A qualitative study of sexual violence and attribution of responsibility in Georgian youth [version 1; peer review: awaiting peer review]

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Abstract

**Background:** Sexual violence is a complex and pressing social issue that needs urgent solutions. Republic of Georgia is one of those countries where despite some advancements in law and practice, patriarchal beliefs and behaviour patterns still prevail in a daily life. So far, there has not been undertaken an in-depth study on how Georgians and particularly youth, define sexual violence and what are the justifications behind these views. The aim of the research is to understand how Georgian students understand sexual violence, who they think are responsible for sexual violence and what are the underlying reasons behind those views.

**Method:** In total, 37 in-depth interviews have been conducted with Georgian students, from September of 2019 to March of 2021. The study participants were recruited from different universities, including the two biggest cities of Georgia - Tbilisi and Batumi.

**Results:** The research revealed that understanding of sexual violence is far more complex than it was expected. Georgian students define sexual violence as a broad category where sexual harassment and sexual coercion have overlapping and at the same time independent meaning. Interpretation and attribution of responsibility in all three categories are dependent on situations and context that contain not only physical violence but also inappropriate touch, insistent gaze, comments about body parts, sexist insults and discrimination, messages of sexual content, psychological pressure and blackmailing. Attribution of responsibility was equally dependent on personal judgements as well as culturally determined stereotypes.

**Conclusion:** Sexual violence is not a new phenomenon in Georgia, but its consideration as a social problem is. The research demonstrated that understanding and judgment on sexual violence, sexual harassment and sexual coercion is nuanced issue and still needs clear categories of definitions.

**Keywords**

sexual violence, sexual coercion, sexual harassment, responsibility
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Introduction
A growing body of literature is focusing on the subject of sexual violence; being a complex and pressing social issue that needs urgent solutions. Due to its severity, sexual violence definition has been broadened over decades and it is defined as any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work (Krug et al., 2002). Among the consequences of any form of sexual victimization are substance abuse disorders, eating disorders, depression, and suicide attempts (Campbell, Dworkin, & Cabral, 2009; Jordan, 2014; Messman-Moore et al., 2000). Despite its comprehensive definition and its fatal consequences; views on sexual violence, is still debatable in different societies on family and institutional level. This ambiguity depends on culture (Heise et al., 1996) Georgia, which has gone through many changes on gender roles in private and public domain, still holds patriarchal views (UN WOMEN, 2017). These views, eventually, form interpretation frames and behavioural patterns of sexual interactions in a family, social environment, legislative bodies and public institutions. Even among young Georgians who are expected to have more modern beliefs than older generation, one can see an influence of patriarchal culture in appraisal of gender issues (Japaridze et al., 2014). Gender attitudes are translated into corresponding judgments of sexual violence which in many cases favour male perpetrators and not victims (UN WOMEN, 2017). The national study on violence against women in Georgia conducted in 2017, revealed that 26% of women have experienced sexual violence and/or sexual harassment at some point in their lives. The study showed that sexual violence perpetrators are rarely held accountable for their actions. The findings also suggest that the majority of Georgian women and men believe that violence against women in relationships should be tolerated and accepted in most of the times. Although Georgian younger generation have more awareness on sexual violence and are expected to have less violence-prone attitudes, 16% of young women (aged 15-24) think that violence in a family should be tolerated to keep family together (UN WOMEN, 2017).

Notwithstanding evidence and daily practice of sexual violence in Georgia, there has not been undertaken an in-depth study on how Georgians and particularly youth, define sexual violence and what are the justifications behind those views. Therefore, the aim of the research is to understand how Georgian students understand sexual violence, who they think are responsible for sexual violence and what are the underlying reasons behind those views.

Attribution of responsibility in sexual violence
Attribution of responsibility is a central component in understanding how sexual violence is understood and practiced in a society and in this case, in youth. Academic studies have indicated that rape victims, despite being victims of a crime, are often blamed and denigrated, even to the extent whereby the victim is held responsible for an assault (Calhoun et al., 1976; Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981; Janoff-Bulman, et al., 1985). Observers’ judgments and actions are also subject to bias as a result of their personality disposition rooted in given cultural context that has an effect on attribution making (Maddux & Yuki, 2006). Patriarchal culture results in ready schemes of judgement where male perpetrators either are not blamed, completely for violence or their blame is shared with victims. A number of studies on factors influencing attributions of rape victims revealed that more male students than female students believe that victims are responsible for rape situations (Bell, Kuriloff & Lotte, 1994; McCaul, Veltrum, Boyechko, Crawford, 1990).

Sexual violence in youth
In the United States many studies were conducted about sexual violence issues in youth. The main reason for these studies was that sexual assaults on campus has become a major concern for many colleges and universities in the United States, for example one out of every four women experience some form of sexual victimization while in college (Cantor et al., 2015). Also, sexual victimization can affect future victimization (Messman-Moore & Long, 2003; Messman-Moore et al., 2000; Noll, Horowitz, Bonanno, Trickett, & Putnam, 2003), and increase the chance of perpetration of violence later in life (McMahon et al., 2015), with victims often showing a propensity to become abusive. In addition, there is evidence that sexual violence can significantly impair one’s cognitive abilities (Hall et al., 2014), reducing students’ opportunities for success during and after college (Jordan, 2014). Research has consistently demonstrated over the past four decades that college women are at high risk of rape and attempted rape while in college (Fisher et al., 2000; Karjane et al., 2005; Koss et al., 1987).

The given study not only contributes to existing literature on understanding sexual violence in Georgian youth but also is one of the first and essential steps designing effective programs for preventing and controlling sexual violence in Georgia.

Method
Ethics
Ethical approval for the research has been granted by the dissertation committee of Free University of Tbilisi, Georgia. Before the interviews, research participants were informed on the purpose of the research and their right to participate or
refuse participation. Additionally, all the participants were also assured of anonymity of their identity and confidentiality of their responses. Written informed consent was obtained from the participants. All data were saved in a secure file, with only the researchers in charge of the data collection and analysis accessing the information.

Study design
In-depth exploration and understanding of beliefs, views and attitudes is a complex process requiring flexibility, rich description, constant tracking of new insights and rigorous analysis on every stage of data collection and analysis. Therefore, qualitative research approach was used in revealing how sexual violence is defined and understood, who are responsible for sexual violence and what are the underlying reasons behind those views.

Data collection methods, instruments and technologies
The qualitative study was conducted from September of 2019 to March of 2021. To ensure rich and in-depth interpretations and discussions on sexual violence and all the parties and factors involved in it, it was planned to conduct in-depth interviews with selected respondents. Considering the complexity of study topic, instead of asking open-ended direct questions, respondents were given real stories of sexual violence incidences from Georgian reality. Then, respondents were asked to share and explain in detail their views and attitudes on given stories. Real stories of sexual violence were compiled from semi-structured interviews with specialists working on sexual violence cases (in total: 15 respondents, including lawyers, doctors, psychologists and social workers). There are not many organisations and specialist who works on sexual violence cases in Georgia. A snowball sampling method was used for recruiting specialists. Also, sexual violence cases were compiled from Georgian digital media (Tabula, Liberati, Netgazeti) articles and TV programs (Rustavi 2). Google www.google.com was used as database and key words were sexual violence, sexual harassment, sexual coercion and rape (all key words were in Georgian). Sexual violence case study was done from September 2019 to December 2019.

Research and analysis was carried out by two researchers Natalia Mchedlishvili and Nino Zhghenti. Both researchers were involved in process of research design, development and implementation. Natalia has conducted all the interviews and then thorough analysis of the data was done by Natalia and Nino as well.

Sampling and piloting strategy
In the first phase, a pilot interview was carried out. 8 interviews were conducted with students of Free University of Tbilisi and Agricultural University of Georgia (Tbilisi). After the pilot, the interview guide took final shape and interviews were continued (29 interviewees were added to pilot interviews) with other students from same universities, also, from Batumi State University, from Ilia State University (Tbilisi), from Tbilisi State University and Caucasus University (Tbilisi). The age of participants were from 18 to 25. The research participants were on different year of study from first year of Bachelor’s degree to last year of Master’s degree. The total number of participants were 37: 19 male and 18 female. The participants were from different faculties: Social Sciences, Business Administration, International Relations, Mathematics and Computer Science, Natural Sciences, Law, Humanitarian Sciences etc. The participants were selected by purposeful random sampling on the basis of the universities. The adequacy of the sampling size was determined on the basis of the saturation of collected data. The participants were invited to the interview by email (obtained from the database of the universities, about 300 emails). Most of invited participants agreed to interview. Some of the interviews took place at the universities in a separate room, face to face and one to one with interviewer and some were conducted via Zoom program (www.zoom.us), due to coronavirus lockdowns in Georgia, from January 2020 to March 2021. All the interviews were conducted one to one and were audiotaped for further data analysis. Interviews lasted on average 1-1.5 hours and were in Georgian.

The pilot interviews were conducted in order to test if sexual violence stories were well-structured and if the content of the story was clear and neutrally formulated. The later was important to avoid altering participants views by biased story telling. After pilot interviews, stories were revised and designed in three categories: 1) sexual harassment stories; 2) sexual coercion stories; 3) sexual violence stories (the most severe cases). The guide contained the three story categories and five major open-ended questions which implied regular prompting, based on respondents’ answers: 1) What do you think about this situation in the story? 2) What do you think, how this situation in this story can be interpreted? Is it sexual harassment, sexual coercion or sexual violence? (These questions were asked chronologically and were based on respondents’ answers) 3) Why do you think this story is sexual harassment (sexual coercion or sexual violence)? 4) Would something change if the participants were different sex or gender? 5) In this story, who is responsible for sexual violence?

Data processing and analysis
Based on audio files detailed transcripts of each interview was prepared. Thematic analysis method was used for data analysis. This method, by using inductive approach, allowed close examination of respondents’ views and attitudes.
Through a systematic and structured reading, codes themes were generated using qualitative data analysis software - NVivo program. Data analysis is structured according to three research questions. Within each question, respondents’ narratives are analysed in context of three theme categories of sexual violence: sexual harassment, sexual coercion, sexual violence.

Results
The interviews and media analysis revealed 12 typical stories that happened in Georgia for last 5 years. As a result an in-depth interview guide was developed where identified real stories were listed for the respondents to reflect on. These selected stories were on the following topics: sexual harassment of a woman/man at the office; sexual harassment of a woman by a priest; sexual harassment of a student (a young woman) by a lecturer (male); dissemination of a video of a woman having sexual contact with ex-partner (man); stalking of a woman by a woman/man; sexual coercion of the wife by the husband; sexual coercion of a man by an ex-partner (man); sexual violence of a student (young woman) who was drunk and was not conscious by male students at students’ party; the deceptive involvement of a young woman in sexual trafficking; rape of a young woman for forced marriage by a young man; rape of a young woman at night in the street by a stranger.

Overall, data revealed sexual violence as a broad category implying many reasons and causes. While, in some cases, it has been understood as a physical violence, in other cases it was viewed as an umbrella term for all forms of sexual violence, among which sexual harassment and sexual coercion where mentioned. Hence, data analysis was structured according to these three categories.

Sexual harassment, sexual coercion and sexual violence: views and justification
Most1 of participants consider sexual harassment as unpleasant flirting, comments with sexual content, inappropriate touch, consistent gaze, comments about body parts, sexist insults and discrimination, messages of sexual content. These are one time or recurrent actions that usually act as a hinting for one’s sexual intentions to other person. This leads to victim’s disruptions in social routines and functioning, especially when it happens at office. The later is a social context where, sometimes hidden abusive organizational culture is a major determinant for violent relationships. According to respondents, when candidates for employment are initially selected based on appearance, eventually harasser makes attempts of unwanted and unpleasant touching or/and sexually intimidating remarks. Either intention is never realized or at some point, it culminates in a violent or forced sexual act, “sexual violence”. Hence, it is believed that those situations take place virtually or when two parties are alone in a room or/and it is impossible or hard to escape. For example, locking a door by a harasser or creating any physical barrier to prevent victim from leaving. One of the participants shared his view: “Sexual harassment is a complicated term. It is difficult to define. I think, in case of sexual harassment you have no space for action. You are trapped in an abuser’s hands. If you are free in space and you are able to escape or ask for immediate help, it is not sexual harassment.” (male student, 21 years old). It was also mentioned that, sometimes, without any physical obstacles, victim’s emotions of shame and embarrassment are sufficient for her/him not asking for available help. As respondents explained, this emotions are usually culturally rooted where perpetrators are well aware of it and victim’s feel lonely and have low or no trust in the social environment for understanding and support.

Sexual coercion
According to research participants sexual coercion is more indirect form of violence where one person puts another person in a situation where she/he cannot refuse sexual interaction or any other action with sexual content and in the most situations, the abuser do not need to use physical force. For example, one of the respondent believes that: “Sexual coercion is when a person badly uses his power over another person. For example, an abuser can say that if you do not agree for sexual intercourse, I can use this power and you will lose your job” (male student, 22 years old). “Power”, in this case, is defined as a possession of some compromising material or any other information that puts the victim in an unfavourable position in a family or public eye. On the other hand, it is also defined as power hierarchy where the most widespread cases are represented in employer – employee relationships. Here, while one needs to keep his/her job, the other takes advantage of this situation. In both cases, one with information or with higher position in a hierarchy, through blackmailing, makes the other person to do sexual activities that may take place once or multiple times. Respondents also believed that it is sexual coercion when an abuser, without blackmailing, can use a victim’s psychological condition to force them into sexual intercourse. These are problematic situations where two persons start interaction with different intentions and end up with sexual intercourse where one of them could not find sufficient inner strength to resist the flow of events.

1For detailed case by case percentages of qualitative data see appendix link at the end of article. The percentages in given data only have a descriptive value and do not have any significance in qualitative analysis.
Unlike sexual harassment, where marking point was verbal expression of “unwanted”, “inappropriate” and “unpleasant” sexual content; sexual coercion was understood as, one party puts the other party in a situation where it is hard to resist the imposed sexual activities. This characteristic of the phenomenon is not observed objectively (e.g. demonstration of physical force) but it is accessible through exploring and understanding subjective feelings and emotions of a victim. Respondents further explained that sexual coercion is more like a psychological violence and intimidation. One of the respondents expressed her view about the case of sexual coercion of a man by his ex-partner (a man): “This case is sexual coercion because the abuser badly used psychological pressure on the victim and forced him to have sex” (female, 20 years old). Victims, without physical or/and, sometimes even verbal resistance, are involved in sexual interaction. Therefore, this type of violence is harder to identify and prove.

Sexual violence

Most participants consider sexual violence to be using physical force for sexual intercourse, unwanted touching, repetitive unwanted sexual comments leading to forced sexual act, coercive sexual intercourse and spreading someone else’s sexual photos and/or videos. Most participants think that sexual violence is quite a broad term and it sometimes includes sexual harassment and sexual coercion, as well: “Sexual violence is a much broader notion and it implies sexual harassment and sexual coercion too” (female student, 19 years old). One of the participants said: “I perceive violence more as a physical act that is committed against the will, and given behaviour and its outcome is visible” (male student, 24 years old). Another participant believed that: “It can also be just a hand patting or something like that…” (female student, 23 years old). In the end of the interview, one of the participants summarised: “Sexual violence, probably implies all those interactions where one party is involved against his/her will.” (female student, 20 years old).

Based on students’ narratives, it was obvious that sexual violence was interpreted as forced physical behaviour on another person and also was perceived as an umbrella term for different forms of sexual violence, including sexual harassment and sexual coercion: “It is important to know differences among sexual harassment, sexual coercion and sexual violence. I think, when you act against your will, it is coercion. Sexual violence is when someone uses physical force …” (male student, 22 years old). Consequently, causes and reasons for perceiving a situation as sexual violence was overlapping with causes and reasons expressed in cases of sexual harassment and sexual coercion. This was due to consideration that sexual violence was more a general category for various forms of sexual violence. The research participants considered the situations in given stories as sexual violence, because there was clear physical assault where one party used physical force: “At first, the fact that he used physical force for having sex is already sexual violence, because the other person did not want this” (male student, 21 years old). Also, one party had not consented to sexual intercourse and clearly expressed that they did not want sex and the second party forced them into it, for example in case of forced marriage one of the participants expressed her view: “This case is sexual violence, because the abuser was using psychological pressure and after this he used physical force too” (female student, 20 years old). Also, one party used blackmail and forced the second party into sex: “One of the partners clearly expressed her will. In this case the will of the victim is clearly visible. The woman expressed a clear will and everything happened against it. This means sexual violence” (male student, 24 years old). Most participants indicated that the case should be considered as sexual violence, because the victim could not give consent, she was drunk and unconscious.

Responsibility for sexual harassment, sexual coercion or sexual violence

Attribution of responsibility was done in favour of a perpetrator and in some cases, in favour of victims too. The decision who to blame, was contingent upon contextual and situational details. Especially, in situations, where there was not a demonstration of physical violence and/or clear and categorical refusal by victim, students believed that responsibility for the outcome should be shared. One of the participants expressed her view about situation where lecturer was sending nude photos to student via messenger: “I do not know the exact messages between them, but because this relationship was bilateral (between student and lecturer), the responsibility cannot be attributed to one party” (female student, 21 years old). Also, when the violence situations were repetitive and victim “could influence” on a particular situation the research participants distributed more responsibility to a victim, for example in regards to the sexual harassment and sexual coercion of someone at a workplace. One of the participants expressed his view about the case of forced marriage: “The responsibility is distributed to victim too, because she saw that the man acted violently against her and she should have told someone about this, she should not be so afraid. I could not see that this girl tried to solve this situation, she even did not ask for help from her family members” (male student, 23 years old).

Students also attributed less responsibility to victims when the abuser was a stranger and the victim could not somehow “control” the situation. One of the research participants said: “In some cases there were solutions for the situation, but here I cannot see how the victim could influence the situation and avoid sexual violence” (female student, 20 years old). In
Discussion
The goal of the present study was to answer the main research questions: a) How Georgian students understand sexual violence? b) Who they think are responsible for sexual violence? c) What are the underlying reasons behind those views?

The findings provide support for the definitions of sexual harassment and sexual coercion as categories of sexual violence. The latter is believed to be a broader term for different forms of sexual violence, and, at the same time, it is perceived to build on physical force (e.g. rape). Sexual harassment and sexual coercion, as are indicated in our study and in the supporting literature, being component part of sexual violence practice, they also have independent meaning.

Hejase (2015) defines sexual harassment as “unwelcome or unwanted sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and any form of verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that interferes with one’s employment or work performance or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment”. Our research revealed that, in comparison to other forms of sexual violence, sexual harassment can be limited to verbal expression as well as unwanted touching. Sexual coercion is described as the use of any tactic or strategy to engage another person in sexual behaviours without consent (Abbey et al., 2014; Farris et al., 2008). These coercive strategies may involve the use of manipulation (through promises or inducing guilt for example), persistent touching, intoxication or verbal pressure or physical force. Sexual coercion, therefore, implies behaviours legally defined as sexual aggression and rape, but also refers to acts of sexual violence that do not meet the legal definition of sexual aggression or rape (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). The findings of our study support demonstrated that sexual coercion is viewed as being forced through power and manipulation, rather than physical force, where one cannot refuse sexual interaction.

Differences in definition of sexual harassment, sexual coercion and sexual violence by the WHO’s World Report on Violence and Health definition and Georgian students’ perspectives in the study. It seems that there are cultural differences between what we perceive as sexual violence and what we do not. For example, Heise et al., discussed that within any one society there may be contested areas where the line between acceptable and nonacceptable levels of sexual coercion are in transition. In the United States, for example, the line among dating partners is clearly changing. Acts that would have been cited as the women’s fault or ascribed to “bad manners” on the part of the man twenty years ago, are increasingly being correctly labelled “date rape” (Heise et al., 1996). Grubb and Harrower’s (2009) study indicated that when a rapist and victim knew each other in some capacity, university students were more likely to blame the female victim to a greater extent. In their opinion, when there was some previous contact between those involved in the rape, respondents made a shift in how they delegated blame because they understood that relationships often involve miscommunications, and that different interpretation of events are likely to occur. Respondents might have felt that blame needed to be more shared in this type of situation (Grubb & Harrower, 2009). The findings from their study suggested that stranger rape and acquaintance rape need to be treated as distinct phenomena. Our study’s results implied that responsibility and culpability became more muddled once the rapist and rape victim have had some previous contact. The authors concluded that more qualitative work was needed to understand the thinking and reasoning behind attributions made in these two kinds of rape situations (Grubb & Harrower, 2009). In our study, Georgian students also attributed less responsibility to victims when the abuser is a stranger and the victim could not control the situation. In their view, when the victim could influence on the situation, the participants attributed more responsibility to victims, for example about the situation where was sexual harassment at the workplace.

Landström et al. (2016) indicated that participants attributed least blame to sexual assault victims who had not previously flirted with the perpetrator and most blame was attributed to the flirtatious sexual harassment victim. The research consistently showed that rape victims may be blamed for the assault, but little was known about victim blaming in other sexual crimes. In their experiment, the researchers examined blame attributions for sexual assault and online sexual harassment. This is true for our study too. The research participants also attributed more responsibility to the victim, who communicated with the abusive party and the participants thought that she or he “looked like they were flirting” for example, in situations a female student (the victim) had had online communication with her lecturer (the abuser) and messages between them were about the victim’s family and private life. After this communication, he started sending her nude photos without her consent.

Overall, this research provides useful information about Georgian students’ attitudes to sexual violence and their attributions of responsibility. The research can become the basis for effective prevention programs of sexual violence in Georgia.
Conclusion

Overall, the study demonstrated that Georgian students’ perspectives on defining sexual harassment, sexual coercion and sexual violence, are in line with definitions that are formulated in existing literature on sexual violence. It is important to mention that students were selected from two biggest cities. This was done on purpose as, considering research aims and objectives, authors were interested in students’ perspectives in big cities, where youth was more exposed to new and alternatives cultures than their own.

In summary, the results of the present study yield several conclusions. First of all, sexual violence is not a new phenomenon in Georgia, but its consideration as a social problem is. Secondly, these issues have attracted the attention of researchers and experts for decades in Western countries, but in Georgia, it is still an unexplored field. Thirdly, there are no programs for prevention of sexual violence in Georgia and this is reflected in Georgian students’ attitudes toward sexual violence and attributions of responsibilities on this issue. Therefore, the given study is one of the first and essential steps in designing effective programs for preventing and controlling sexual violence in Georgia.

Study limitation

The core limitation of this study is that it does not include all Georgian society’s views about sexual violence issues, but only Georgian youth’s perspectives. It was beyond the researchers’ control how honest the participants were in answering the questions, but to ensure honest responses of the respondents, in-depth interviews implied additional in-depth questioning and in some instances, reformulation of major and additional questions. This allowed to understand whether respondent was not confident in his/her responses and to double check the views and attitudes that respondents provided.

Data availability

Figshare: Sexual Violence and the Object of Attribution of Responsibility in Georgian Students

https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/Data_docx/19123637 (Mchedlishvili & Zhghenti, 2022)

Underlying data

This project contains the following underlying data:

- Data.pdf (transcript of interviews)
- Quantitative results data (the percentages relating to the participants assessments of each case)

Extended data

Figshare: Sexual Violence and the Object of Attribution of Responsibility in Georgian Students

https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/Data_docx/19123637 (Mchedlishvili & Zhghenti, 2022)

This project contains the following extended data:

- Interview guide

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