

# Sexual Harassment of Women in Urban China

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**Abstract** Using data from the Chinese Health and Family Life survey, this study analyzed the prevalence of and risk factors for sexual harassment in China in the year 2000. It was the first study to use a general population sample to examine all types of harassment in an Asian country. The dataset was a stratified probability sample with 3,821 participants, and was nationally representative (apart from Hong Kong and Tibet) of China's adult population aged 20–64. In total, 12.5% of all women and 15.1% of urban women reported some form of harassment in the past year. Among urban women age 20–45, most cross-sex harassment was not from supervisors or superiors (1.4%) but from coworkers and other peers (7.0%), strangers (4.6%), dates and boyfriends (3.6%), and others (2.6%). Multivariate analysis of risk factors for cross-sex harassment suggested that, despite its predominance in the Western literature on sexual harassment, the power differentials approach, focusing on male-female power differentials in patriarchal societies, was of modest utility. The results were more consistent with a more comprehensive routine activities approach borrowed from criminology, which emphasizes situational opportunity, perceived benefit to the harasser, and reduced costs for the harasser. The most striking result from the data represents the area receiving the least attention in the West, namely, the perpetrator's perception of "benefit," deriving from the victim's inadvertent "signaling."

**Keywords** Sexual harassment · China · Routine activities · Power differentials

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## Introduction

Over the last two decades, research on sexual harassment in Western countries has proliferated (e.g., Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1993; Gruber, 1998; Gutek, 1985; LaRocca & Kromrey, 1999; O'Connell & Korabik, 2000; Tangri, Burt, & Johnson, 1982; Wayne, 2000; Williams, Giuffre, & Dellinger, 1999; Wilson, 2000). Despite this proliferation, few large-scale, and no nationally representative, studies have examined sexual harassment in non-Western countries, where different cultural assumptions and different sets of social controls might produce distinct patterns. With the exception of one large-scale study of Japanese workers (Haspels, Kasim, Thomas, & McCann, 2001), empirical analysis in Asia is also limited. None have examined China.

Chinese society has only recently begun to undergo a sexual revolution (Farrer, 2000; Sha, Xiong, & Gao, 1994). Along with public concern about the new modalities of sexual behavior, media reports suggest that the perceived growth of sexual harassment or *xing sao rao* has also risen in salience as a societal focus, leading to serious counter-harassment efforts by the government (Fu, 2005). These efforts culminated in 2005 in the anti-harassment provisions of the draft amendment to China's Law on Women's Right Protection (CorpWatch, 2005). Despite this growing concern, however, reliable information on the prevalence and correlates of harassment at the national level is still lacking.

Much of the existing research on other societies focuses on sexual harassment in workplaces and schools. As some scholars have noted (Macmillan, Nierobisz, & Welsh, 2000), sexual harassment also occurs outside the workplace, with equal or more detrimental consequences. Much of the existing research focuses on harassment by males with power and authority over the woman. While some scholars note that harassment is often perpetrated by equal or lower status

co-workers (Gutek, 1985; O'Connell & Korabik, 2000; Wayne, 2000) or schoolmates (Cumplings & Armenta, 2002; Fineran & Bennett, 1999; Ivy & Hamlet, 1996), few have examined sexual harassment that is perpetrated by strangers and lovers. The few studies that do engage this last subject are typically qualitative in nature (Duneier, 1999; Duneier & Molotch, 1999; Gardner, 1980, 1995, 1997; Nielsen, 2004).

Using data from the nationally representative Chinese Health and Family Life Survey, this article begins to fill these gaps. In addition to providing baseline data on the prevalence of sexual harassment among Chinese men and women, we examined risk factors for sexual harassment by dates/boyfriends, peers, strangers, and superiors.

### Core mechanisms and hypotheses

Two major strains of interpretation emerge from the literature on sexual harassment: the power differentials approach and the routine activities approach, borrowed from criminology. The second approach is more comprehensive, offering potentially to incorporate the first approach as only one of several risk factors for harassment.

#### *Power differentials*

The first approach focuses on *power differentials* in patriarchal societies. Whether stemming from societal norms, organizational hierarchies, or interpersonal characteristics, asymmetries in both formal and informal power increase the likelihood of harassment (Berdahl, Magley, & Waldo, 1996; Bernard & Schlaffer, 1997; Choi, Au, Cheung, Tang, & Yik, 1993; Cleveland & Kerst, 1993; O'Connell & Korabik, 2000; Sheets & Braver, 1999; Tangri et al., 1982; Waldner, Vandengoad, & Sikka, 1999; Wilson & Thompson, 2001). Three possible sub-hypotheses emerge from the power differentials approach, with the first two being the most common. The first is the *vulnerable victim* hypothesis. In this hypothesis, differential power in the target-perpetrator dyad increases harassment by defining the target's vulnerability, whether directly in terms of an organization's formal hierarchy (Tangri et al., 1982; Wilson & Thompson, 2001) or indirectly, through an organization's culture or societal norms that dictate power distributions (Choi et al., 1993; O'Connell & Korabik, 2000; Tangri et al., 1982; Wilson & Thompson, 2001). The second, *power-threat*, hypothesis postulates that women who become "too assertive," and thereby threaten male dominance, are forced back down through harassment. Thus, for instance, women in male-dominated occupations are more likely to be victimized (De Coster, Estes, & Mueller, 1999; Gruber, 1997; Gutek, 1985; LaFontaine & Tredeau, 1986; Rubenstein, 1992). A third hypothesis is not part of the standard literature, but seems consistent with the power-threat hypothesis: in *transitional societies*, women who violate tra-

ditional norms regarding dress or behavior are disciplined via verbal comments and other mechanisms. In other words, as old patriarchal norms about women's behavior begin to change, women who violate traditional norms are punished through verbal harassment. The street harassment of unescorted middle class women in 19th century London illustrates this pattern (Walkowitz, 1998).

The power differentials model has some complexities in empirical tests, beginning with its twin propositions that both upwardly mobile and low status women are most at risk, potentially a "heads I win, tails you lose" proposition that might be impossible to falsify with data. Empirically, in developed countries such as the U.S., Italy, France, and Canada, educated women often report more harassment. For instance, a recent French study (Jaspard & EVNEFF Team, 2001) noted that harassment was less frequently reported by manual workers and the less educated. For intra-organizational or workplace harassment, Gutek (1985) noted that perpetrators were more likely to be co-workers than superiors, suggesting that if power-differentials are important, the differentials must often hinge on minor differences in power among co-workers. Several studies also suggest that harassers can often be subordinates (Grauerholz, 1989; McKinney, 1994; Rospenda, Richman, & Nawyn, 1998; Welsh, 1999). This pattern could be seen as more consistent with the second, or power-threat, hypothesis, implying that the first, or vulnerable victim, hypothesis is less important in developed societies. Finally, the few studies that differentiate peer, public, and supervisor harassment suggest that peer and public harassment (including harassment by customers) is more common than harassment of subordinates by superiors in organizational settings (Jaspard et al., 2001; Lenton, Smith, Fox, & Morra, 1999; Macmillan, et al., 2000; Statistics Canada, 1994). Thus, despite the emphasis placed by much of the extant literature on harassment in the workplace, and the abuse of power by superiors, it seems that the "vulnerable victim" hypothesis cannot easily explain most harassment. Nevertheless, to test the power-differentials model with our data, we posited a set of three sub-hypotheses 1a-1c, shown in Table 1 along with examples of possible empirical outcomes in our data.

#### *Routine activities: opportunity*

Borrowing from models used in the study of crime, a second line of interpretation focuses on *routine activities*, with an emphasis on risk factors emerging from attributes of the victim and from the situational context (Clarke & Felson, 1993; Cohen & Felson, 1979; Cohen, Kluegel, & Land, 1981). Three core mechanisms derive from this approach: *opportunity* (victim and perpetrator are in contact with one another), *benefit* (attractiveness of the target), and *cost* (probability and severity of sanctions).

**Table 1** Summary of competing hypotheses by type of mechanism in harassment

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Women will report more harassment when they:

Power differentials

- 1a. are in positions of less power relative to men (e.g., unemployed, in lower status job, migrant, single)
- 1b. pose a challenge to male predominance (e.g., in upper-white collar jobs)
- 1c. violate traditional norms in dress or demeanor (e.g., as indexed by weight loss desires, liberal sex values, heightened reports of sexual interest, and residence in the interior where community norms have changed more slowly). Verbal harassment will be particularly common

Routine activities: Opportunity

- 2a. are working, and thereby encountering more men at work and in commuting to and from work
- 2b. are in sales and service jobs or in self-employment (which typically involves retail sales and service), thereby encountering clients and customers as well as male co-workers
- 2c. frequent dance halls, thereby exposing themselves to more potential harassers

Routine activities: Benefit

- 3a. rate themselves as more attractive
- 3b. pursue new images of beauty (e.g., desire to lose weight, adjusted for current body-mass-index)
- 3c. have more liberal attitudes towards sex or heightened sexual interest (with this harassment particularly likely from peers and boyfriends who have some chance to know or guess their attitudes)

Routine activities: Low costs

- 4a. are migrant or single, and therefore without a community or husband to exact retribution. (Note the overlap with hypothesis 1a)
- 4b. live in communities with fewer normative constraints on the treatment of women as sexual objects (e.g., either male pornography consumption or prostitution is common in the community)
- 4c. live in large communities where the harasser has anonymity (particularly for verbal harassment)

Other mechanisms

5. experienced childhood sexual contact

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Opportunity is determined by *exposure* or *contact* between potential victims and harassers, with exposure/contact determined by the victim's "routine activities." Consistent with this emphasis on exposure and contact, research on workplace harassment suggests that both a larger percentage of men in the workplace and a larger size workplace significantly exacerbate workplace harassment (De Coster, Estes, & Mueller, 1999; Gruber, 1998; Gutek, Cohen, & Konrad, 1990; Timmerman & Bajema, 1998). A working woman might be more likely to be harassed simply because she is more likely to ride on public transport or to take an elevator, ride her bicycle down the street, or otherwise frequent public spaces, a scenario supported both by recent qualitative studies in China (Bu, 1994; Tang, 1994) and other Asian studies (Haspels et al., 2001). Contact with potential harassers is

particularly common for women in sales and service jobs (Hughes & Tadic, 1998). Based on these observations, we posited sub-hypotheses 2a and 2b (Table 1).

In urban China, entertainment or dancing venues ("dance halls") are associated with sexual interaction, even if it is interaction without intent to engage in a serious sexual or other relation (Farrer, 2000). Thus, women frequenting dance halls will have greater exposure to a sexually permissive environment and greater contact with men. To examine this factor, we posited sub-hypothesis 2c (Table 1).

#### *Routine activities: benefit*

In the standard criminology model, the second factor is "benefit" or the "attractiveness of the target." Sub-hypothesis 3a (Table 1) was included to test physical attractiveness as a risk factor. However, attractiveness as a target could also include dress and demeanor that could intentionally or, perhaps more often, unintentionally signal availability for sexual approaches. "Signaling," or *presentation of self*, while not explored in the scholarly literature on sexual harassment, might be particularly relevant in China. A new culture of sexuality is emerging in China (Farrer, 2000), with new images of female beauty sexualizing the female form (Evans, 1997; Hooper, 1998). Women embracing these changes may sport the make-up and bright clothes (Hooper, 1998) seen advertised in glossy magazines, even while a minority of women accept pre- and extramarital sex (Farrer, 2000; Sha et al., 1994). For example, in Hong Kong, abutting China, while young women exceeded men in liberal attitudes towards family and gender behavior, the women remained more conservative than men in attitudes toward courtship and sexual intimacy (Choi et al., 1993).

In a time of cultural transition, with new scripts and norms for female-male interaction still under negotiation (Honig & Hershatter, 1988), we speculate that women embracing the new images of sexual beauty might erroneously be seen as signaling greater receptivity to sexual solicitations, particularly from strangers. Misperception theory, for instance, highlights the tendency of men, as opposed to women, to perceive everyday interactions in more sexual terms (Johnson, Stockdale, & Saal, 1991; Stockdale, 1993). To analyze these factors, we posited sub-hypothesis 3b (Table 1).

Finally, dates/boyfriends may see "progressive women" as inviting requests for additional sexual access, and peers may offensively tease them for defying traditional norms and conventions. This argument leads to sub-hypothesis 3c (Table 1).

#### *Routine activities: low costs*

In the criminology approach, the third mechanism is the absence of sanctions or costs attached to harassment. In

contrast to opportunity, costs relate to the “constraining” aspects of the situational context. At the individual level, single women could be at greater risk: the absence of a husband (who can be expected to retaliate against the offender) lowers the costs attached to harassment. This hypothesis receives additional support from recent work that synthesizes evolutionary and feminist perspectives in explaining violence against women. Smuts (1996), for instance, argued that exclusive mating relationships emerged among primates as dominant males started needing the support of lower-ranked males in intra- or inter-group competition and, therefore, began to respect the latter’s exclusive rights to their mates. Similarly, migrant women, lacking community protection, could also face greater risk of harassment (Fu, 2005). In order to test this factor, we posited sub-hypothesis 4a (Table 1).

In the existing literature on harassment, costs are often discussed as a function of normative constraints in society and in organizations (e.g., De Coster et al., 1999; Timmerman & Bajema, 1998). At the community level, then, harassment is more likely in contexts where sex role stereotypes are strong, and less likely where sanctions are imposed on perpetrators (Choi et al., 1993; DeJudicibus & McCabe, 2001; O’Connell & Korabik, 2000; O’Hare & O’Donohue, 1998; Salzinger, 2000; Welsh, 1999). Sex role stereotypes are most prominent in occupations that are dominated by either men or women (Gruber, 1998; Gutek, 1985).

Most of this literature suggests very specific variables for analysis that are either not relevant outside of a Western setting or require intensive small-scale studies of organizations and communities. Nevertheless, we were able to generate general predictions (summarized in Table 1, sub-hypothesis 4b) that were applicable to China and to our survey methodology, using male consumption of pornography and prostitution as proxies for normative context. Specifically, frequent consumption of pornography and prostitution in a community served as indicators of lax norms about men’s treatment of women. It might also be argued that normative regulation is weaker in larger communities, where anonymity allows men to harass women with greater impunity from social sanctions from friends and acquaintances (see, for instance, del Frate, van Dijk, van Kesteren, & Mayhew, 2002). Based on this argument, we posited sub-hypothesis 4c (Table 1).

Of course, to a considerable extent, the “vulnerable victim” hypothesis under the power differentials approach is but a special case of the more general opportunity, benefit, cost approach. The vulnerable victim (e.g., a junior employee confronted by a more powerful supervisor) is an instance of reduced costs for the potential harasser.

### Other mechanisms

A growing literature suggests that *childhood sexual contact* is correlated with later sexual coercion (Browning & Laumann, 1997; Davis & Lay-Yee, 1999; Follette & Polusny, 1996; Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2001). The psychogenic and life-course approaches provide divergent explanations for the phenomenon, the former focusing on risky sexual behavior driven by the victim’s attempts to resolve childhood trauma, the latter emphasizing the incorporation of sexual scripts subsequently strengthened through early sexual activity (Browning & Laumann, 1997). Hypothesis 5 (Table 1) was included to examine this factor.

Finally, as a risk factor, *youthfulness* can have multiple interpretations—e.g., “vulnerable victim” in the power differentials approach (younger women have less power and therefore are more vulnerable) or “benefit” in the routine activities approach (men are hard-wired by evolution to be attracted to younger women). We remain agnostic on the specific mechanism involved, treating youthfulness as a control variable in the analysis.

## Method

### Participants

Data were from the 1999–2000 Chinese Health and Family Life Survey (CHFLS). With the exclusion of Tibet and Hong Kong, the sample was nationally representative of the adult population of China aged 20–64. Following standard procedures for complex samples (Levy & Lemeshow, 1999), the probabilistic sample was drawn from 14 strata and 48 primary sampling units (counties and city districts), with probabilities of selection proportional to population size at each of the four sampling steps down to the individual. Among the sampled individuals, 3,821 completed the interview, yielding a final response rate of 76%. After adjusting for a change in question skip patterns early in the field work, 3108 responses about sexual harassment were available for analysis. The interview included both initial face-to-face responses to an interviewer and later computerized portions allowing private response to sensitive questions. This article draws on the public use data set located at <http://www.src.uchicago.edu/prc/chfls.php>.

### Procedure

Most interviewers were trained middle-aged social workers and researchers who remained with the project throughout the interview period of one year. Interviewers were matched by gender to participants. Thus, female participants were

interviewed by female interviewers. For the sake of privacy, interviews took place outside the homes of the participants, normally in a private room in a hotel in big cities and in a meeting facility in smaller locales. Oral and computer-entered consent was obtained prior to the hour-long interview. The first part of the interview that included basic demographic questions was a computer assisted face-to-face interview—the interviewers read out the questions from the computer to the participant and entered the answers into the computer. During the second part of the interview, which included sensitive sexual behavior questions, the participants had full control of the computer, i.e., they read and answered the questions themselves. The harassment responses were in this later, self-administered part of the interview. Institutional review boards at the University of Chicago and Renmin University approved the interview methods.

### Measures

A computerized interview, based in part on the 1992 US National Health and Social Life Survey, was pretested in China in three field trials.

#### *Sexual harassment*

Participants answered two questions about sexual harassment incidents within the previous 12 months. The first question referred to physical touching (*dongshou dongjiao* or sexual touching/fondling) and included examples of specific behaviors (touching, acting indecently, or taking advantage with a sexual intent), as recommended in the sexual harassment methods literature (Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1993). The second question referred to verbal harassment or “sexually offensive” statements. The precise wordings for the questions were as follows: For physical harassment: “In the past 12 months, did someone sexually harass you (e.g., touch you, act indecently towards you, or take advantage of you with a sexual intent)?” For verbal harassment: “In the past 12 months, has anyone said anything sexually offensive to you?”

We grouped both sets of responses together as one. Neither the ambiguous Chinese definition of sexual harassment (Tang, 1994) nor the widely used Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ) categories (Gelfand, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1995), with which our questions overlap on most dimensions, suggest a clear conceptual distinction between verbal and physical harassment. Moreover, the coefficients predicting verbal and physical harassment differed with statistical significance only for youth in our data. Combining the two types of harassment produced more examples of harassment, thereby increasing model reliability. Qualitative analyses in China suggest that fondling, pinching, insulting remarks, and requests for romantic relations are among the most frequent

complaints of those reporting sexual harassment (Bu, 1994; Pan, 1994; Tang, 1994). Most likely, these are the behaviors we have captured.

#### *Perpetrators*

Questions about the perpetrator’s gender and relationship to the target followed the verbal and physical harassment questions. Six relationship categories were offered: (1) supervisor, teacher, senior (“older generation” in direct translation); (2) colleague, schoolmate, acquaintance, neighbor; (3) date or girl/boyfriend (current or former); (4) family member, relative; (5) stranger; and (6) someone else. Because few participants reported harassment by a family member ( $n = 13$ ), we grouped these responses together with “someone else” and termed this category “other.” We will henceforth refer to the categories as harassment by a supervisor, peer, date/boyfriend, stranger, and other. In the subsequent logit analysis of these categories, a “1” value indicated that she was harassed by this type of person. A “0” value indicated that she experienced no harassment by any perpetrator. In short, the analysis by perpetrator type was similar to a multinomial logit. The major difference was that some women experienced harassment by more than one type of perpetrator (e.g., verbal harassment by a stranger and physical harassment by a peer).

#### *Youthfulness*

For the “youthfulness” indicator, we take age 45 minus the participant’s current age, further divided by 10 so that a one-unit change indicates a decrease of 10 years (see Table 2).

#### *Opportunity/power differentials*

Two sets of variables tapped both opportunity and power differentials: (a) *Occupation*. Though with different predictions of outcomes, both the opportunity and power differentials approaches suggest differential outcomes for women at different levels in the work force (see Table 1). Accordingly, among women currently at work, we distinguish upper-through-lower status jobs, with the reference category being blue-collar manual jobs. Those who were not working at the time of interview were treated as a separate category (see Table 2 for definitions and descriptive statistics). (b) *Dance hall attendance*, a dummy variable with a mean of 0.23, was a proxy for increased contact with men in a permissive sexual environment.

#### *Benefit*

Benefit to the perpetrator was indexed by four variables (see Table 2), the first being simple physical attractiveness and

**Table 2** Description of risk factors for harassment of urban women age 20–45

Variable	<i>M</i>	Min	Max	Content
Youthfulness (45-age)/10	1.26	0	2.5	Age 45 minus current age, further divided by 10 so that a one-unit change indicates 10 years younger
<i>Exposure/Contact</i>				
<i>Occupation (current)</i>				
Upper white collar	0.09	<sup>a</sup>		Administrative/management or professional/technical job
Clerical	0.15	<sup>a</sup>		Office worker (e.g., secretary)
Sales/service occupation	0.17	<sup>a</sup>		Retail sales or service worker
Self-employed/family business	0.15	<sup>a</sup>		Self-employed, or in business with no more than seven employees
Manual occupation (ref.)	0.24	<sup>a</sup>		Blue collar worker (the reference category in later tables)
Not working	0.20	<sup>a</sup>		Not currently employed, including unemployed and retired
Dance hall attendance	0.23	<sup>a</sup>		Any attendance during past year
<i>Benefit/Signaling</i>				
Self-rated attractiveness	2.41	1	4	1 = not very attractive, 4 = very attractive
Weight loss desired	0.33	<sup>a</sup>		Self-report that needs to lose weight
Liberal sex values	1.97	1	4	Summary scale on approval of premarital sex, extramarital sex, and sex for pleasure alone ( $\alpha = .56$ )
Sexual interest	1.22	1	4	A summary index of the respondent's consumption of pornographic materials and sex drive (frequency of thoughts about sex, masturbation, and consistency of interest in sex over the past 12 months) ( $\alpha = .51$ )
<i>Other</i>				
Childhood sexual contact	0.04	<sup>a</sup>		Any sexual contact before age 14
Body mass index	21.85	16	31	Weight in kilograms divided by squared height in meters
<i>Additional Risk Factors</i>				
<i>Individual characteristics</i>				
Migrant	0.14	<sup>a</sup>		Unregistered in the urban permanent household residence system (i.e., no "green card") and at their current residence $\leq 5$ years
Single (non-married)	0.21	<sup>a</sup>		Never married
Education	3.62	1	6	1 = no formal education, 6 = university education
<i>Community characteristics</i>				
Coast	0.47	<sup>a</sup>		South or Southeast Coastal residence (Jiangsu through Guangdong Provinces)
Population (logged)	12.73	11	16	Log of urban population of city or county where woman resides
Male porn consumption	47.19	32	73	Mean percent of sampled men of any age in community reporting that they viewed pornography last year
Male paid sex	10.22	0	26	Mean percent of sampled men of any age in community reporting that they had commercial sex ever during lifetime

Notes: "*M*" indicates mean values adjusted for sampling weights.

<sup>a</sup>Dummy variable that takes the values of 0 (absent) or 1 (present).

the last three for "presentation of self". (a) *Self-rated attractiveness* ranged from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 4, with a mean of 2.41 (i.e. somewhere between "relatively unattractive" and "relatively attractive"). (b) *Weight loss desired*, based on the self-reported need to lose weight, was a dummy with a mean of 0.33. Because thinness is a new measure of female sexual beauty in Asia (Nagami, 1997; Wong, Bennink, Wang, & Yamamoto, 2000), this measure served as a proxy for a woman's pursuit of modern beauty norms, which may also be reflected in her style of dress, make-up, and general appearance. (c) *Liberal sex values* was a sum-

mary scale on approval of premarital sex, extramarital sex, and sex for pleasure alone. Ranging from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 4, the variable had a mean of 1.97. (d) *Sexual interest* was a summary index of the respondent's consumption of pornographic materials and sex drive (frequency of thoughts about sex, masturbation, and consistency of interest in sex over the past 12 months). Ranging in value from 1 to 4, this variable had a somewhat low mean of 1.22. Much as for the participant's liberal attitudes about sex, interest in sex may signal a willingness to accept sexual advances, at least to peers, dates, and boyfriends (see Table 2).

### Cost

This category included two measures of the participant's weaker power position due to the absence of a community or husband to protect her (migrant, single), two proxies for community norms (high levels of male pornography consumption and paid sex), and an indicator of anonymity for potential harassers (residence in a large city or county). *Migrant* and *single* were both dummy variables, with means of 0.14 and 0.21, respectively. *Male porn consumption* and *paid sex* percentages were based on self-reports from the approximately 40 men sampled in each community. Porn consumption ranged from a minimum of 32 to a maximum of 73, with a mean of 47.19. Paid sex percentages were much lower, ranging from 0 to 26, with a mean of 10.22 (see Table 2). The logged values of the community urban *population* are provided in Table 2. The actual urban populations ranged from a minimum of about 59,000 to a maximum of about 8,000,000 (for Shanghai), with a mean of about 350,000.

### Other risk factors

(1) *Childhood sexual contact*, a dummy (with a very low mean of 0.04) for sexual contact of any kind before age 14, was included with the assumption that prior vulnerability predicts current vulnerability. (2) *Body mass index* (BMI, kg/m<sup>2</sup>) ranged from a minimum of 16 to a maximum of 31, with a mean of almost 22. BMI served as a control for the variable "need to lose weight." With this variable included, "need to lose weight" has a greater influence when the individual reports a need to lose weight even though her BMI indicates she is already thin. (3) *Education* was included to tap the possibility that more educated women are more attuned to the issue of harassment and therefore more likely to report harassment. The values of this variable ranged from a minimum of 1 (indicating no formal education) to 6 (indicating university education), with the mean at 3.62 (i.e. somewhere between junior and senior high-school education). (4) *Coast*, indicating South or Southeast Coastal residence, was included on the assumption that values and behavior regarding male-female relations have changed more rapidly in these locations than elsewhere because of proximity to foreign influences (see Table 2).

### Statistical analyses

Using *svy* methods in the STATA 8.2 statistical package (STATA Corp, 2001), we weighted results in our analyses, first using population weights that adjusted for the intentional oversampling of coastal and urban settings. After comparison of the resulting age distribution to census results for 2000, we adjusted weights by age to compensate for the

smaller number of usable interviews of 20–29 year-olds and 50–64 year-olds. With these adjustments, the percentage distributions by age, occupation, urban residence and education closely parallel those in the national census. Standard errors were adjusted for sample stratification (sampling strata independently) and clustering (sampling individuals within each of 48 primary sampling units). The analysis here was mostly limited to one subset of participants—urban (because the study over-sampled urbanites), those age 20–45 (who were the most likely to experience harassment), and women.

## Results

### Prevalence

In the full data set, including participants of all ages and both verbal and physical harassment, 12.5% (95% confidence interval [CI], 4.2, 20.9) of women and 7.8% (CI, 6.5, 9.2) of men were sexually harassed by someone of the opposite sex in the last year. In urban areas, which are arguably more comparable to developed Western countries where most studies have been done, the prevalence of cross-sex harassment for women of all ages was 15.1% (CI, 13.6, 16.7), and for men of all ages was 6.4% (CI, 4.7, 8.7).

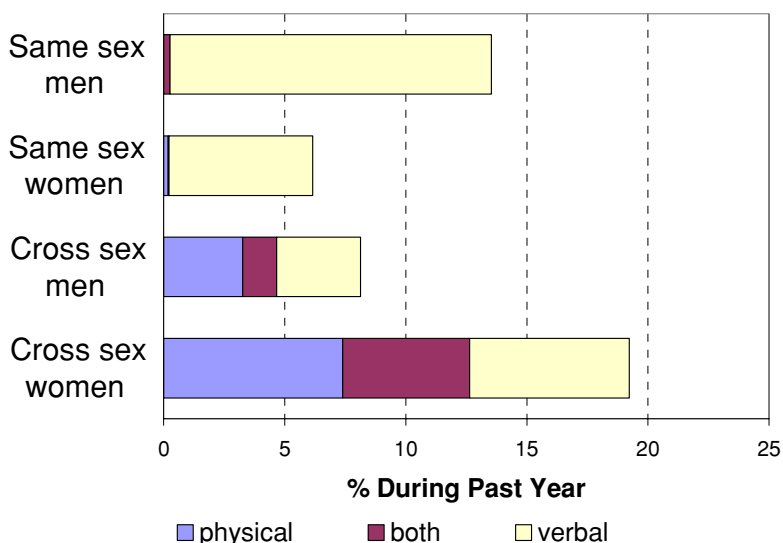
In urban areas, harassment was more common among younger participants and all the subsequent analyses were for this higher-risk younger group age 20 through 45. Among urban participants age 20–45, same-sex harassment was overwhelmingly verbal for both men and women (Fig. 1). Cross-sex (heterosexual) harassment was about evenly split between verbal and physical harassment. For women, cross-sex harassment of all types was more than double that of men (19.2% vs. 8.1%,  $p < .001$ ).

Among these same women, harassment by a coworker, neighbor, or other peer (7.0%) was the most common form of cross-sex harassment (Fig. 2). Strangers (4.6%), dates/boyfriends (3.6%), and other perpetrators (2.6%) each produced no more than half as much harassment as peers. In comparison, supervisors (1.4%) were a minor source of harassment. To complete the picture for male targets of harassment, much of that harassment was by peers. Specifically, 71% of same-sex and 46% of cross-sex harassment was from peers.

### Multivariate analysis

The multivariate results for risk factors were grouped in two tables, the first a set of logit equations (Table 3) and the second a set of logit equations in which an additional risk factor was added one variable at a time (Table 4). Results from both tables are described below, organized in terms of the original hypotheses:

**Fig. 1** Harassment of Urban Respondents Age 20–45 by Gender of Perpetrator and Target



Notes: The analysis that follows focuses on cross sex harassment of women (the final bar in this figure). Data in this and following figure adjusted for sample weights.

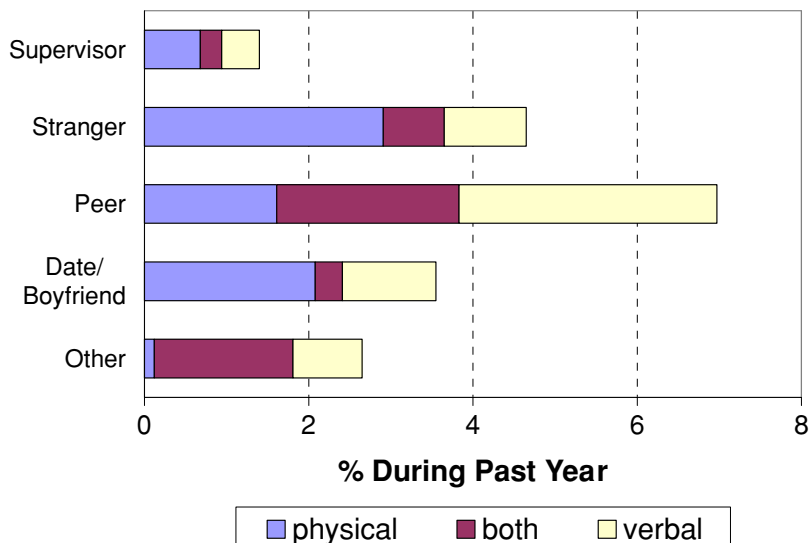
*Youthfulness*

Youthfulness was treated as a control in the analysis, the specific mechanism(s) relating this attribute to harassment being unclear. With only a few exceptions, younger women were more vulnerable. For any type of harassment, the chances increased by a factor of 1.71 (odds ratio) when a woman was 10 years younger (Table 3, column 6). This increase was particularly large for harassment by a date or boyfriend and also for harassment by a stranger (Table 3).

*Opportunity/vulnerability*

As indicated above, three sets of variables, employment status and occupation, dance hall attendance, and being a migrant, measure both opportunity and vulnerability (as in “vulnerable victim” in the power-differentials approach). To recall, we began with sets of hypotheses that made somewhat different predictions about the consequences of work. The power differentials approach led to the hypotheses that (1a) women in positions of less authority or power relative to men are more likely to experience harassment, and

**Fig. 2** Cross Sex Harassment of Urban Women Age 20–45 by Perpetrator



**Table 3** Heterosexual harassment of women last year by perpetrator and risk factors: odds ratios and *t* statistics

	Perpetrator							
	Supervisor (1)	Stranger (2)	Peer (3)	Date/boyfriend	Other (5)	Any (6)	Any verbal (7)	Any physical (8)
Youthfulness (45-age)/10	1.17 (0.28)	<b>2.12*</b> (2.76)	1.36 (1.07)	<b>5.51**</b> (3.38)	<b>0.68<sup>+</sup></b> (2.03)	<b>1.71**</b> (3.11)	1.25 (1.39)	<b>1.99*</b> (2.12)
Exposure/Contact								
Occupation: (cf. manual)								
Upper white collar	<b>0.00**</b> (32.95)	1.31 (0.38)	2.31 (1.30)	<b>0.00**</b> (52.07)	0.88 (0.15)	1.15 (0.36)	1.17 (0.24)	1.30 (0.67)
Clerical	<b>4.76*</b> (2.10)	1.60 (0.63)	1.01 (0.02)	0.36 (1.24)	1.25 (0.48)	0.76 (0.36)	0.58 (0.39)	0.69 (0.99)
Sales/service	<b>6.95*</b> (2.32)	<b>5.18**</b> (2.85)	<b>1.72<sup>+</sup></b> (1.78)	<b>2.70<sup>+</sup></b> (1.99)	1.59 (0.86)	<b>2.21**</b> (4.05)	<b>2.36**</b> (3.39)	<b>1.57<sup>+</sup></b> (2.01)
Self-employed/family business	<b>14.62**</b> (2.99)	<b>3.70*</b> (2.25)	<b>1.80*</b> (2.35)	1.14 (0.12)	1.92 (1.07)	<b>2.22**</b> (3.32)	<b>1.36</b> (0.72)	<b>2.48**</b> (3.55)
Not working now (retired/fired/never)	0.60 (0.59)	0.60 (0.59)	<b>0.11**</b> (3.33)	0.67 (0.71)	<b>0.27<sup>+</sup></b> (1.87)	<b>0.36*</b> (2.51)	0.38 (1.40)	<b>0.22*</b> (3.58)
Dance Hall Attendance (any last year)	<b>2.46<sup>+</sup></b> (1.73)	1.94 (1.61)	<b>2.83**</b> (2.81)	2.14 (0.88)	2.15 (1.04)	<b>2.17**</b> (4.68)	1.54 <sup>+</sup> (1.82)	<b>2.43**</b> (3.13)
Benefit/Signaling								
Self-rated attractiveness	<b>2.70*</b> (2.27)	0.61 (1.14)	1.82 (1.45)	1.23 (0.86)	1.11 (0.24)	1.31 (1.50)	<b>1.42*</b> (2.08)	1.32 (1.45)
Weight loss desired (0/1)	0.27 (1.24)	<b>2.26*</b> (2.51)	<b>1.73*</b> (2.36)	1.30 (0.51)	<b>1.63*</b> (2.05)	<b>1.62**</b> (2.90)	1.47 (1.25)	1.25 (0.96)
Liberal sex values	<b>2.17<sup>+</sup></b> (1.94)	<b>1.90*</b> (2.23)	<b>1.81**</b> (3.87)	<b>6.16**</b> (3.81)	<b>2.27<sup>+</sup></b> (1.82)	<b>2.81**</b> (5.55)	<b>2.19**</b> (7.30)	<b>2.42**</b> (3.50)
Sexual interest	<b>3.52**</b> (3.07)	1.00 (0.02)	<b>2.64**</b> (4.15)	<b>1.54*</b> (2.10)	1.04 (0.11)	<b>1.46<sup>+</sup></b> (1.78)	1.29 (1.15)	1.50 (1.68)
Other Conditions								
Childhood Sexual Contact	1.18 (1.33)	0.95 (0.45)	1.04 (0.83)	1.02 (0.26)	1.09 (1.47)	<b>2.58**</b> (3.21)	1.17 (0.22)	<b>3.55**</b> (2.93)
Body Mass Index	607	784	816	762	766	923	1.01 (0.25)	1.08 (1.16)
Observations							923	916

*Notes:* In columns 1–6, verbal and physical harassment are combined. In columns 1–5, the comparison is between a person harassed by each perpetrator and those reporting no harassment by any perpetrator. Respondents may have multiple types of perpetrators. Sample limited to urban women age 20–45. Column 1 limited to women currently at work. Logit analyses corrected for sample design effects.

<sup>+</sup>*p* < .10.

\**p* < .05.

\*\**p* < .01.

**Table 4** Additional risk factors for heterosexual sexual harassment

	Type of harassment		
	Any	Verbal	Physical
<b>Individual Traits:</b>			
Migrant	1.73 (1.44)	<b>1.95*</b> (2.21)	1.02 (0.06)
Single (non-married)	<b>2.05<sup>+</sup></b> (1.99)	<b>1.99<sup>+</sup></b> (1.86)	1.54 (1.03)
Education	1.02 (0.18)	0.91 (1.26)	1.08 (0.36)
<b>Community Traits:</b>			
Coast	<b>0.74*</b> (2.44)	0.64 (1.70)	0.77 (1.19)
Population (logged)	1.05 (1.00)	<b>1.16<sup>+</sup></b> (1.99)	0.98 (0.37)
Male porn consumption	0.99 (0.89)	0.99 (0.78)	1.00 (0.09)
Male paid sex	0.99 (1.09)	<b>0.95*</b> (2.58)	0.99 (0.47)

Notes: These risk factors are entered one item at a time into models 6 through 8 of Table 3.

<sup>+</sup> $p < .10$ .

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

(1b) women who pose a challenge to male predominance are more likely to experience harassment. With respect to the opportunity mechanism under the routine activities model, we argued that (2a) because they have more contact with men, working women are more likely to experience harassment of all types, and (2b) because of contact with clients and customers in addition to work mates, women both in sales and service jobs and in self-employment (which typically involves retail sales and service) are more likely to experience harassment.

As predicted by the second set of hypotheses, employed women reported significantly higher levels of harassment than non-working women. Or, as seen in Table 3, women who were not working had a reduced chance of being harassed (OR (odds ratio)=0.36 in column 6). Harassment also varied by occupation. Compared to work in a manual job, working in sales and service occupations or being self employed or in a family business approximately doubled the likelihood of harassment (OR = 2.2 in column 6). Additionally, the consequences of occupation varied somewhat by type of perpetrator. Clerical occupations achieved statistical significance only for supervisor harassment, sales/service occupations for supervisor and stranger harassment, and self employed/family business for supervisor, stranger and peer harassment.

Dance hall attendance is an indicator of both the violation of tradition and contact with potential harassers. Thus, it relates to two separate hypotheses- (1c) women who violate traditional norms in dress and demeanor are more likely to report verbal harassment, and (2c) because of greater exposure to potential harassers, women who frequent dance halls are more likely to experience harassment.

In the results, dance hall attendance approximately doubled the likelihood of harassment (OR = 2.17 in Table 3, column 6).

### Benefit

Since the physical attractiveness of the target increases benefits to the potential harasser, we hypothesized that (3a) women who rate themselves as more attractive are more likely to face harassment of all types. In the results, self-rated attractiveness increased harassment, especially by supervisors and for any verbal harassment (Table 3, columns 1 and 7).

However, we argued that “attractiveness” of the target might also include dress and demeanor that could intentionally or unintentionally signal availability for sexual approaches. Hence, we posited that (3b) women who pursue norms of beauty consistent with the new images are more likely to experience harassment, and (3c) women with more liberal attitudes towards sex or heightened sexual interest are more likely to experience harassment, particularly from men who know the woman well.

In the results (Table 3), several types of harassment increased when women wanted to lose weight, held liberal sex values, and expressed a high level of sexual interest. The influence of liberal sex values was greatest for harassment by dates or boyfriends, which would be consistent with men in these relationships having more knowledge of a woman’s beliefs. Similarly, a woman’s sexual interest was related to harassment by a supervisor, peer, or date/boyfriend, and not to harassment by a stranger, again consistent with the speculation that personal values are likely to be more evident to men with whom the woman has frequent contact.

### Cost

Initially, we posited that women will report more harassment when they (4a) are migrant or single, and therefore without a community or husband to exact retribution, (4b) live in communities with fewer normative constraints on the treatment of women as sexual objects (e.g., either male pornography consumption or prostitution is common in the community), or when they (4c) live in large communities where the harasser has anonymity (particularly for verbal harassment). The results for these predictions were mixed in a set of analyses that added a single additional risk factor to a set of logit equations (Table 4). Consistent with the predictions, women reported more harassment when they were migrant or single or lived in a larger city. Contrary to these predictions, women were not more likely to be harassed in communities where male porn consumption or male paid sex was more common. Indeed, contrary to what one might expect from a

community norms approach, higher paid sex levels were, if anything, protective for verbal harassment. The finding for migrants remained robust after population size was controlled for in a separate set of equations, suggesting that it was not simply an artifact of migrants moving to larger places.

#### *Childhood sexual contact*

Based on previous research, we argued that (5) individuals who have experienced childhood sexual contact are more likely to face harassment. The results were consistent with this hypothesis (Table 3).

#### *Harassment of men*

A separate set of exploratory analyses showed that harassment of men was far more difficult to explain. The only items significant at the .05 level were youthfulness (for same-sex harassment) and not working, coastal residence, and average commercial sex levels in the community (for cross-sex harassment). The latter relationship would be consistent with more men being accosted on the street by commercial sex workers in cities with many women of this type.

## Discussion

### Prevalence in other societies

Comparisons across societies are difficult (Haspels et al., 2001; Sbraga & O'Donohue, 2000; Timmerman & Bajema, 1999; Welsh, 1999). Samples, question wording, cultural definitions, and sensibilities vary across studies (Barak, 1997; Kennedy & Gorzalka, 2002). With all those caveats in mind, results for other national (not local or occupation specific) studies that used a similar single question or two about harassment might produce roughly comparable results. The results for cross-sex harassment of Chinese women ages 20–64 in the past year were 12.5% for all women and 15.1% for urban women.

In Finland, a nationally representative Women's Safety study reported that 19.6% of women experienced a range of harassment behaviors over the last year (Heiskanen & Piispa, 1998). In a French National Survey on Violence Against Women, which asked about incidents both at work and in public areas occurring in the last year, 8.3% of French women (15% of Paris women) reported some form of harassment (Jaspard et al., 2001). In Italy, 24.4% of women between the ages of 14 and 59 reported at least one type of sexual harassment in the last three years (Sabbadini, 1998). With no information on how many women suffered repeat harassment across multiple years, it is unclear how to reduce

the Italian percentage to get an annual prevalence. Nevertheless, allowing for all the problems of comparison, the Chinese data appear broadly comparable to what has been found in European societies.

### Mechanisms

We started with two partially contrasting conceptual approaches, the power differentials perspective and the routine activities model. The results were more consistent with the second of the two approaches, in part because it was the more comprehensive of the two approaches. More specifically, out of the three power differentials hypotheses, two were only partially confirmed, and our results were contrary to a third. Of the nine hypotheses under the power differentials approach, in contrast, eight were confirmed and one disconfirmed. Additionally, the results were consistent with our hypothesis about victims of childhood sexual contact.

We began with three hypotheses derived from the *power differentials* approach. According to the vulnerable victim hypothesis (Hypothesis 1a), differential power in the target-perpetrator dyad increased harassment, whether directly in terms of an organization's formal hierarchy or indirectly through an organization's culture or societal norms that dictate power. Consistent with this hypothesis, migrant women were more likely to report verbal harassment (Table 4). On other dimensions, however, the results were not consistent with the hypothesis. It was women near the top of the occupational hierarchy, rather than women at lower levels, in manual occupations, who were more likely to be harassed. Similarly, it was not women with no work and no income, but those who were employed, who were more likely to report harassment. It is possible that our interpretation of this approach was too crude—missing many local power differentials that increase harassment. For instance, among white-collar women, clerical workers were more likely to be harassed than women in upper white-collar professions. This pattern could be seen as consistent with an argument that it is the small differences among workers who come in contact with each other regularly in the same office or work site, rather than gross income or status differences, that matter. If so, this is a more nuanced conception of victim vulnerability.

The second, “power-threat,” hypothesis suggests that women who threaten male predominance, whether by being “too assertive” or by violating “male territory,” are sanctioned through harassment (Hypothesis 1b). Our results were contrary to this hypothesis. In the status hierarchy, it was not women in professional/technical or administration/management positions who report the most harassment, but those in sales and service occupations and the self-employed. The latter tended to be occupations with a high percentage of females. Thus, the most vulnerable women were neither those in more atypical occupations nor those in

high status occupations who might threaten male status. This pattern was not consistent with the power-threat hypothesis.

The third power-differentials hypothesis applies to transitional societies. As old patriarchal norms about women's behavior begin to change, women violating the traditional norms are punished with verbal harassment (Hypothesis 1c). Some of our results were consistent with this hypothesis. For example, it was in the more traditional North and Interior, rather than the cosmopolitan coastal regions, that women reported the most harassment. Additionally, women with more liberal attitudes, higher sex drive, and self-reported need to lose weight were more likely to be harassed. One concern could be that the negative effect of coastal living was an artifact of controls introduced for dance hall attendance, desired weight loss, attitudes toward sex, sex drive, and attractiveness. In separate analysis, however, the effect of region remained at least mildly negative even when these controls were removed from the equation. Finally, same-sex harassment was almost all verbal, which is consistent with an emphasis on the social chiding of women who are seen as "stepping out line" with traditional norms of dress and behavior (Fig. 1).

The results were more uniformly consistent with the *routine activities* approach, integrating the mechanisms of opportunity, benefit, and costs. If *opportunity* is central, then the women most likely to report harassment should not be those with little or no income or in low income or traditionally male occupations, but instead women in frequent contact with men. This contact could include going to and from work, working in sales and service jobs that involve contact with male customers, and contact with men in settings such as dance halls. These were the patterns found in the data. Women were more likely to report harassment when employed, particularly in sales and service and self-employment types of jobs, and when they attended dance halls. Women in lower-status manual jobs reported not more but less harassment. The reason could well be that these women both had less contact with clients and customers, and had less need to travel to and from work because they lived in factory housing near their place of work. If so, then it was not their social or income status but their "routine activities" that provided the opportunity for harassment. Dance hall attendance, of course, exposes a woman to multiple risks- involving both opportunity and, in part, being labeled as "available" for sexual approaches. In short, this set of results was consistent with each of the three "opportunity" hypotheses, 2a through 2c.

The second aspect of routine activities was "*benefit*" or the "attractiveness of the target," including not only her self-rated physical attractiveness but also (frequently unintended) "presentation of self" aspects that are misperceived as availability for sexual approaches. In our results, physically attractive women faced greater harassment. More

remarkably, the strongest results in the data represent an area receiving little attention in the West, i.e., presentation of self. Regardless of their age and marital status, those we term "progressive" women, as indicated by their acceptance of new norms of beauty, reported sexual interest, and liberal sex values, were more frequent targets of harassment.

One possible problem with interpreting these findings is that progressive women are more likely to label solicitations as harassing. Educated or liberal women exposed to increasingly globalized media products are more likely to have internalized contemporary "Western" sexual and gender narratives, and therefore "Western" notions of propriety. Past literature also suggests that reporting tendencies are particularly evident among more educated (Lach & Gwartney-Gibbs, 1993) or liberal (defined as sensitive to sexism) women (Vaux, 1993). While our results may partially reflect heightened sensitivity, we suggest there is more to the story. A Hong Kong study found no correlation between readiness to identify harassment as a social problem and liberal views on courtship (Choi et al., 1993). Reports of harassment also did not increase linearly with education in our data, as we would expect if internalized Western notions of harassment were the root cause for progressive women reporting more harassment.

A second possible question about the findings is why "progressive" women were not more welcoming of approaches. If these women truly were more "progressive" in their beliefs about sexual encounters and interested in sex, why did they label solicitations as harassment? We offer two possible explanations. First, these women may be more progressive in their sexual views and interests than in their personal behavioral standards. In other words, they may be more willing to accept the idea of premarital sex than to engage in it. Thus, solicitations were perceived as harassing. However, even sexually active women, who apparently had relaxed their personal standards, continued to report more harassment. Quite possibly, these women had relaxed their standards to allow for premarital sex with a fiancé or intended fiancé, but not sex with others.

Among the risk factors examined thus far, both exposure to potential harassers and presentation of oneself as a liberal and sexually progressive individual are underemphasized in the Western literature. In the routine activities model, the third factor was absence of sanctions or *costs*. Consistent with both the vulnerable victim and absence of sanctions approaches, we speculated that single women and migrant women would be more likely to report harassment (Hypotheses 1a and 4a). We based this speculation on the absence of costs to the harasser due to the non-availability of a male guardian and, for the migrant woman, to the absence of a supportive community. Our results supported this speculation.

At the community level, costs would vary with social norms and regulations. Our analysis used frequent male consumption of pornography and commercial sex as proxies for lax norms about men's treatment of women. High levels of both were expected to exacerbate reports of harassment (Hypothesis 4b). Arguably, normative regulation was also weaker in larger, less cohesive communities, where anonymity allowed men to harass women without fear of being sanctioned by friends and acquaintances (Hypothesis 4c). In the results, while community size exacerbated harassment, male commercial sex and pornography consumption did not. We speculate that far from leading to harassment, the latter might even provide separate outlets for male sexual drives.

Finally, we speculated that women who had experienced childhood sexual contact would be more likely to report harassment (Hypothesis 5). Our results were consistent with this hypothesis, adding to the growing literature on the effects of childhood sexual contact on later sexual coercion.

### Limitations

There were several limitations to our analysis. We had only a few questionnaire items available for analysis, and could thus only scratch the surface of the harassment topic. We relied on self-reports that provided little evidence of the exact behaviors being reported. Thus, to some extent, we may have measured variation in the "measuring instrument" (the participant doing the reporting), with participants being differentially offended by the same behaviors of men around them. In addition, the wording of our question on verbal harassment was admittedly somewhat vague. Our cell sizes for some of the analyses were small (e.g., for harassment by supervisor and for childhood sexual contact). This, in turn, made it difficult to produce statistically significant results. Partly because of small sample sizes, we analyzed little about rural patterns or about same-sex harassment among men or women.

### Summary

To our knowledge, this is the first study to use a general population sample to examine all types of harassment in a developing non-Western country. The results indicate that when compared to other omnibus surveys for the total population, harassment prevalence in urban China resembled prevalence levels found in the developed West. The Chinese results also highlighted the point, often buried in other studies, that peer and stranger harassment were more common than supervisor harassment.

The Chinese results suggest that the emphasis placed by much of the extant theoretical literature on the vulnerability of lower-status females to aggression by powerful males

needs to be re-evaluated. Given that previous empirical studies have also highlighted the harassment of higher-status women by lower-status men, this conclusion should come as no surprise. However, this insight has yet to be adequately incorporated into scholarly conceptions of harassment. Moreover, to the extent that victim-vulnerability does play a role, it seems to be shaped by local (e.g., clerical workers in close contact with supervisors) rather than global (e.g., all women in manual work where they are not in constant contact with men) power differentials. Partly for this reason, we argue that the routine activities approach from criminology has greater utility in explicating harassment of all types. To some extent, the routine activities approach is simply a more comprehensive approach that incorporates power-differentials as one of the ways that the costs of harassment might be reduced for the potential harasser.

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