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‘He says, She says’: Sexism and Sexual Harassment in Higher Educational Institutions in India

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Introduction and Motivation

- Education for women has been considered as a catalyst for social development, and a force to reduce gender inequality (Katiyar, 2016).
- The percentage of women holding at least a graduate degree has increased in India over time – 4.38 percent in 1991 and 11.41 percent in 2011 (Census 1991, 2011).
- Whitley and Page (2015) have shown how educational institutes nurture an environment where sexual harassment prevails.
- Pervasiveness of sexual harassment - limits opportunities of women – loss of confidence – loss of access to informal channels of information – discriminatory academic environment (Mazer and Percival, 1989; Benson and Thomson, 1982).
- This acts as the motivation for the current study - we look at the incidences of sexual harassment in higher educational institutions in India.

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- Analyses of the prevalence and extent of harassment in higher education institutions are limited (Bajpai 1999, Rogers, 2008; Aina and Kulshrestha, 2017; Sambaraju, 2020; Vandana, 2020).
- Our study contributes to this literature - we bring to light various experiences of sexist practices and instances of sexual harassment faced by female students - look into institutional interventions to address these issues.
- To this end, a survey was conducted last year in September – also, theoretical contribution in understanding institution intervention.
- Following Fitzgerald and Shullman (1993) - identify a range of sexist behavior - ‘from gender harassment to sexual assault’.

Data Sources and Methodology

- Survey via Google forms in September last year - circulated among females who are either currently pursuing their studies or have studied in some Indian university and/or college at some point.
- Subtle forms of sexism as all the non-physical forms of sexism.
- Explicit forms of sexism - include cat-calling, staring inappropriately, slut shaming, and touching inappropriately.
- The survey also included questions of sexual harassment by members of institutions – male students, male faculty members, and staff members – whether the survivors filed an official complaint, and the reasons for not doing so.
- Total of 578 responses, both current and former female students.
- We have developed a sequential decision tree to model the working of power dynamics, cost associated with sexual harassment, and institutional intervention - three players - male (faculty or student), female (student) and the institution.

Empirical Results

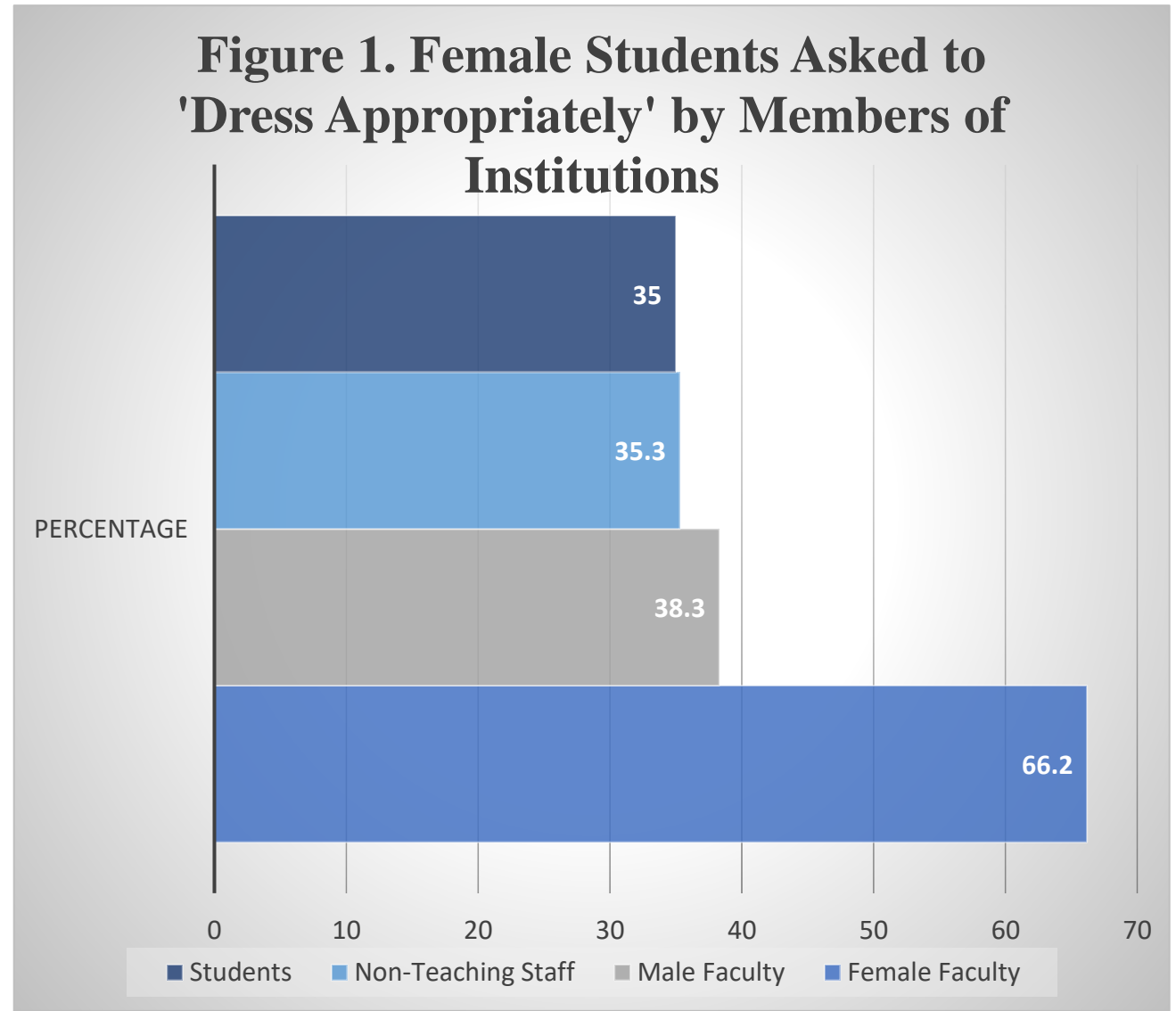
- 46.9 percent of the respondents never considered their campuses to be unsafe.
- Observation akin to that made by Barak et al. (1992) - respondents did not perceive themselves to be harassed.
- This underscores the normalization of sexism and sexual harassment even in campus spaces.
- Further analysis will be based on the respondents who reported facing subtle and explicit forms of sexism in their institutions.

Table 1: Percentage of total respondents reporting various forms of sexism

| | Percentage | |
|-----------------|--------------|---------|
| | | Male |
| Types of sexism | Male student | faculty |
| Subtle sexism | 76.82 | 40.14 |
| Explicit sexism | 69.03 | 48.1 |

Sexist Practices: 'Dress Appropriately'

- 44 percent of the total respondents reported being asked to 'dress appropriately' by at least one person of their institution.
- This observation highlights the workings of internalized patriarchy, where females also indulge in sexist remarks.

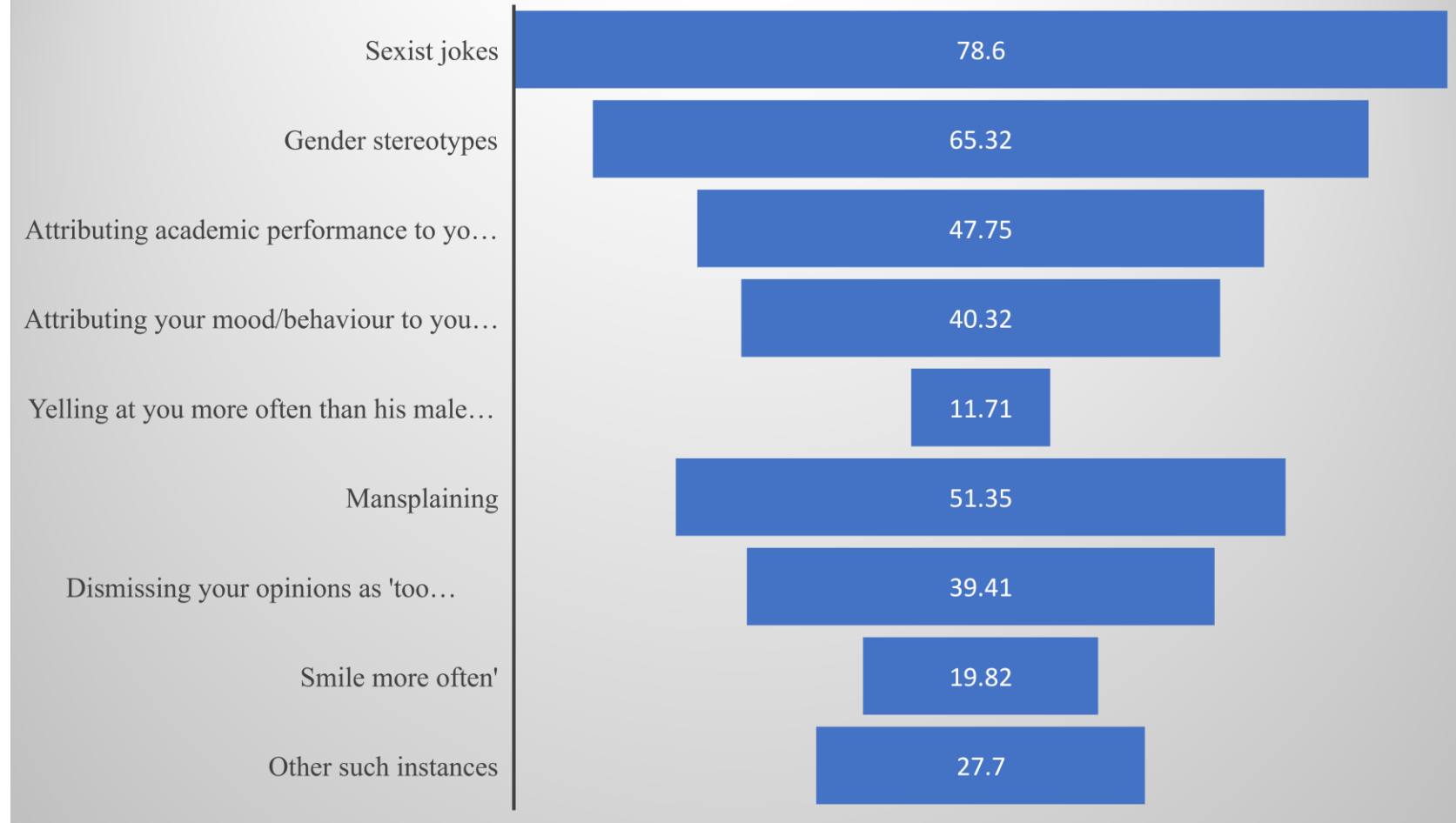


Subtle Sexism

Male Students

- Subtle sexism is manifested by unequal behavior towards women, but these are largely overlooked as they are often perceived as normal (Swimm and Cohen, 1997).
- Around 77 percent of the total respondents reported having faced instances of subtle forms of sexism from male students of their institutes.

Figure 2. Types of Subtle Sexism faced from Male Students

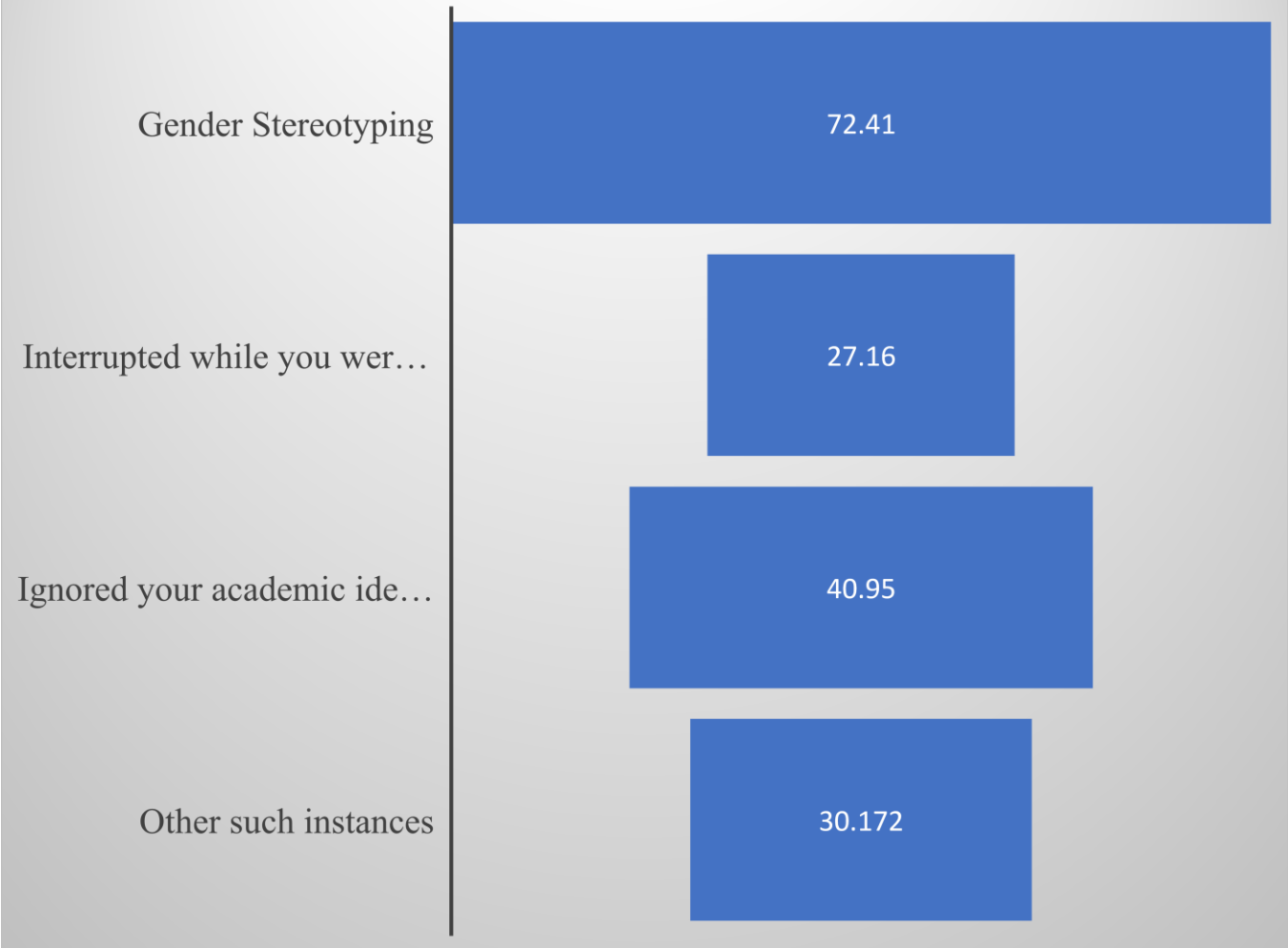


Subtle Sexism

Male Faculty

- 39.6 percent of the total respondents reported instances of subtle sexism practiced by male faculty members.
- Through these seemingly harmless practices, males maintain their dominance over females, perpetuating patriarchal stereotypes which keeps the man at a superior position.
- This creates a general lack of respect for female students within campus spaces, which in turn, can prevent them from reaching their full potential.

Figure 3. Types of Subtle Sexism faced from Male Faculty

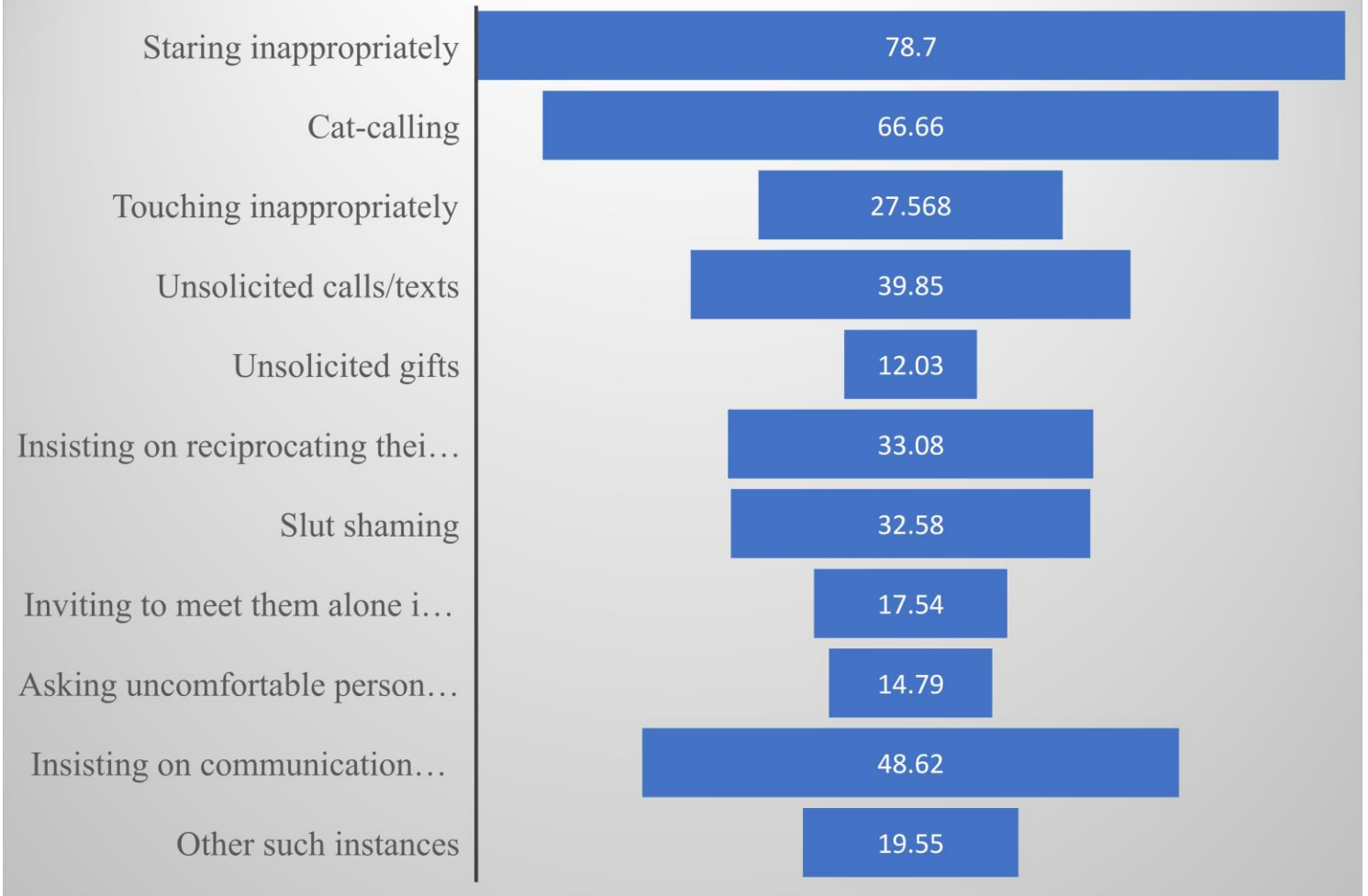


Explicit Sexism

Male Students

- 68.9 percent of the total respondents faced some form of explicit sexism from male students on the campus.
- Abbey (1982) notes in their survey that males perceive female friendliness as seduction. This can explain the pervasiveness of incidents like sending unsolicited phone calls/texts, insistence of reciprocating romantic gestures, sending unsolicited gifts, etcetera.

Figure 4. Types of Explicit Sexism faced from Male Students

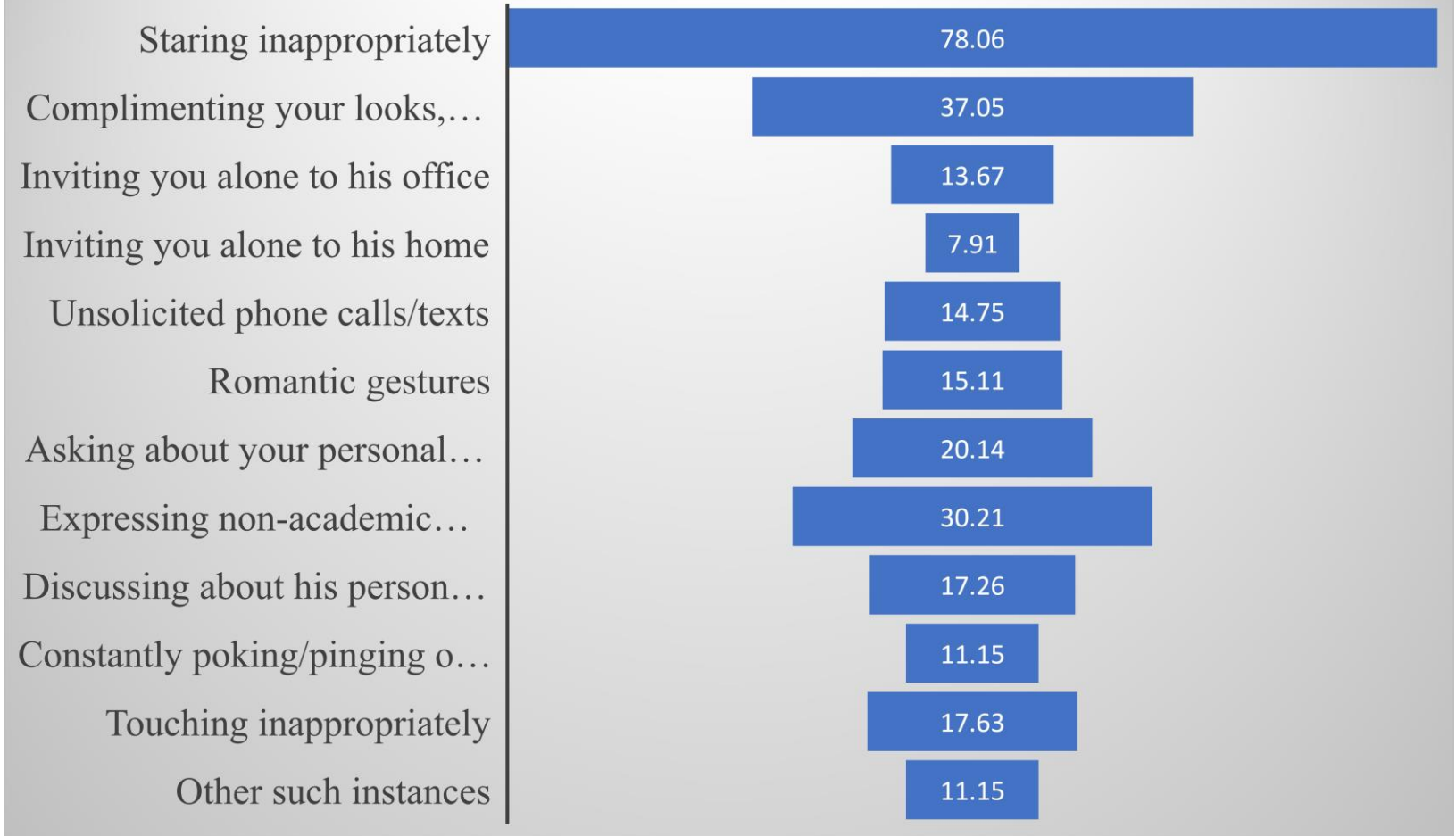


Explicit Sexism

Male Faculty

- 48 percent of the total respondents reported such experiences practiced by male faculty members.
- Power difference accorded by both the academic setup and the patriarchal society makes it difficult for students to decline uncomfortable invitations and gestures.
- ‘Two-fold hierarchical position’ assumed by male professors - credible threats to female students (Whitley and Page, 2015; Reilly et al., 1986; Fitzgerald et al., 1988).

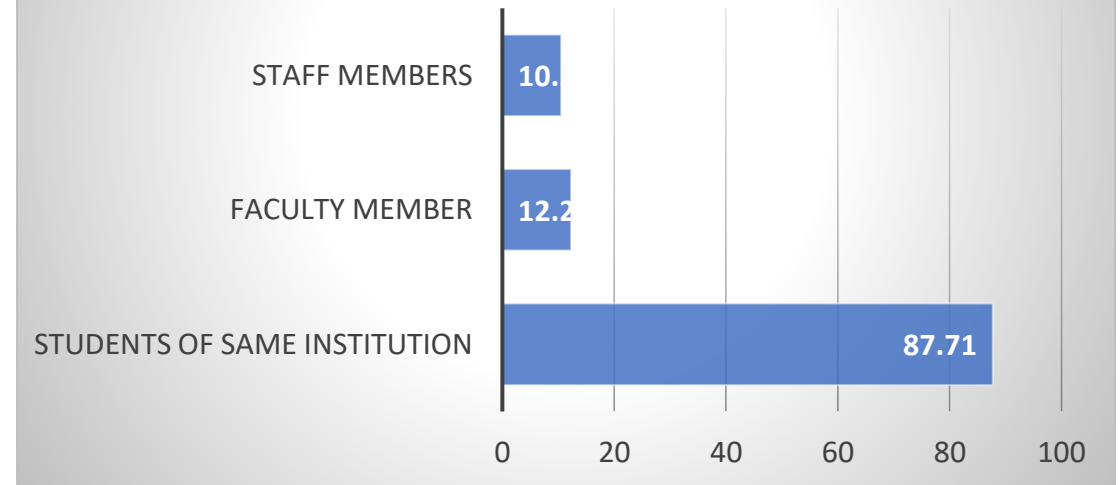
Figure 5. Types of Explicit Sexism faced from Male Faculty



Sexual Harassment in Campus Spaces

- 57 of the total 578 respondents reported being sexually assaulted by at least one person from their respective educational institutions.
- Following the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act of 2013, the Internal Complaint Committee (ICC) was set up in academic institutions to address issues of sexual harassment and assault.
- Of these students, only 15.7 percent of the survivors lodged a First Information Report (FIR) with the police, or filed a complaint with the ICC.
- 56.14 percent feared character assassination - 36.84 percent feared backlash from their institutions - 33.33 percent reported the absence of ICC/relevant committee in their institutions.
- Failure of institutions to inculcate a safe environment - prevalent culture of victim blaming.
- Prevalent power hierarchy is skewed against female students - particularly in cases where a male faculty member is the perpetrator (Whitley and Page, 2015).
- 'Power-dependency' inherent in a professor-student relationship (Benson and Thomson, 1982).

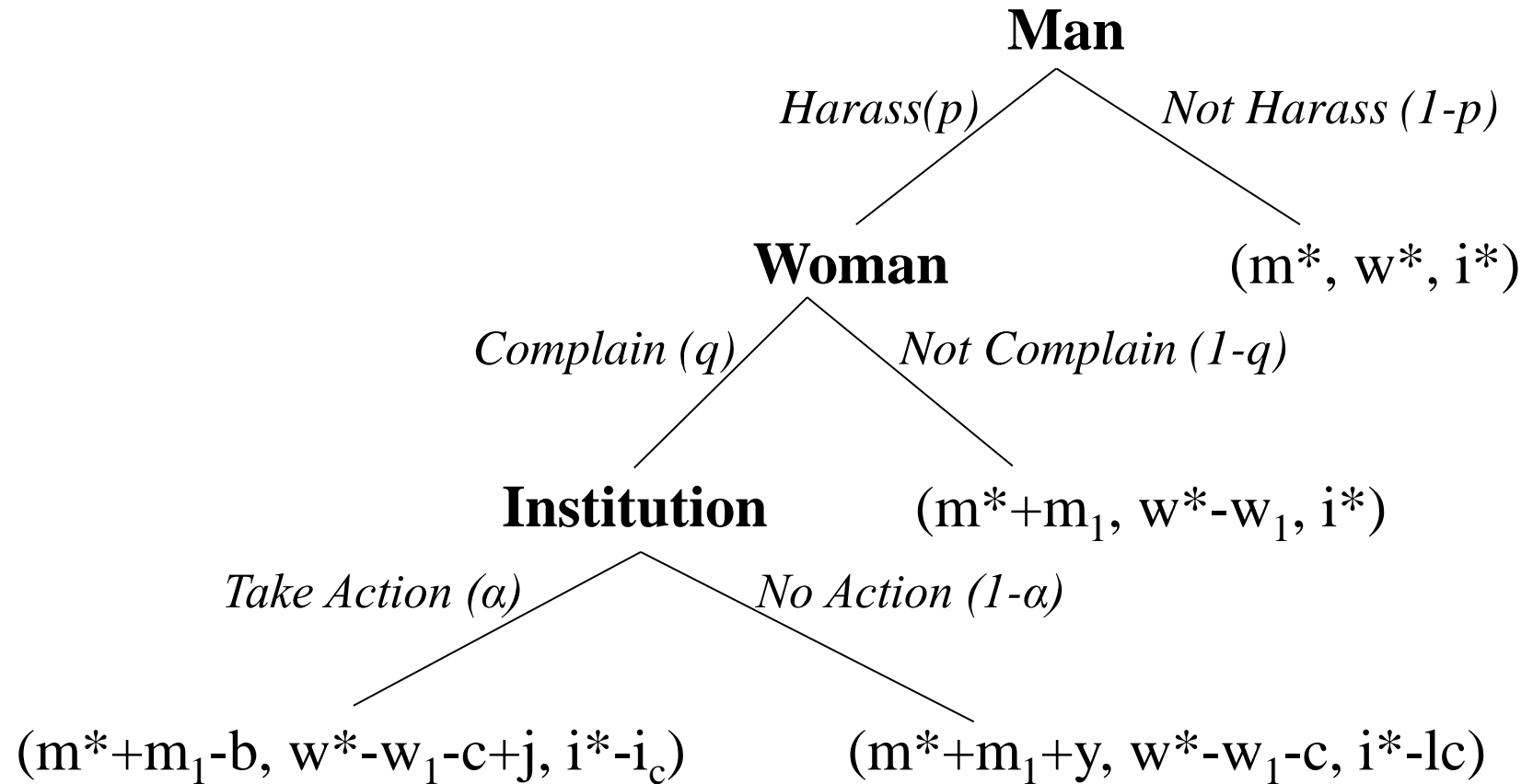
Figure 6. Members of Institutions who Sexually Assaulted Female Students



Theoretical Model

- In this section, we develop a dynamic game theoretical model to analyse the intervention of institutions which play a crucial role in maintaining a safe environment in university premises for female students.
- We have used our understanding from our empirical results to define the strategy sets, the associated payoffs, probabilities and costs.
- A simple decision tree of a game with three players: man, woman and institution.
- The greater power that males have over females due to the prevalence of patriarchy has been incorporated by situating the male as the first mover in this sequential game.

Decision Tree



Subgame of the institution

- From the last sub-game, we note that the institution will take action when $l_c > i_c$
- There should be sufficient provision to hold the institution accountable for its action.

Expected Payoff of the Man

- The game terminates if the man chooses not to harass the woman, his payoff is $E_{nh} = m^*$
- However, if the man harasses the woman, then his payoff is:

$$E_h = q[\alpha(m+m_1-b) + (1-\alpha)(m^*+m_1+y)] + (1-q)(m^*+m_1) \dots \dots \dots (i)$$

- Thus, his gain from harassing is given by:

$$G_h = E_h - E_{nh}$$

$$G_h = qy - \alpha qb - \alpha qy + m_1 \dots \dots \dots (ii)$$

- If we assume that the institution necessarily takes an action if a complaint is filed by a survivor, then $\alpha = 1$. In such a scenario,

$$G_h = m_1 - qb \dots \dots \dots (iv)$$

- Equation (iv) implies that even when the institution takes an action against the perpetrator with certainty, the man may still choose to harass if $m_1 > qb$. Among these three variables, the institution can control only b . In order to disincentivize men to harass, the punishment needs to be substantially high so that G_h becomes negative.
- Moreover, G_h will be negative if m_1 is sufficiently low. However, this is possible only if there is a shift towards greater gender equality in the society.

Expected payoff of the Woman

- If, on being harassed, the woman decides not to lodge a complaint, then her payoff is:

$$E_{nc} = w^* - w_1 \dots\dots\dots(v)$$

- However, her payoff when she decides to lodge a complaint is given by:

$$E_c = \alpha (w - c - w_1 + j) + (1 - \alpha) (w - c - w_1)$$

$$E_c = \alpha j + w - c - w_1 \dots\dots\dots(vi)$$

- Thus, the woman's gains from complaining is:

$$G_c = E_c - E_{nc}$$

$$G_c = \alpha j - c \dots\dots\dots(vii)$$

Institutional Role and Societal Norms

- If we assume that the institution necessarily takes an action, that is α equals 1, then the gain of the woman from complaining is:

$$G_c = j - c \dots \dots \dots (viii)$$

- The institution can control part of the variable c , which needs to be minimized in order for G_c to be positive. It is not sufficient for the institution to take action; it needs to ensure that the cost borne by the women to lodge a complaint against the perpetrator is sufficiently low.
- If we further assume that the woman necessarily files a complaint, that is q equals 1, then the gain of the man from harassing her is:

$$G_h = m_1 - b \dots \dots \dots (ix)$$

- Equation (ix) underscores the crucial role of patriarchal norms in determining the choice of the man, that is, whether or not to harass the woman.
- The only way to disincentivize such behavior is if m_1 is sufficiently lower than b , as explained before, or if the punishment meted out to him is higher than the payoff received from harassing the woman, that is, b equals $m_1 + \epsilon$, where ϵ is a non-zero positive quantity.

Implications of the Theoretical Model

- The contribution of our theoretical formulation is not restricted to the institutional aspect of addressing harassment on campuses. It also addresses the feminist critic of institutional responses which states that instances of sexual harassment and abuse in institutions are often viewed in isolation, which depoliticizes these incidences and fragments women's struggle (Osborne, 1992). Rather, a structural shift in gender inequalities would help to evolve the environment of universities.
- This implication also follows from our theoretical results. A lesser value of m_1 , the payoff received by the man from harassing the woman, requires a structural and political shift away from patriarchal norms. Thus, if the payoff gained from exerting male dominance falls significantly, then there would be no incentive for the man to harass.

Summary

- Our survey revealed that patriarchal norms of the society are reproduced in university and college campuses, thereby creating a hostile environment for female students. Sexist comments and behaviors are ubiquitous in higher educational institutions, and are observed to be perpetuated by both male students and male faculty members. However, fears of victim blaming, character assassination, and backlash from institutions compel the survivors to refrain from lodging an official complaint.
- Based on our empirical findings, we have built a dynamic game with three players - man, woman and institution, where the man (student and faculty) is the first mover owing to his dominant social position. We have incorporated the power differences and institutional intervention in instances of sexual harassment. The results of our theoretical model have both institutional and structural implications.
- Limitation

Thank you