

Experience of Sexual Harassment among Female Students in Alexandria University

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Abstract

Background: Sexual harassment is a pervasive issue that affects women worldwide, endangering their safety, health, and self-respect. It is especially common among young women in Egyptian communities, despite efforts to combat it. **Objective:** To explore sexual harassment experience among female students in Alexandria University. **Settings:** The study was carried out in all Faculties affiliated to Alexandria University. They accounted for 19 faculties. **Subjects:** A convenient sample of 650 female university students was selected from the previously mentioned settings by using the proportional allocation method. **Tools:** one tool was used. Part one: "Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Female University Students and Their Families". Part two: "Female University Students' Opinion about Sexual Harassment Questionnaire". Part three: "Female University Students' Exposure to Sexual Harassment". Part four: "Female University Students' Response & Coping to Sexual Harassment. **Results:** The majority of the female students were exposed to sexual harassment, which was perpetrated mainly by strangers followed by colleagues and relatives. Moreover, sexual harassment occurred mainly in the street, transportation, recreational places, educational institutions, and to a lesser extent at home. Most of the studied students had good opinion and knowledge about sexual harassment, but less than half of them had no knowledge about the Egyptian efforts to combat sexual harassment. Additionally, less than three-quarters of studied students didn't know about the existence of the anti-violence unit at Alexandria University. Furthermore, avoidance and confrontation were the most frequently used coping strategies by the victims of female students. **Conclusion:** Although most of the studied students had a good knowledge about sexual harassment, but they were exposed to sexual harassment in a high percentage. **Recommendations:** Educational campaigns and programs should be run to inform university students about Alexandria University's anti-violence unit and Egyptian efforts to prevent sexual harassment, including laws that punish offenders and a hotline for reporting incidents.

Keywords: Sexual Harassment, Female University Students, Experience.

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Introduction

Violence against women is a main public health problem (WHO, 2021). Sexual harassment is a prevalent form of gender-based violence (GBV) that is considered a global matter. It can have a severe impact on a person's social and physical well-being as well as the economic development of nations (Hardt et al., 2023).

The World Health Organization has noted that one in three women worldwide has been the victim of sexual harassment in their lives. (WHO, 2020). In Egypt, according to a recent study conducted by Abdel Fattah et al. (2022) revealed that 81% of Egyptian women are exposed to sexual harassment (Abdel Fattah et al., 2022).

Sexual harassment is very common among female university students, according to numerous reviews of the literature. For example, according to a study conducted by Ibrahim et al. (2023) at Suez Canal University revealed that 73.5% of female university students had experienced sexual harassment (Ibrahim et al., 2023).

Females are vulnerable to different forms of sexual harassment, including verbal, physical, and nonverbal (He et al., 2024). Sexual harassment is a widespread issue that can occur in public spaces, educational institutions, and social gatherings (Hardt et al., 2023).

Sexual harassment is a multifaceted issue influenced by various individual, relationship, community, and societal factors (Hassan et al., 2023). Women who experience sexual harassment suffer from psychological, physical, academic, and professional effects (Aboelnour, 2022; Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020).

The ways in which victims of sexual harassment react and cope vary amongst themselves. Coping strategies can be broadly classified into two categories: problem-focused strategies and emotional-focused strategies (Algorani & Gupta, 2023).

In actuality, sexual harassment is regarded as a serious human problem that requires adequate attention from all professionals, including researchers and community health nurses. Community health nurses (CHNs) are integral to the comprehensive approach encompassing education, advocacy, prevention, and support in addressing sexual harassment. Through educational initiatives, they create preventative plans, offer victims prompt assistance and counseling, and move for strong laws and regulations to combat sexual harassment (Aboelnour, 2022; Zara et al., 2024).

Aims of the Study

This study aims to explore the experience of sexual harassment among female students in Alexandria University.

Research questions

What is the experience of female students in Alexandria University about sexual harassment?

Materials and Method

Materials

Design: A cross-sectional descriptive design was used to carry out this study.

Settings: The study was carried out in all faculties affiliated to Alexandria University representing the three main academic sectors namely: Scientific, Medical, and Theoretical sectors. They accounted for 19 faculties.

Subjects: A convenient sample of 650 female university students. The sample size was calculated using EPI info 7 statistical program using the following parameters: total population 99342, Expected frequency 50%, and confidence level 95% with margin of error 5% and effect size 1.5. Subjects were allocated proportionately among all faculties affiliated to the University.

Tools: In order to collect the required data from the study subjects, one tool was used:

Tool one: “Female University Students’ Sexual Harassment Questionnaire”. This tool was developed by the researcher in Arabic language after reviewing the recent relevant literature (Aboelnour, 2022; Bonar et al., 2022; Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Fitzgerald et al., 1993; Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Gautam, 2019; Mohamed et al., 2022; Mushonga et al., 2021). **It consists of four parts:**

Part I: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Female University Students and Their Families: This part included data such as age, academic year, place of residence, marital status, birth order, academic achievement, work experience, parents’ age, education, occupation, marital status.

Part II: Female University Students’ Opinion about Sexual Harassment Questionnaire: This part included 110 questions to explore female students' opinions and knowledge regarding sexual harassment.

Participants responded to each item of the 110 questions by using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The total score was computed by adding the scores on the 110 items and was converted into percent score and classified in the following levels, poor knowledge & opinion (<33.3%); fair knowledge & opinion (33.3% - < 66.7%) and good knowledge & opinion ($\geq 66.7\%$).

Part III: Female University Students' Exposure to Sexual Harassment: This part was adapted from Fitzgerald et al. (1993) to assess the female students' exposure to sexual harassment. It was translated into Arabic by the researcher. It consisted of 19 items distributed along three major subscales, gender harassment (7items), unwanted sexual attention (5items), and sexual coercion (7 items). Total scale score was computed by adding the scores on the 19 items and was converted into percent score and classified in the following levels low exposure (<33.3%); moderate exposure (33.3% - < 66.7%) and high exposure ($\geq 66.7\%$).

Part IV: Female University Students' Response & Coping to Sexual Harassment: This part was adapted from Fitzgerald et al. (1995) and was translated into Arabic by the researcher to assess the different harassment coping responses in different categories: internally focused responses and externally focused responses. Responses were set on 5 points Likert ranges from (Never=0) to (Always=4). Total resultant score of each subscale was obtained by summing up the score of each item, which was converted into percent score and classified into three levels low use (<33.3%); moderate use (33.3% - < 66.7%) and high use ($\geq 66.7\%$).

Method

Approval from the ethics committee of faculty of nursing, Alexandria University was obtained. An official approval to conduct this study was obtained after explaining the aim of the study. The study tools were tested for content validity by 5 experts in the fields of CHNg. The necessary modifications were made

accordingly. A pilot study was carried out on 10% of the study subjects to test the clarity and applicability of the research tools.

Tool was tested for reliability using Cronbach's Alpha test. The reliability coefficient was 0.913 for the exposure questionnaire and 0.826 for coping questionnaire, which is acceptable.

The data was collected by the researcher during the academic years (2021-2022) and (2022-2023); from April 2022 to January 2023

Ethical considerations:

Oral informed consent was obtained from each female student after explaining the aim of the study and the right to refuse to participate in the study and/ or withdraw at any time. Data confidentiality was maintained during the implementation of the study.

Statistical Analysis

The collected data were organized, coded, transferred into a specially designed format to be suitable for computer feeding and statically analyzed using the statistical package for social studies (SPSS) Version 25.0. Variables were analyzed using descriptive statistics which included: percentages, frequencies, range (minimum and maximum), arithmetic mean, and standard deviation. Finally, analysis and interpretation of data were conducted. P-values of 0.05 or less was considered statistically significant.

Results

Table 1: Shows the distribution of the studied female students according to their socio-demographic characteristics. The table revealed that the female students' age ranged from 17 to 25 years with a mean of 20.68 ± 1.502 years. More than two-fifths (44.0%) of the female students aged from 20 to less than 22 years, while the minorities of them aged less than 18 years and 24 to 25years (0.6 % and 2.6% respectively). Concerning the academic sector, more than three-quarters (78.6%) of the female students were in the theoretical sector, while more than one-tenth (12.2%) of them were in the medical sector and only 9.2% of them were in the scientific sector. With respect to the academic level, the table showed that less

than one-quarter (24.0% and 21.2%) were enrolled either in the first or the second grade, while more than one-tenth (12.6%) were enrolled in the third grade, and less than two-fifths (38.5%) of the female students were enrolled in the fourth grade and only 3.7 % of them were enrolled in the fifth grade. Regarding the female students' marital status, the vast majority (92.0%) of them were single, and 8.0% of them were married. Additionally, it was noticed that most (92.8%) of them were living in urban areas.

Figure 1 shows that the majority (81.4%) of the female students were exposed to sexual harassment and less than one-fifth (18.6%) of them reported no exposure to sexual harassment

Table 2 reveals the distribution of the studied female students according to their experience of sexual harassment. The majority (83.2%) of the female students who reported exposure to sexual harassment were exposed to it in the street, followed by transportation (52.7%). Moreover, more than two-fifths (44.8%) of them exposed to sexual harassment through online sites, while, more than one-tenth of them reported exposure to harassment either in recreational places or educational institution (11.0% and 10.8% respectively). On the other hand, a minority (3.8%) of them were exposed to sexual harassment at home. Regarding the experienced types of sexual harassment, the majority (89.2%) of female students exposed to verbal harassment, followed by physical harassment (57.7%), finally, non-verbal harassment (38%). In relation to perpetrators of sexual harassment, all victimized female students reported that the perpetrators were strangers followed by colleagues (10.6%) and finally relatives (5.1%). Concerning the frequency of sexual harassment occurrence, less than one-fifth (18.1%) of the female students reported exposure to sexual harassment only one time and more than one quarter (26.3%) reported exposure to harassment four times and more. With respect to the time of sexual harassment occurrence, less than one-fifth (18.1%) of the students reported exposure to sexual harassment at

morning while, more than half (50.3%) of the female students exposed to sexual harassment in the afternoon. On the other hand more than two-fifths (41.8%) of them exposed in the evening, and less than one-fifth (18.1%) of them exposed to sexual harassment at night. Concerning the reporting of sexual harassment incidents, only 5.5% of the female students reported the incidents.

Table 3 shows the distribution of the studied female students' levels of exposure to sexual harassment according to Sexual Experience Scale, minority of the victimized female students had high exposure level of unwanted sexual attention, gender harassment and sexual coercion (3.8%, 3.6% and 0.6% respectively).

Figure 2 reveals that externally focused copying strategies were the most frequently used by the female students (28.9%) compared to internally focused coping strategies (5.1%).

Table 4 describes the relationship between exposure to sexual harassment and the studied female students' nature of clothing and general appearance. It was noticed that the majority of the female students who wore either modestly or immodestly were exposed to sexual harassment (81.4% and 81.1%). Moreover, the majority (81.8%) of the students who wore veil were exposed to sexual harassment compared to 77.8 % of students who had no veil. Additionally, the majority (83.5%) of the students who use facial makeup were exposed to sexual harassment compared to 78.8% of those students who don't use.

Discussion

Sexual harassment is a widespread issue affecting many people's lives and requires immediate attention (Makhaye et al., 2023). The current study found that most female students were exposed to sexual harassment. This finding is consistent with other studies such as a study done by Ibrahim et al. (2023) and Mosha et al. (2022) who reported that the majority of female students were exposed to sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment can occur in various settings, including public places, transportation, and shopping centers, which are often crowded and lack guard supervision, making them suitable targets for harassment. The result of the present study brought to light that most sexual harassment cases took place in streets, followed by public transportation and recreational places. These findings agreed with a study conducted by Kabbash et al. (2022) at Kafrelsheikh University. They found that most of the sexual harassment cases took place in public transports and streets that may be due to Streets and public transportation offer anonymity and opportunities for sexual harassment, while lack of security may allow perpetrators to carry out their acts without fear of detection.

Educational institutions strive to provide secure learning environments, but sexual harassment remains a significant issue despite their efforts to create a welcoming and supportive environment (Girdhar & Rajput, 2019). Unfortunately, the results of the current study revealed that one-tenth of female university students were exposed to sexual harassment in educational institutions, especially those students in the medical and theoretical sectors. This finding agreed with a study by Ibrahim et al. (2023) who stated that minorities of female students experienced sexual harassment at university.

It's unfortunate to say that the results of the present study clarified that minorities of the studied female students were exposed to sexual harassment at home. These results are consistent with a study done by Mahmoud and Hassan (2021)

The study reveals that sexual harassment can occur at any time, highlighting that it is not limited to specific times. The results of a study conducted by Ibrahim et al. (2023) supported these findings. The current study shows that the female students experienced three types, but the most prevalent type was verbal sexual harassment. These findings come in accordance with the results of Athanasiades et al (2023) and Orfan et al (2022) in their studies who found

that verbal harassment was the most common type of harassment among females.

Sexual harassment is a problem that affects a lot of women. Studies have looked at various types of harassing behaviors, such as gender harassment, sexual coercion, and unwanted sexual attention (Coulter & Rankin, 2020). The current study found that a minority of the victimized female students had high exposure level of unwanted sexual attention, gender harassment and sexual coercion. In the same line, Chairunnisa et al. (2022), and Thapalia et al. (2020) in their studies, discovered that sexual coercion was the least common type of harassment reported by female students.

Sexual harassment can be perpetrated by unfamiliar individuals, colleagues, or even family members. The results of the present study clarified that the perpetrators of sexual harassment were mainly strangers, followed by colleagues. The current findings agree with the study conducted by Orfan et al (2022), additionally, the results of the current study revealed that minorities of perpetrators of sexual harassment experienced by the female students were relatives. These findings come in line with those of Mahmoud and Hassan (2021) who found that a minority of perpetrators were brothers and cousins.

Reporting sexual harassment incidents is important for creating a culture of equality, respect, and safety, as it significantly impacts victims and prevents harmful behavior (Lakshminarayanan & Košir, 2024).

Unfortunately, results of the current study illustrated that the vast majority of the female students did not report the incidents of sexual harassment. The result of the current study was in agreement with the study conducted by Loukaitou-Sideris et al. (2024) who concluded that the reported incidents of harassment were extremely low.

Sexual harassment is a severe and potentially life-threatening experience that often necessitates the use of coping mechanisms to manage its impacts (Nyarko Adu et al., 2024).

The current study found that various strategies were used to cope with the consequences of harassment. Still, externally focused coping strategies were most frequently used by the victims of female students. The current findings are in line with a study conducted by Abutayeh and Abu-Zaitoon (2024) to investigate the forms of violence against female students who found that female students favored external mechanisms like reporting to university security and filing an official complaint.

It was found that the prevalence of exposure to sexual harassment occurred slightly higher in those who had veil and use facial makeup or cosmetics. Consequently, these results challenge the misconception that women who do not cover their heads or dress provocatively were at a higher risk of facing sexual harassment. The same results were observed in the study conducted by Abu-Zaitoon (2024) about forms of violence facing female students at a Jordanian university who found that the vast majority of the female participants who wore veils and loose-fitting clothing were exposed to sexual harassment.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the current study, it can be concluded the majority of the female students were exposed to sexual harassment, In addition , externally focused coping strategies were the most frequently used by the victims of female students such as avoidance and confrontation.

Recommendations

In line with the findings of the study, the following recommendations are suggested

- Launch an extensive public awareness campaign about sexual harassment and its detrimental effects, reporting mechanisms, and punishment laws.
- Develop a comprehensive data system to assess sexual harassment prevalence and identify potential causes to prevent and reduce this issue.
- Motivate victims to speak up and report sexual harassment incidents so that the stigma associated with the problem can be eliminated

Table (1): Distribution of the studied female students according to their socio-demographic characteristics.

Students' characteristic	Total (N=650)	
	No.	%
Age (years)		
- <18	4	0.6
- 18-	160	24.6
- 20-	286	44.0
- 22-	183	28.2
- 24-25	17	2.6
Min – Max	17.00 – 25.00	
Mean ± SD	20.68 ±1.502	
Academic sector		
- Medical	79	12.2
- Scientific	60	9.2
- Theoretical	511	78.6
Academic year		
- First	156	24.0
- Second	138	21.2
- Third	82	12.6
- Forth	250	38.5
- Fifth	24	3.7
Marital status		
- Single	598	92.0
- Married	52	8.0
Place of residence		
- Rural	47	7.2
- Urban	603	92.8

Table (2) Distribution of the studied female students according to their experience of sexual harassment.

Items	Total (N=529)	
	No.	%
Place of occurrence of sexual harassment #		
- Street	440	83.2
- Transportation	279	52.7
- Online sites	237	44.8
- Recreational places	58	11.0
- Inside educational institutions	57	10.8
- In front of educational institutions	46	8.7
- Workplaces	43	8.1
- Parties	33	6.2
- House	20	3.8
Type of sexual harassment #	N= 529	
- Verbal	472	89.2
- Physical	305	57.7
- Non verbal	201	38.0
Who was the harasser? #		
- Stranger	529	100.0
- Colleague	56	10.6
- Relatives	27	5.1
Time of harassment #		
- Morning	142	26.8
- Afternoon	266	50.3
- Evening	221	41.8
- Night	96	18.1
Frequency of harassment		
- Once	96	18.1
- Twice	174	32.9
- Three times	120	22.7
- Four times and more	139	26.3
Reporting occurrence of sexual harassment		
- No	500	94.5
- Yes #	29	5.5
▪ Related authority	15	51.7
▪ Family members	13	44.8
▪ Friends	5	17.2

Multiple responses were allowed

Figure (1) Distribution of the studied female students according to their experience of sexual harassment (Sexual Experience Questionnaire).

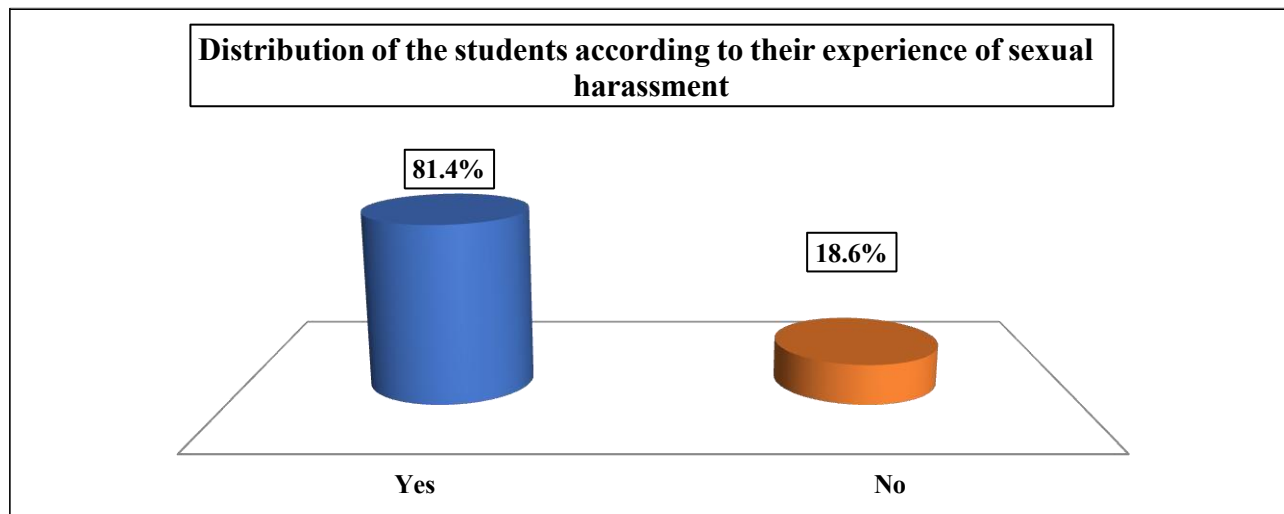


Figure (2): Distribution of the Studied Female Students According to the Levels of Their Experience of Sexual Harassment According to Sexual Experience Scale.

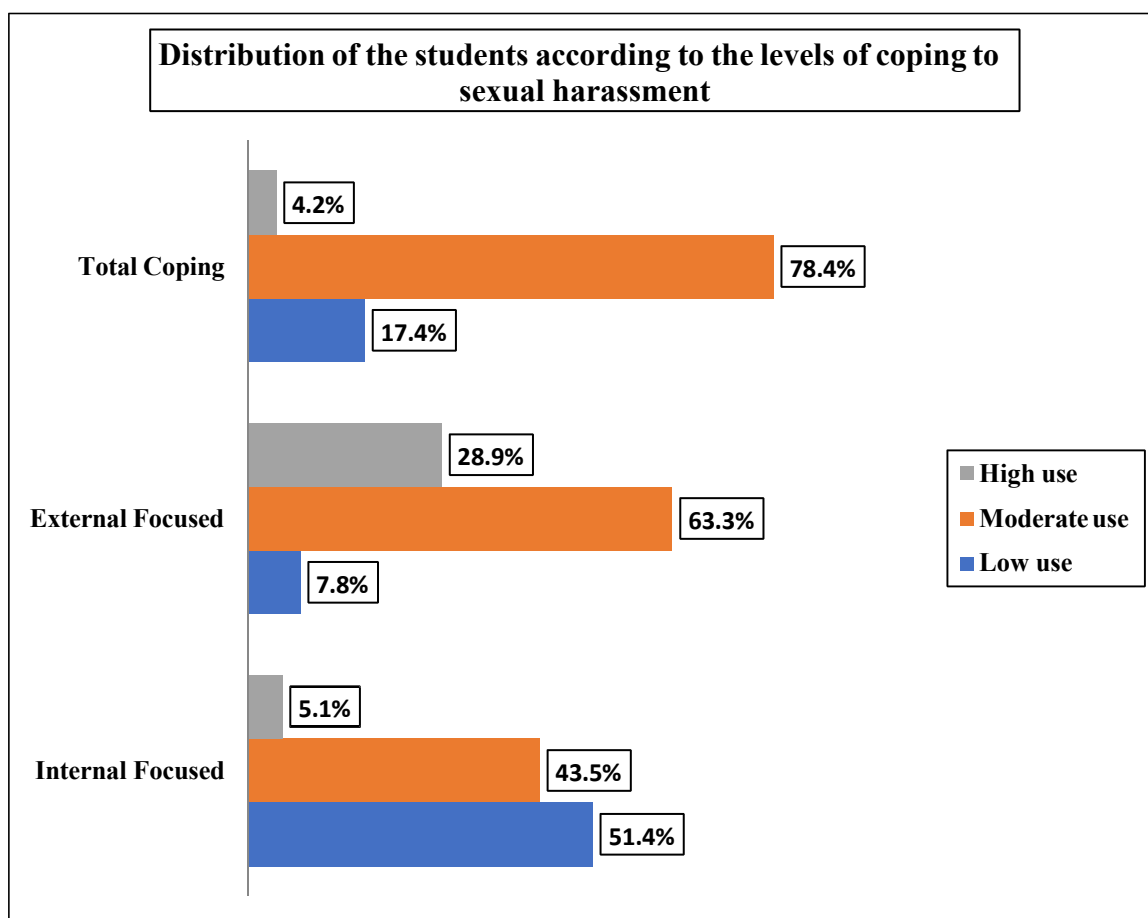


Table (3): Distribution of the Studied Female Students' Levels of Exposure to Sexual Harassment According to Sexual Experience Scale (By Domains).

Items	Levels of Students' Exposure to Sexual Harassment					
	Low		Moderate		High	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
▪ Gender harassment	376	71.1	134	25.3	19	3.6
▪ Sexual coercion	501	94.7	25	4.7	3	0.6
▪ Unwanted sexual attention	425	80.3	84	15.9	20	3.8
Total Students' Exposure to Sexual Harassment	466	88.1	58	11.0	5	0.9

Table (4): Relationship between Exposure to Sexual Harassment and the Studied Female Students' Nature of Clothing and General Appearance.

Items	Exposure to Sexual Harassment				Total (N=650)		Test of Significance
	No (N= 121)		Yes (N= 529)		No.	%	
	No.	%	No.	%			
Nature of clothing							
- Modest	114	18.6	499	81.4	613	94.3	X ² = 0.002
- Immodest	7	18.9	30	81.1	37	5.7	P= 0.961
Presence of veil							
- No	16	22.2	56	77.8	72	11.1	X ² = 0.695
- Yes	105	18.2	473	81.8	578	88.9	P= 0.404
Use of facial makeup							
- No	62	21.2	231	78.8	293	45.1	X ² = 2.281
- Yes	59	16.5	298	83.5	357	54.9	P= 0.131

X²= Chi Square Test * Statistically Significant at $p \leq 0.05$

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