

Eliminating Sexual Harassment from Lebanese Public Schools

Dovan Khalifee
Biology Major

Introduction

According to UNESCO, "Education is the foundation of gender equality." This emphasizes the great role that education has in influencing gender equality as it is the foundation for a gender sensitive society. Thus, this paper will tackle gender equality in Lebanese public schools and will focus specifically on sexual harassment. The paper will then develop some policy recommendations that can minimize sexual harassment in public schools. These policies can consequently have a positive influence on the Lebanese curriculum, personnel working in the educational sector, and the funding process of the educational institutions.

Overview

This paper is based on a review of existing literature on the subject of sexual harassment in public schools, beginning at the global level and then narrowing down to focus on research from Lebanon. As previously mentioned, sexual harassment can be present across different sectors and even at schools. In fact, female sexual harassment at school can be physical or verbal, including but not limited to sexual coercion of girls and undesirable sexual remarks or jokes (Jenner et al., 2022). Female sexual harassment can look very different, as there are many different types. For example, sexual harassment is when a male student physically intimidates his female classmate, calls her lesbian because she likes to play football, or shows her sexual photos that she does not want to look at. Harassment can have serious negative effects on the student. These negative effects range from having trouble sleeping, feeling scared of going to school, and even developing suicidal thoughts. A study done by Hill and Kears (2011) identified sexual harassment in U.S. schools as a type of bullying, and noted that it is very widespread in middle and high school levels whereby girls are more likely to be the victims. Moreover, in a study conducted by the American

Association of University Women, it was proven that females are more likely to be harassed than males. Almost 48% of students who were between grades 7 and 12 have been subjected to sexual harassment during the years of their school education. The sexual harassment that they were subjected to was not limited to physical harassment but also virtual sexual harassment. In fact, 44% of the students were physically harassed while 30% were virtually harassed through social media or by text messages (Hill & Kearl, 2011). The study also showed that students who had been sexually harassed were often afraid to return to school and preferred staying at home where they felt safe. Also, students who had been sexually harassed experienced a drop in their school performance levels, including severe grade drops (Hill & Kearl, 2011). This demonstrates the extensive physical and mental effects of sexual harassment on female students.

It is important to note that the shape of the educational sector greatly influences the rates of sexual harassment in schools. For example, the Lebanese school curriculum includes three levels of education which are the elementary, secondary, and higher education (Assaf et al., 2022). Each educational level includes certain subjects; none of the subjects are related to gender issues or discrimination. All the sections that are found in the Lebanese curriculum will prepare students to join various fields in the future but will not prepare them to have the mindset of gender equality. Public schools in Lebanon, and with the diminished funding that they get, do not have the ability to include gender related workshops and educational sessions concerning gender equality. However, this lack of awareness might contribute to an increase in the prevalence of female sexual harassment among students. According to the UN and the World Bank, between 100,000 and 120,000 students have joined public schools in 2019-2021 in Lebanon due to the economic crisis (BouJaoude & Baddour, 2022). Even though there is no proper funding for public schools in Lebanon, they are now overwhelmed with a great number of students. So, this shows the severity of the problem in which generations will be growing without a base and a foundation about gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and gender-based violence. Further, since all these public schools adopt the national curriculum, an increased number of students will be graduating with a weak foundation and knowledge about gender related topics (BouJaoude & Baddour, 2022).

According to BouJaoude and Baddour (2022), private schools today are starting to introduce gender studies to the curriculum either through guest speakers, projects, or workshops. This shows the willingness of the private sector to introduce the concepts of feminism and gender equality and the drawbacks of sexual harassment to their students. As a result, this makes students in private schools more aware of the issues that surround gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and discrimination. However, public schools, which lack the proper management, funding, and organization, and without introducing their students to issues related to gender, are failing to solve the issue of female sexual harassment that occurs on school grounds (Mattar, 2012).

The gap between the public and private sector is due to the fact that public schools are completely under the control of the Lebanese government which includes the Center for Educational Research and Development (CRDP). CRDP is responsible for the modification and improvement of the Lebanese curriculum (BouJaoude & Baddour,

2022). This explains why some private schools introduce gender-based topics to their curriculum as compared to public schools: While private schools can make changes to their curriculums internally, public schools are subjected to government oversight. However, this also means that any changes must be approved by the government before they can be implemented in public schools. Not only does this make the process long and bureaucratic, but it simultaneously places public schools under the complete control of the government.

Recommendations

According to this analysis, it is important to mention several recommendations that can be implemented for a potential improvement.

1. Modifying the Educational System

As mentioned previously, the Ministry of Education is the governmental organization responsible for shaping and modifying the system. In other words, the Center for Educational Research and Development (CRDP) has a direct influence on the content of the curriculum. As a result, these organizations are capable of enforcing gender-related content to the curriculum. For example, they can make students attend obligatory sessions regarding gender awareness. CRDP can also implement a final gender-based project that is mandatory to submit to the school by the end of each year. However, for the Ministry of Education to be able to implement such changes to the curriculum, political will must be built from within the ministry itself. Meaning, ministry staff should have awareness about the need for gender sensitivity training in schools, as well as the negative consequences of gender-based discrimination and bullying in schools.

2. Proper, Targeted Educational Funding

The Lebanese government should work on increasing the allocated GDP percentage to fund the educational sector in Lebanon. In 2013, 2.6% of the total GDP was assigned to public teaching. Whereas countries that are part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) allocate an average of 5% of GDP to fund the educational institutions (OECD, 2022). The improvement of the education sector is highly dependent on the amount of funding that it gets (Tang, 2022). Based on this, the private sector gets most of the funding from the high tuition rates that they collect from the students as compared to the public sector. The public sector is highly dependent on external donors and on the Ministry of Education. As a result, with minimal funding, public schools will not be able to introduce any activities or workshops that will promote gender equality among students. However, if the funding is increased, the Ministry of Education will be able to start funding educational and awareness-raising programs for its own employees so that they will gain the proper expertise to start working on implementing the workshops and curriculum modifications to the public schools that highlight gender equality. Also, with proper funding, new activities that will help to reduce gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and gender-based violence can be introduced to public schools. In addition, there also must be proper supervision to make sure that all the new policies issued by the Ministry of Education are implemented. This also requires funding, as

efficient and knowledgeable personnel must be recruited to conduct the auditing process on schools.

3. Proper Training of Teachers

According to BouJaoude and Baddour (2022) teachers are the most crucial component for the proper education of students. Teachers influence their students in different aspects as they are in contact with them for long periods of time each day and throughout the year. Thus, teachers must be the perfect role models for gender equality. For teachers to be good role models for gender equality, they must attend gender awareness and educational sessions in which they are taught how to implement gender equality among students. These campaigns must be supervised and funded by the Ministry of Education. In this way, the Ministry of Education can certify every teacher that successfully passes a gender training. By providing teachers with the proper gender education, they will be able to deal with any type of gender discrimination and female sexual harassment among students in a professional way. Having trained teachers might also help to limit the amount of sexual harassment that takes place in schools between students.

4. Updating Current Curricula

Another strategy to reduce sexual discrimination and harassment among students is by adding new chapters to the books currently used in the curricula. To begin with, history books can be modified to include the history of women in addition to protests and revolutions that took place over the past years to attain gender equality in different societies. Also, a modification for the civics book can help in reducing sexual harassment among students. The civics book can be modified to include the laws that ensure gender equality among citizens such as international conventions including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, or CEDAW, and the UN Security Council resolution 1325, or the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. In addition, the book chapters should elaborate on the extensive work done by different organizations over the world to eliminate female sexual harassment. In this way the curriculum will be gender sensitive, which will help to reduce sexual harassment among students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, gender discrimination is a critical issue that needs to be addressed. Sexual harassment is one type of gender discrimination which may have detrimental effects on the victim. This policy paper reviews sexual harassment that occurs in Lebanese schools, and specifically, in public schools. One major identified cause of sexual harassment in Lebanon is the absence of gender education in the Lebanese curriculum. Thus, four recommendations were drawn to help enhance the education system. First, the MOE and CRDP are highly responsible for shaping the Lebanese curriculum especially for public schools, which needs to be amended as soon as possible. Moreover, it is crucial that the education system in Lebanon receives funding; teachers need to receive extensive training about harassment, and gender-sensitive teaching materials need to be added to current curricula. If these recommendations are implemented, gender equality may be achieved. As previously mentioned,

discrimination comes in different forms, and it is not limited to sexual harassment. Thus, future research must tackle the intersectionality among the different forms of discrimination in order to have a better understanding of their effects on the physical and psychological level.

REFERENCES

- Assaf, J., Nehmeh, L., & Antoun, S.** (2022). Promoting the full potential of Open Educational Resources (OER) in the Lebanese educational community. *Pedagogical Research*, 7(4), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.29333/pr/12475>
- BouJaoude, S., & Baddour, R.** (2022). Teacher education programs in Lebanon: Innovations in the past decade (2011–2021). In M.S. Khine (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teacher education* (pp. 153-170). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-2400-2_10
- Hill, C., & Kearl, H.** (2011). *Crossing the line: Sexual harassment at school*. American Association of University Women.
- Jenner, S.C., Djermester, P., & Oertelt-Priogione, S.** (2022). Prevention strategies for sexual harassment in academic medicine: A qualitative study. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(5-6), 2490-2515. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520903130>
- Mattar, D.M.** (2012). Factors affecting the performance of public schools in Lebanon. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 32(2), 252–263. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2011.04.001>
- OECD.** (2022). *Public spending on education*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/6932ce5c-en>
- Tang, Y.** (2022). Government spending on local higher education institutions (LHEIs) in China: Analysing the determinants of general appropriations and their contributions. *Studies in Higher Education*, 47(2), 423–436. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1750586>
- UN Women, UNDP, UNFPA, UNESCWA.** (2018). *Egypt Gender Justice & The Law*. <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Arab%20States/Attachments/Publications/2018/Gender%20Justices%20and%20The%20Law%20in%20the%20Arab%20Region/Country%20Assessments/Egypt%20Country%20Assessment%20-%20English.pdf>