability (43,44). By interpreting social cues and responses in ways that justify their conduct, perpetrators reinforce their own beliefs that their actions are acceptable within certain contexts, perpetuating the cycle of misconduct.

Moral disengagement theory further complements this understanding by explaining how individuals can temporarily detach from internal ethical standards to perform actions that would normally be judged as wrong. Research indicates that while some perpetrators may experience remorse after consequences arise,

this alone is insufficient to prevent recurrence without enhanced self-control and moral development (45,46). Weak impulse regulation and limited moral awareness contribute to repeated offenses, highlighting the interplay between cognitive distortions and deficient ethical monitoring.

Clinical Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for nursing practice, public health interventions, and sexual harassment prevention strategies. Understanding perpetrators' motivations and behavioral patterns provides critical insight for developing perpetrator-focused prevention and rehabilitation programs, which are often underrepresented in sexual violence interventions.

For nursing and health professionals, particularly those working in community health, mental health, and correctional settings, these findings highlight the need to incorporate emotional regulation training, self-control enhancement, moral awareness, and consent education into health promotion and rehabilitation programs. Nurses play a strategic role in delivering gender-sensitive, trauma-informed, and ethically grounded education, both for individuals at risk of perpetration and within broader community prevention initiatives.

At an institutional level, the study underscores the importance of addressing power imbalances and organizational cultures that normalize harassment. Health professionals can contribute to policy advocacy, workplace training, and interdisciplinary collaboration aimed at creating safer environments and strengthening early detection and intervention mechanisms. Integrating perpetrator-oriented perspectives alongside victim-centered approaches may enhance the effectiveness of long-term sexual harassment prevention and reduce recidivism.

Study Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the study involved a small sample size and was conducted within a single correctional facility in Bandung City, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other settings or populations. Second, all participants were incarcerated male perpetrators, and thus the perspectives of non-incarcerated perpetrators or female perpetrators were not captured.

Third, data were based on self-reported narratives, which may be influenced by recall bias, social desirability, or post-offense rationalization, particularly given the legal context of incarceration. Additionally, the phenomenological approach prioritizes depth of understanding over generalizability, which may not reflect the full spectrum of sexual harassment behaviors across different sociocultural contexts.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable, context-specific insights into perpetrator motivations and behavioral processes. Future research should involve more diverse samples, include comparative and longitudinal designs, and examine intervention outcomes to strengthen the evidence base for perpetrator-focused prevention strategies.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative phenomenological study highlights sexual harassment perpetration as a patterned, multi-level phenomenon shaped by psychological, social, and structural factors. Perpetration is driven by internal motivations such as sexual desire, curiosity, emotional regulation difficulties, and low self-control, and reinforced by permissive social norms, cultural normalization, and hierarchical power relations. Harassing behaviors develop gradually and are sustained through cognitive rationalization, moral disengagement, and strategic risk management.

These findings emphasize the importance of integrating perpetrator-focused perspectives into sexual harassment prevention alongside victim-centered approaches. Comprehensive prevention and rehabilitation programs addressing emotional regulation, moral awareness, accountability, and power dynamics are essential, particularly within institutional and hierarchical settings. Future research should involve more diverse samples, including non-incarcerated perpetrators, and evaluate the effectiveness of intervention-based and longitudinal prevention strategies across different social and digital contexts.

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Author Contributions

KJAS: Conceptualization, data collection, data analysis, manuscript drafting, and original writing.

AS: Methodological guidance, qualitative analysis supervision, critical manuscript revision, and validation of findings.

ID: Study supervision, conceptual refinement, interpretation of results, critical review, and final approval of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

The qualitative data generated and analyzed during this study are not publicly available due to ethical considerations, participant confidentiality, and the sensitive nature of the research topic. However, anonymized data excerpts may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and with appropriate ethical approval.

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