

# SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN MALAYSIAN EDUCATIONA INSTITUTION- A REVIEW OF ITS FACTORS AND EFFECTS

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#### **Abstract**

Sexual harassment is defined as a single or sequence of unwelcoming sexual acts that the receiver perceives as threatening, aggressive, insulting, humiliating, or offensive, intending violate the recipient's dignity. It is impossible to deny that sexual harassment is on the rise in schools and on college campuses. One of the more significant issues in our modern era is the lack of suitable and effective measures to combat the prevalence of sexual harassment. Therefore, a systematic review was conducted to summarize the trend of sexual harassment within Malaysian educational institutions, its contributing factors, and its implications for the institution and community. Review identification was performed in a database search using PubMed, Scopus, and CINAHL. Based on the criteria consisting of full papers in English published from January 2011 to November 2021, 10 articles were eligible for review. The systematic review revealed that the prevalence of sexual harassment is surprisingly high among students, including physical sexual misconduct. Observing the formal dress code as regulated by the institution and providing a safe and controlled internet browser are believed to be helpful in producing a safe environment at the institution.

**Keywords**: Sexual harassment, Malaysian Educational Institution, Factors

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#### INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is described as conduct that includes uninvited and inappropriate sexual remarks or physical advances in the office or other professional or social settings. Sexual harassment is a form of misconduct that can lead to termination since employers are required to create a safe and conducive working environment. This is also applicable to educational

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institutions. Sexual harassment takes the form of an unwanted physical act, such as caressing, patting, pinching, stroking, hugging, or kissing. It also covers verbal harassment, gestural harassment, visual harassment and psychological harassment. It is impossible to deny that sexual harassment is on the rise in schools and on college campuses. The main problem is that there are insufficient and inefficient procedures in place to reduce the occurrence of sexual harassment. Without an active preventive plan and proper monitoring by parents, teachers, academicians, staff, and authorities, the condition will become worse and affect the civilization of our nation in the future. Urgent attention needs to be given to settle this issue.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

This review article objectively aims to identify the types of sexual harassment in Malaysian educational institutions and their implications for the students, staff, community and institution. The associated factors contributing to the sexual harassment were also identified. Three electronic databases (PubMed, CINAHL and Scopus) were searched from the database's inception in January 2011 till November 2021. Three independent authors were responsible for searching and stratifying the articles by scanning the titles and abstracts identified from the search strategy for all databases. Another independent author with expertise in the subject matter verified the finalized articles and settled any discrepancies between the authors. The search strategy used the following sets of descriptors: Sexual Persecution, Molestation, Sexual Sexual Assault, Victimization, Transgression, Disturbance Act, Offensive, Exploitation, Gender Harassment, Impropriety, Indecent, Intimidation, Malaysian, Malaysia, Our Country, This Country, Universities, Colleges, Campus, Education Centre, Higher Institution, School, Boarding School, Learning Centre and International School. The following research questions needed to be answered: the prevalence of sexual harassment in Malaysian educational institutions, the types of sexual harassment in Malaysian educational institutions, the associated factors for sexual harassment in Malaysian educational institutions, and the implications of sexual harassment for the involved students. Articles had to be written in English, and the paper format had to be cross-sectional, case-control, or cohort in the study. Further data extractions were carried out by the initial three authors using a standardized data extraction table to collect relevant data from each eligible trial. The data comprised publication details, study characteristics, study setting, study design, sample size, eligibility criteria, and outcome measurements. Any divergences regarding data extraction between the three authors were also solved by the fourth author via discussion. Any articles with insufficient or missing information were also excluded. Out of the 621 articles identified, 44 articles meeting the inclusion criteria were included (Figure 1). The other articles were excluded because of their structure and format, which consisted of case reports, case series, commentary, randomized control trials, review articles, systematic reviews, or meta-analyses. Articles that discussed the sexual abuse or harassment of non-Malaysian settings were also excluded. After reviewing data extraction and finalizing it by all authors, only 10 articles were included, which fulfilled the objective as summarized in Table 1.

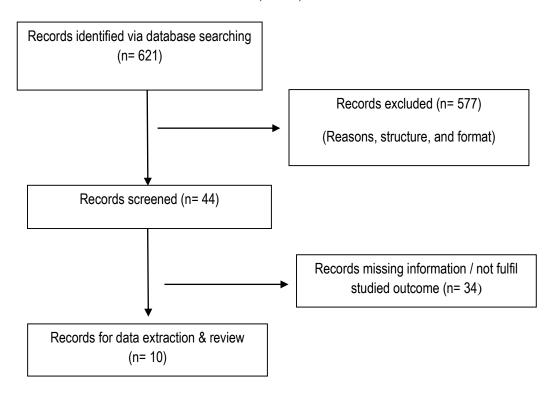


Figure 1: Schematic flow for articles identification and extraction

Table 1: List of Reviewed Articles and Details

No	ARTICLES	PREVALENCE	TYPES	FACTORS	IMPLICATIONS
1.	Sexual misconduct in academic setting: Domestic law and practice in Malaysia (Mohamed, 2015).		Lecturer to student, student to lecturer, student to student.  Forms: Verbal, physical, non-verbal harassment may include leering (staring), or sexual gesturing (movements		Psychological and physical consequences, traumatic symptoms, productivity capacity. Other effects: employment or jobrelated experiences and dismissals, unable to focus on studies.
2.	Differences in the Perception of Sexual Harassment by Gender and Ethnicity among Selected Malaysian Undergraduates. Gender, Technology and Development (Yee et al, 2015).	30 percent of the female undergraduates are victims  75 - 80 percent of students had experienced at least one form of sexual harassment.	Physical form (such as pulling off clothing or rubbing against another person), Verbal form (such as sexual comments)	-	The boys were more likely to ignore sexual harassment compared to girls. Lower levels of school and job satisfaction. Affects their motivation and effectiveness at work as well as family relations at home.
3.	Victimization Experiences of Adolescents in Malaysia (Wan-Yuen et	Males were more likely to report physical victimization and had a significantly higher prevalence	Physical and emotional victimization were most common.	Low and difficult social support within family and at school Practice of living within extended	-

	al, 2011).	of emotional victimization on four of six items.		household and more tightly integrated neighbourhood grouping may have protective effect toward sexual victimization Domestic violence Parenteral alcoholism	
4.	Sexual harrassment amongst undergraduate students at a public university in the east coast of peninsular Malaysia, Malaysia (Sharifah Aishah et al, 2013).	31% experience of being sexually harassed outside campus. 14.2% had been harassed in the campus	The incident which happens in institutions of higher education is more serious - involves relationship between lecturers and students	Indecent clothes: tight, sexy. Uncontrolled social interaction between male and female students. Surrounding environment: dark, quiet. Personality & attitude.	
5.	Understanding Sexual Harassment among Undergraduate Students' in Higher Education Institution in Malaysia (Siti Rapidah et al, 2018).	In 2015, a total of 230 cases of sexual harassment have been reported in Malaysia statistic.  In other countries, percentage range from 50-61%.	Verbal, non-verbal, physical, and written	Human factor OLow morale of harasser OWomen viewed as sex objects & regarded as inferior to man (easily dominate women) OWomen who are physical attractive	Education performance for instance trouble focused on their studies, anxiety and lower self- esteem. shame and fear.
6.	Sexual Harassment and Discrimination Experiences of Academic Medical Faculty (Jagsi et al, 2016).	30% women, 4% of men.			40% of affected described more severe forms, perceived a negative effect on confidence in themselves as professionals. 47% reported that these experiences negatively affected their career advancement.
7.	Sexual harassment in Malaysian educational institutions (Mohamed, 2015).	More than 50% students, experienced harassment	Verbal: upsetting or insulting words directed at someone based on her/his gender.  Non-verbal: eg leering or ogling with suggestive overtones  Physical: touching, grabbing or pinching in a sexual way.	Improper dressing: wearing skimpy or transparent wear arouse the sexual emotional attachment  Exposure to sexual materials: easily accessible  Use of illicit drugs  Being in secluded area	Impact their school performance, such as a difficulty of concentrating in their studies, fear and lower self-esteem, among others.  Destructive to the psychological, physical and emotional well-being of the victims.

			Written: sending sexually oriented notes	Close proximity	
8.	A qualitative study to explore understanding and perception ofsexual abuse among undergraduate students of different ethnicities (Jayapalan et al, 2018).		Physical - touching of an individual's body parts such as buttocks, breasts and private parts  Verbal - teasing somebody about their body parts, language, whistling  Visual - perceived viewing photographs or videos with sexual content or nudism  Flasher - believed to be people who display their body parts  Sexting - sending of text or picture		
			message containing sexual elements via electronic devices Videoing couples or		
			one's partner while making out and uploading the video to the internet for public to view		
9.	Unethical behavior and professionalism among medical students in a private medical university in Malaysia (Yadav et al (2019)).	40.7% had noticed some form of unethical behavior among other students		Personality	Professionalism concerns during the clinical years. Can influence other students differently.
10.	Knowledge of sexual and reproductive health among adolescents attending school in Kelantan, Malaysia (Ab Rahman et al, 2011).			Lack of knowledge on sexual and reproductive health	

#### PREVALENCE SEXUAL HARASSMENT

The prevalence of sexual harassment in Malaysian educational institutions is quite pervasive. According to our findings, there is only one study that documented the prevalence of sexual harassment among adolescent students in Malaysian secondary schools, in which a large percentage of students (more than 50%) experienced sexual harassment (Mohamed, 2015a). Sexual harassment is a widespread issue in educational institutions, and it is becoming more prevalent in Malaysian public and private colleges. Several studies have been conducted in the local universities amongst undergraduate and postgraduate students. According to our analyses, a significant number of university students in Malaysia have been subjected to at least one type of sexual harassment (Rathakrishnan et al, 2021). Likewise, Yee et al. (2015) have reported found that 75% of undergraduates at a Malaysian university had experienced sexual harassment at least once throughout their studies, as similarly reported by Choo et al. and Ahamd et al (Tien Yee et al, 2015; Choo et al, 2011; Kes gangguan seksual 2015 makin meningkat, 2015). These statistics are in line with a report by Berita Harian in 2017, which found that in 2016, more than half of university students in Australia were subjected to sexual harassment, with 7% of them being sexually assaulted at least once (Gangguan seksual di universiti Australia membimbangkan, 2017).

Besides, a study done by Syed Nong (2013) conducted at a public university in the east coast of peninsular Malaysia showed the prevalence of sexual harassment that was concerning to the location of the event, whether it was outside or inside the university. 31% of the students had been sexually harassed outside the campus including in the shopping malls, public transportation, rail stations and outdoor areas while 14.2% of students reported they had been harassed by the security officers, administrative workers, colleagues, professors, and maintenance workers on campus such as in the dormitory area, cafeteria and campus buildings. Aside from that, there is a gender gap in the prevalence of sexual harassment in educational settings, where female cases outnumber males as shown in several studies in Malaysia (Omar Ali et al, 2018; Mohd Karima, 2016). The findings are also similar in other countries worldwide. As shown by the American Association of University Women, 62% of female college students had been sexually harassed at their university in 2006 according to Hill and Silva. This finding is also in accordance with research conducted by Norman et al. (2013) at a Ghanaian university, which found that 61% of female medical students were sexually harassed by their instructors. Jagsi et al. (2016) further described that 40% of women who reported experiencing harassment of more serious types and felt it had a detrimental impact on their professional confidence.

## TYPES OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment in educational institution has long been recognized as a serious but underreported issue that affects students and staff, particularly women. Most authors defined sexual harassment as unwanted sexual attention that occurs through verbal or physical engagements (Tien Yee et al, 2015; Fogarty, 2006). Categorizing harassment, the term encompasses both physical and verbal manifestations (Mohamed, 2015b). Physical sexual harassment furthermore can take the form of pulling off clothing or rubbing against another person (Tien Yee et al, 2015). A study conducted by Jayapalan et al (2018) further described the physical types of

harassment can be involving vaginal or anal penetration, and stroking of an individual's body parts such as buttocks, breasts, and private regions.

Besides, sexual harassment that is expressed verbally might take the shape of sexual remarks, jeers, rumours, or sexual jokes directed at an individual (Tien Yee et al, 2015; Wolfe et al, 2008). According to Jayapalan et al. in 2018, verbal sexual assault might be regarded as insulting a person's bodily parts, using obscene words and whistling. Apart from that, sexual harassment can also take the form of visual, such as perceived sexual content or nudism in photographs or videos; or encountering flashers who are those displaying their body parts (genitals, breasts, or buttocks) indecently, sexting, and videoing couples or one's partner while making out and uploading the video to the internet for public viewing (Jayapalan et al, 2018). Similarly, Mohamed et al. reported that a written form of sexual harassment may be taking place when one is sending sexually explicit notes, letters, SMS, MMS, and e-mails to the targets (Mohamed, 2015b).

Sexual harassment also can be emanated from lecturer to lecturer, student to a lecturer, and student to student (Mohamed, 2015a; Mohamed, 2015b). The incidents that occur in higher education institutions are especially worrisome because it involves a power imbalance between lecturers and students, which is exacerbated by factors such as age discrepancy, students' naivety, lecturers' belief and respect, and gender disparity in the academic environment (Syed Nong et al, 2013). Moreover, according to Mohamed, lecturer to student type of sexual harassment happens, although it is uncommon, when a professor may have an intellectual advantage over a student, particularly if the student is not bright and academically weak (Mohamed, 2015a; Mohamed, 2015b). Furthermore, lecturers also have been the targets of sexual harassment in some circumstances, while students have been the perpetrators. Female lecturers are typically the victims in this situation, as they are frequently harassed by male students who are physically larger and possibly even older than them (Rospenda et al, 2005). Sexual harassment amongst students can take many forms, including verbal, nonverbal, and physical. Any distressing or offensive statements hurled at someone because of their sex are considered verbal harassment. According to Mohamed, verbal harassment includes calling certain nicknames, such as 'stud,' 'babe,' 'chick,' or 'sexy,' which may have negative connotations. Meanwhile non-verbal might take the form of leering (staring) or obscene signs (movements) (Mohamed, 2015a; Mohamed, 2015b). Any unconsented physical touch including sexual touching, grabbing or pinching, is considered physical harassment and may be deemed sexual assault, which is a criminal offense.

## **CONTRIBUTING FACTORS**

A learning institution is a pure place for students to seek knowledge, gain as much experience, and build their inner selves to face the challenges in this world to always bring themselves forward in various situations. In other words, schools and universities are second places after home for students where most of the time, they will be socializing with friends, teachers, lecturers, and administrative staff. However, recently, most parents are being bothered by sexual harassment that occurs in educational institutions. This issue is not something new and strange in Malaysian society. It has been detected in Malaysia as early as the late 1980s and keeps portraying an increase in trend. Various solutions and strategies have been offered to

reduce this incident as well as put a stop to sexual harassment. But why does sexual harassment keep on happening in the learning center? Is the perpetrator carry all the fault that leads to sexual harassment? Does the victim also play a significant role in causing sexual harassment to happen?

Based on a study conducted by Jayapalan et al. (2018), the higher occurrence of sexual harassment in the educational center is mainly toward children and females. Females are at risk of being victims due to their feminine nature, which makes them vulnerable as they lack physical strength, no authority in decision-making, have a soft personality, and have a petite appearance. Thus, females are easily dominated by males who are physically strong, and superior compared to females. Apart from that, women also have subordinate status where they must obey and submit to men's wishes, especially their sexual needs (Abeid et al, 2014). Furthermore, an attractive and good-looking appearance with the improper way of dress code portrayed by women also leads to the arousal of sexual desire of men (Jayapalan et al, 2018). For example, women wearing a tight, skimpy, or transparent outfit that almost reveals their inner body curve are associated with wanting to seduce the opposite sex (Pasura et al, 2013). A study by Chukwudi & Cbakorun in 2011 shows that female students who wear revealing and tight dresses were associated with an expectation of compliments, wishes, and demands to be gratified.

Apart from that, children and young people are at greater risk for sexual harassment as they are innocent and powerless, which are advantages for the perpetrator [Jayapalan et al, 2018; Abeid, 2014). They are more likely to obey commands from others and can easily be persuaded with some gift and be threatened with force to perform sexual harassment (Pasura et al, 2013). Children also may lack knowledge of what sexual harassment is; they cannot identify and rationalize whether this incident of sexual harassment is a good act or the wrong one. They are easy victims as they usually never open up about their experiences as they might feel nobody will believe in their story, and it is not essential to tell others (Jayapalan et al, 2018; Foster and Hagedorn; 2011). Some children also have a special relationship with their perpetrators where they trust and care deeply for them and will never want them to get into trouble (Foster and Hagedorn; 2011).

Sexual harassment is also likely to occur in a conducive environment such as a quiet and dark place with less interruption and a low chance of being spotted by others (Mohamed, 2015a; Mohamed, 2015b; Jayapalan et al, 2018). Male and female students in a secluded area such as in the locker room, sports room, or even in a classroom where there are no other friends have a higher tendency for sexual harassment to occur. Uncontrolled social interaction between males and females is also one of the most significant factors leading to sexual harassment (Syed Nong et al, 2013; Jayapalan et al, 2018). Mixing and being too close to the opposite sex create a favourable environment to perform the sexual act. A study by Jayapalan et al. also showed that talkative and gregarious people have a higher risk of being sexually harassed as they are being perceived as an easy target by the perpetrator (Jayapalan et al, 2018).

Exposure to sexual materials in any internet browser may arouse sexual emotions and can lead to sexual harassment. The modern world with high internet accessibility allows people regardless of age to browse information without boundaries, which has a negative impact as some information is not adequately filtered. For example, young people, especially students, are easily exposed to sexual content, leading to e-sexual harassment via sexual messages and

sending pornographic pictures to the opposite sex (Mohamed, 2015a; Mohamed, 2015b). On the other hand, sexual jokes common among students and employees could also create a hostile environment as some women perceive it as verbal harassment (Mohamed, 2015a; Mohamed, 2015b; Mohamed et al, 2011). Lastly, lack of knowledge and awareness about sexual harassment as a wrongful act are among the contributing factor that increases the incidence of sexual harassment in Malaysian educational institutions (Yadav, 2019). A study conducted among adolescents attending school in Kelantan revealed that most students have a misconception regarding sexual and reproductive health. They believe that sexual intercourse done with preventive measures is a small matter without causing any consequences to both parties (Ab Rahman et al, 2011).

# **IMPLICATIONS**

Sexual harassment has been conceptualized as abuse that can occur to either both men and women. The injurious effect of sexual harassment on the victim in this arena of life cannot be disputed. It has also become one of the most controversial talks and debated social problems that still have not been eradicated from our society. What is sexual harassment? Who is the problem? Who is at risk to be the victim? Why does it occur? What sexual harassment does to the victim and the perpetrator? What is the solution? Everyone has their own opinions and words regarding this topic and the perspective might be variable in each group of people. By this, the frequency of sexual harassment might be undercalculated or overcalculated due to the difference in how people perceive the conduct of sexual harassment. It is a complex organizational problem that exists in contemporary life culture. It might not occur to you, but it exists in our society and the consequences of sexual harassment to the victim's life might varies. The results of sexual harassment can be divided into two broad areas in the educational institution which is work or education-related outcomes and also their psychological outcomes. Research done by Rapidah et al. studied both the outcomes on education, productivity and the psychological effect, which is the emotional state of the victims (Omar Ali et al, 2018). From their research done in 2018, sexual harassment had caused the most tremendous effect on the victims' emotions, followed by education and productivity. The victims perceive the sexual harassment negatively that most of them felt embarrassed, stressed by the act, felt afraid and it lowered their self-esteem following the indecency done by the perpetrator (Omar Ali et al, 2018).

Director of counseling division, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Department of Malaysia, Dr. Raja Kamariah Raja Mohd Khalid stated that women are usually felt embarrassed and misapprehend the actions of sexual harassment thus they tend to keep them to themselves, not to lodge the situation to any higher responsible authority (Omar Ali et al, 2018). Most of them assume the harassment was something shameful to reveal or they might not even notice that they were the actual victim of the situation. A worse situation can occur, or more severe sexual harassment can occur when no actions are done by the higher authority (Omar Ali et al, 2018; Kalra and Bhugra, 2013). The predator might feel they have the upper hand when the victims are afraid to lodge reports on them.

As described by Omar Ali et al. (2018), in their education, most of the undergraduates acknowledged that sexual harassment had created an offensive environment for them during

learning. The predator had also created a hostile environment for the undergraduates following the misconduct. Most of them also claimed that sexual harassment had taken a toll on their educational productivity and the process of learning becoming upsetting to them. Thus, it can be concluded that the misbehavior can affect the student's life greatly from their academic performance and also their mental health.

Lecturers or students who are victimized from sexual harassment are prone to long term psychological disturbances as mentioned by Mohamed (Mohamed, 2015a; Mohamed, 2015b). Sexual harassment and physiological disturbances can relate a lot in determining the mental health in the student's academic life. In general, sexual harassment itself can harm the student psychologically. Students might be having stress academically that it affects their mental and physical health. When sexual harassment comes into picture in student who had been stressed academically, it can disastrously affect the life of the student. Failure to balance psychological and emotional health causes the students to lose focus of their studies and eventually influence their performance academically.

Mohamed remarks that lecturers who becomes victim of the offend need to put up with a wide range of psychological and physical outcomes during and post the sexual harassment (Mohamed, 2015a; Mohamed, 2015b). Post sexual harassment, the victims might suffer from variable symptoms ranging from stress, trauma, nausea, loss of appetite, anger, fear and last but not least, headache. Sexual harassing lecturers that come from the higher authority can impair the output and productivity capability of the lecturers. This can greatly harm the organization in the future if the indecency is not quickly hastened because the productivity of the lecturers can affect the performance of the university as well.

Mohamed in 2015 acknowledges that from the view of work-related outcomes, the lecturers might lose the employment and work-related experience for skills training and at some level, they might take the decision to leave university voluntarily to avoid the same insult if the harassment comes from the people at higher authority in the university. Things might get even worse if the lecturers fight against the sexual harassment coming from the higher up, they might be forced to leave the career. It can be inferred that dedicated lecturers that leave the university after becoming the victim of the misconduct can be a great loss to the university.

Study had been done by Yadav et al. (2019) on medical students, claiming professional concerns that arise during the clinical years says a lot about the unethical behaviour shown by medical students during their preclinical years. These professional concerns might be coming from only some students, but it can influence other students differently. If the student keeps on retaining the same personality throughout their clinical phase as a student, the health care system might collapse because in some cases, the student might sustain his behaviour during his job as a healthcare provider.

The written description from the undergraduates' victims from Yee et al. (2015) recognizes that the previous experience of sexual harassment causing them to become more aware of the preceding action of sexual behaviour. This enables them to become better at perceiving the harasser behaviour more definitely and avoiding them from becoming the victims of the assault again in the same situation. In other words, they become more vigilant and tactful of the situations around them. Sexual harassment is a disgusting act so no one should not become the victims of sexual harassment for them to become more alert of the misconduct.

So, there must be some actions or solutions to eradicate the acts of sexual harassment from our society.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS/SOLUTIONS

Based on this review, a few recommendations can be made, which can be divided into student, parent, institution, and government roles. Sexual harassment can be prevented by students taking charge of the environment and situation by avoiding any stimulus that would encourage sexual harassment. Wearing appropriate attire, displaying ethical behaviour full of politeness and respect, and avoiding posting unnecessary pictures of oneself on social media are all part of this. Parents should maintain good relationships with their children and take note of what is happening at the institution, including any suspicious behavior shown by the children. The educational institution should provide specific policy and measures on sexual harassment including rules and regulations pertaining to appropriate student dress codes, to install closed circuit television (CCTV) in strategic places in the campus and should prevent improper behavior and inappropriate interaction between male and female students. The internet browser should be restricted by the institution from getting access to the pornography site. Finally, is the role of the government and policymakers to enforce stronger laws and punishments to fight sexual harassers.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Sexual harassment in Malaysian educational institutions is underreported despite the high prevalence affecting students, especially females. Among the forms of misconduct that have been reported include physical, verbal, and visual forms. Being a young female, an inappropriate dress code with good looking appearances, supported by a quiet and isolated environment, are among the contributing factors stimulating the occurrence of physical sexual harassment. Furthermore, the sexual desires of the performer were also driven by exposure to sexual materials and arousing content on the internet. It will have bad implications for the victim as well as the abuser, especially in terms of academic and psychological outcomes. Observing the formal dress code as regulated by the institution and providing a safe and controlled internet browser by the authorities can prevent inappropriate sexual desires within the institutional environment specifically and within our community generally.

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