



REVIEW ARTICLE

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# Social and Psychological Impact of Sexual Violence Victims: A Literature Review

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## Abstrak

Tinjauan literatur sistematis ini menganalisis dampak sosial dan psikologis yang dialami oleh korban kekerasan seksual, yang bertujuan untuk memberikan sintesis komprehensif dari efek yang dilaporkan dalam penelitian terbaru. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan systematic literature review yang memanfaatkan Scopus sebagai database utama, studi yang diterbitkan dalam dekade terakhir dipilih untuk mengatasi stigma sosial, gangguan psikologis, dan tantangan pemulihan yang dihadapi korban. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan prevalensi berulang dari gangguan terkait trauma, termasuk depresi, kecemasan, dan gangguan stres pasca-trauma (PTSD), dan dampak penting pada dinamika sosial seperti stigma dan viktimisasi sekunder. Hasil penelitian ini sangat penting untuk mengetahui bahayadari kekerasan dan pelecehan seksual. Penelitian ini diharapkan mampu menjadi pertimbangan dalam rangka meningkatkan struktur dukungan sosial dan intervensi klinis untuk mendorong pemulihan korban.

**Kata kunci:** kekerasan, pelecehan, seksual,

## Abstract

*This systematic literature review analyzes the social and psychological impacts experienced by victims of sexual violence, aiming to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the effects reported in recent research. This study uses a systematic literature review approach that utilizes Scopus as the main database, studies published in the last decade were selected to address social stigma, psychological disorders, and recovery challenges faced by victims. The findings of this study show the recurrent prevalence of trauma-related disorders, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and an important impact on social dynamics such as stigma and secondary victimization. The results of this study are very important to understand the risk of sexual violence and harassment. This research is expected to be able to be considered in order to improve the structure of social support and clinical interventions to encourage victim recovery.*

**Keywords:** violence, harassment, sexuality

## Introduction

Sexual violence and sexual harassment are significant and complex public health problems. The impact of sexual violence is not only felt by individual victims, but also affects the social environment and the community at large. Research shows that victims of sexual violence often experience a variety of psychological effects, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety [1], [2]. Thus, understanding the impact of sexual harassment and violence is urgently needed.



The long-term psychological effects of sexual harassment and sexual violence are profound and diverse, impacting victims of different ages and backgrounds. Individuals who experience sexual abuse often suffer from a variety of psychological disorders, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [3]. In addition, sexual harassment and violence have a social impact that is rarely studied in depth by many researchers. Sexual harassment and sexual violence have profound social effects that go beyond the immediate physical and psychological harm inflicted on the victim. These actions contribute to a culture of fear and mistrust within the community, often leading to social isolation and stigmatization of survivors. Research shows that victims of sexual violence often experience significant psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can hinder their ability to engage socially and maintain relationships [4]

This proves that the effects of sexual harassment are not limited to direct victims; Witnesses to such incidents also reported significant psychological distress. A study involving adolescent girls found that witnessing sexual abuse was associated with an increased risk of anxiety, depression, and substance use, highlighting the broader social impact of the behavior [5], [6]. This suggests that the consequences of sexual harassment go beyond individual experiences, affecting the mental health of entire communities. In addition, psychological victims of abuse can lead to adverse outcomes in the educational and work environment, as victims can experience decreased job satisfaction, increased absenteeism, and impaired academic performance [5], [6]. The pervasive nature of sexual abuse creates an environment of fear and insecurity, which can hinder personal and professional growth.

Additionally, the stigma surrounding sexual harassment often discourages victims from reporting their experiences or seeking help, exacerbating the long-term psychological impact. Survivors can internalize feelings of shame and guilt, which can lead to a reluctance to engage in social or professional environments where abuse can occur again. This phenomenon is especially pronounced among sexual minority individuals, who face compound risk due to homophobia and societal discrimination, further complicating their mental health outcomes. [5], [6] Reluctance to report incidents can create cycles of silence and distress, where the psychological consequences of abuse are not adequately addressed, leading to long-term declines in mental health.

Based on the existing literature, there is evidence that the effects of sexual violence can vary depending on individual characteristics and social contexts. Koss et al. [7] showed that differences in demographics, such as age and socioeconomic background, can influence how victims experience and cope with those impacts. Therefore, future research needs to pay attention to this variability in designing more responsive interventions. In this literature review, we seek to provide a deeper understanding of the social and psychological impacts of sexual violence by analyzing a range of relevant studies. By compiling data from various studies, we hope to identify common patterns and factors that contribute to the victim experience. This is an important step in informing policies and practices aimed at supporting victims.

We will also examine gaps in the existing literature and identify areas that require further research. More in-depth research is needed to understand the long-term implications of sexual violence and how interventions can be more effective in addressing its impacts. With this systematic approach, we hope to contribute to an increased understanding of victims' needs and ways to support them in the recovery process. This research is expected to provide useful insights for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in designing more effective support programs for victims of sexual violence. By digging deeper into the social and psychological impacts, we hope to contribute to reducing stigma and creating a more supportive environment for those who have suffered from sexual violence.

## **Method**

This systematic literature review was conducted using a comprehensive search strategy to identify relevant studies on the social and psychological effects of sexual harassment. Databases such as scopus were utilized to gather peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2023. The search terms included "(Title-Abs-Key ( "Social Effect" ) Or Title-Abs-Key ( "Psychological Effect" ) And Title-Abs-Key ( "Sexual Harassment" ) Or Title-Abs-Key ( "Sexual Violence" ) Or

Title-Abs-Key ( "Sexual Abuse" )." Inclusion criteria were established to focus on empirical studies that examined the impact of sexual harassment on individuals' psychological and social.

The selected articles were screened for relevance based on their titles and abstracts, followed by a full-text review to assess their methodological rigor and findings. Studies were included if they provided empirical evidence regarding the psychological or social effects of sexual harassment, with a particular emphasis on those that explored the experiences of diverse populations. A total of 35 articles were ultimately included in the review, representing a range of methodologies, including quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and meta-analyses. Data extraction was performed to summarize key findings, including the prevalence of sexual harassment, its psychological and social effects, and the role of institutional responses. The extracted data were organized thematically to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of the literature, highlighting common trends and gaps in the existing research. This systematic approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of sexual harassment and its implications for individuals and society.

After all the data was collected and filtered with a total of 120 articles, the analysts used the VOSviewer 1.6.20 application to find out the network visualization related to the psychological and social impact of violence and sexual harassment as in figure 1.

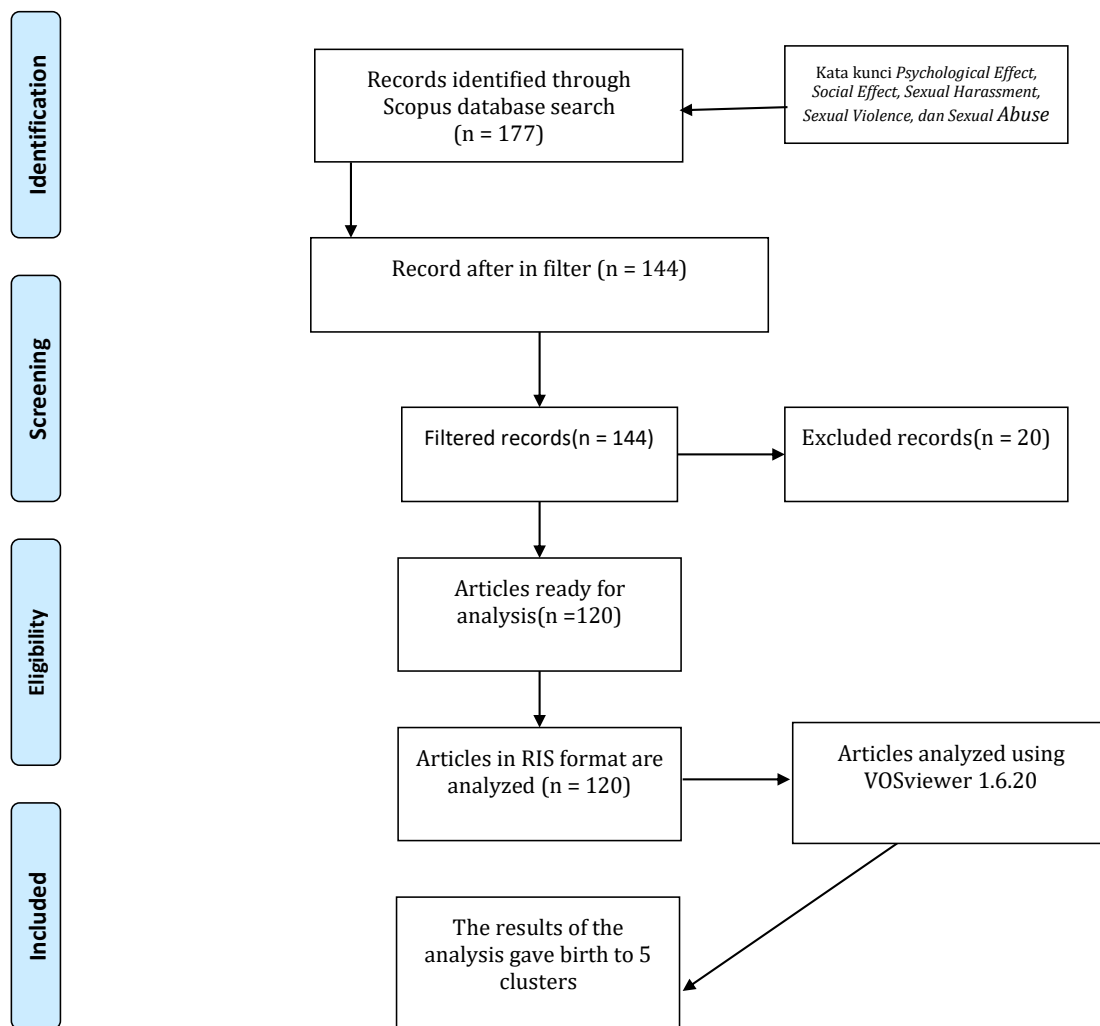


Figure 1. systematic literature review protocol



**Psychological and social Impact of sexual harassment**

Psychological impact is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (see figure 3) (PTSD) is commonly observed among sexual violence victims. Symptoms include flashbacks, hypervigilance, and emotional numbness. Studies demonstrate that PTSD prevalence in sexual violence survivors is significantly higher than in the general population. Depression and Anxiety Depression and anxiety disorders are prevalent among survivors, often manifesting through persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and fear. Victims frequently report low self-esteem and difficulty in daily functioning. Studies show that these disorders tend to be more severe when victims encounter secondary victimization through social interactions or institutional barriers. Automatic Rumination and Suicidality Rumination, or repetitive negative thinking, is a prominent symptom in survivors, often leading to suicidal thoughts and behaviors. The psychological impact is exacerbated by feelings of guilt, shame, and self-blame. Research indicates that rumination is particularly high when the perpetrator is a known individual, increasing the difficulty of mental recovery.

Social impact is Stigma and Social rejection survivors of sexual violence often face social stigmatization, which can lead to social isolation and reduced support from family and friends (see figure 3). Public attitudes can label survivors as the people responsible for the violence, thus exacerbating their trauma. Social stigma is a significant barrier to recovery, as it prevents victims from seeking the support needed for healing. Secondary Victimization Secondary victimization, which is often experienced during interactions with law enforcement or health care providers, can further traumatize victims. These phenomena include blame language and invasive questioning that undermine the credibility of victims, making it more challenging for them to pursue legal justice or psychological recovery. Impact on Interpersonal Relationships Many survivors struggle to maintain healthy interpersonal relationships due to trust issues and fear of intimacy. These difficulties often extend to family dynamics, where misunderstandings or unsupportive responses exacerbate the emotional burden on survivors. Studies show that victims may withdraw from social circles to avoid potential judgment or compassion, leading to further isolation.

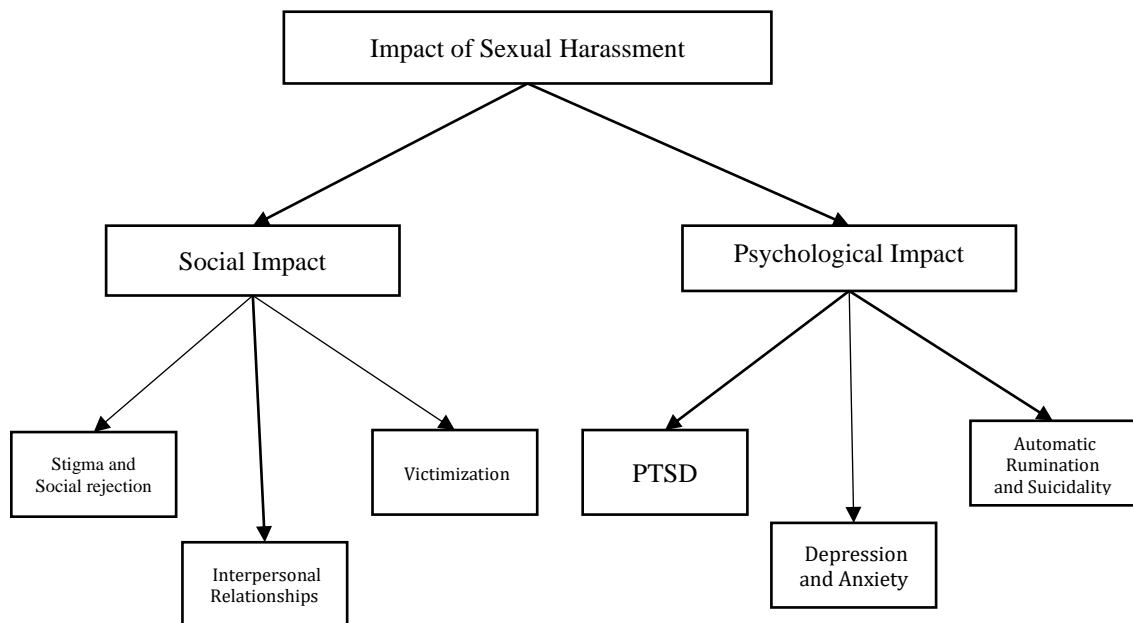


Figure 3. Impact of Sexual Harassment

## Discussion

Sexual harassment is a pervasive issue that has profound social and psychological impacts on individuals and communities. The ramifications of such harassment extend beyond the immediate victim, affecting workplace dynamics, mental health, and societal perceptions of gender roles. Research indicates that victims of sexual harassment often experience a loss of individual and social identity, particularly in professional settings such as healthcare. For instance, a study involving Iranian nurses revealed that those who faced sexual harassment struggled to maintain psychological balance, leading to severe negative emotions and a pervasive fear of long-term consequences [8]. This aligns with findings from other studies that highlight the detrimental effects of harassment on job satisfaction and career aspirations, as many victims contemplate leaving their professions due to dissatisfaction and emotional distress [9].

The psychological impact of sexual harassment is significant, with numerous studies documenting its association with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. For example, a cross-sectional analysis of Danish employees found that workplace sexual harassment was linked to increased depressive symptoms, underscoring the mental health toll it takes on individuals [10]. Furthermore, the fear of harassment can exacerbate these effects, as individuals who perceive a threat may experience heightened anxiety and physical symptoms, even if they have not been directly victimized [11]. This phenomenon illustrates the broader implications of harassment, where the mere presence of a hostile environment can lead to a decline in overall well-being among employees.

Sexual harassment has far-reaching and complex psychological effects, including the development of serious mental health problems like PTSD, anxiety, and depression. Many people who have been the targets of sexual harassment have described similar symptoms to those of people who have been victims of more extreme sexual violence, like assault. A study found that victims of sexual harassment exhibited PTSD symptoms comparable to those of rape victims, with rates of PTSD screening scores being alarmingly high for both groups Yang et al. [12]. This suggests that the psychological trauma inflicted by sexual harassment can be as debilitating as that caused by more overt sexual violence, highlighting the urgent need for recognition and intervention.

The relationship between sexual harassment and mental health disorders is further complicated by the phenomenon of automatic rumination, where victims find themselves persistently replaying the traumatic event in their minds. This ruminative process can exacerbate feelings of helplessness and despair, leading to heightened anxiety and depressive symptoms [13]. Research indicates that individuals who engage in rumination following traumatic experiences are at a greater risk for developing chronic mental health issues, including depression and anxiety disorders. The cyclical nature of this rumination can create a feedback loop, where the victim's mental state deteriorates further as they become trapped in a cycle of negative thoughts and emotions, making recovery increasingly difficult. Moreover, the impact of sexual harassment on suicidality cannot be overlooked. Studies have demonstrated a clear link between experiences of sexual harassment and increased suicidal ideation among victims. For example, military personnel who experienced sexual harassment were found to have a significantly higher risk of suicidal thoughts compared to their peers who did not face such harassment [14]. This correlation underscores the critical need for mental health support and intervention for individuals who have experienced sexual harassment, as the psychological toll can lead to devastating outcomes, including self-harm and suicide.

The results of this study reinforce previous research on the dangers of sexual violence and harassment psychologically. Psychological impact of sexual harassment is a critical area of concern that warrants comprehensive attention and intervention. The links between sexual harassment, PTSD, anxiety, depression, automatic rumination, and suicidality illustrate the urgent need for effective support systems and policies to address these issues (see figure 3). By fostering supportive environments and promoting awareness of the psychological consequences of sexual harassment, society can take significant steps toward healing and recovery for victims.

The social impact of sexual harassment is profound and multifaceted, affecting not only the victims but also the broader community and societal norms. One of the most significant consequences of sexual harassment is the stigma and social rejection that victims often face.

Victims may experience feelings of shame and humiliation, which can lead to social isolation and withdrawal from their social circles [15]. This stigma is often compounded by societal attitudes that tend to blame victims for the harassment they endure, further alienating them from their peers and support networks. Research indicates that individuals who experience sexual harassment are frequently subjected to negative social judgments, which can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and despair [16]. The societal tendency to minimize or dismiss the experiences of victims contributes to a culture of silence, where individuals feel compelled to hide their experiences rather than seek support.

Sexual harassment has profound social impacts, often creating stigmatization and rejection that affect individuals and communities on multiple levels [17]. For survivors, experiencing sexual harassment frequently leads to feelings of shame, guilt, and fear. These emotions are exacerbated by societal stigmas, which may blame or question the credibility of survivors rather than holding perpetrators accountable. Such stigma can isolate survivors, discouraging them from speaking out, seeking justice, or accessing mental health resources, thus compounding the trauma they experience. When individuals fear judgment or disbelief, they may remain silent, which not only hinders personal healing but also allows harmful behaviors to continue unchecked within social and workplace environments. Moreover, the rejection survivors face is not only personal but often institutional [17]. Many workplaces, schools, and organizations lack effective mechanisms to address harassment complaints fairly, perpetuating a culture where survivors feel marginalized.

Interpersonal relationships are also significantly impacted by sexual harassment. Victims may struggle to maintain healthy relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners due to the emotional toll of their experiences. For instance, studies have shown that victims of sexual harassment often report difficulties in establishing trust and intimacy in their relationships, leading to increased conflict and dissatisfaction [18]. The trauma associated with harassment can manifest in various ways, including emotional withdrawal, anxiety, and irritability, which can strain interpersonal connections. Furthermore, the fear of being judged or not believed can deter victims from discussing their experiences with loved ones, leading to further isolation and emotional distress [19]. This dynamic not only affects the victims but can also create tension within their social circles, as friends and family may feel helpless or unsure of how to provide support.

Victimization in the context of sexual harassment extends beyond the individual, influencing community perceptions and behaviors. The normalization of harassment can perpetuate a cycle of victimization, where individuals feel empowered to engage in harassing behaviors due to a lack of accountability. This culture can create an environment where harassment is tolerated or overlooked, leading to increased incidents and a diminished sense of safety for potential victims. In academic settings, for example, the prevalence of sexual harassment can create a hostile learning environment, discouraging students from fully participating in their education and undermining their academic success. The implications of such victimization are far-reaching, affecting not only the immediate victims but also the overall climate of the institution and the well-being of the student body [20], [21].

The results of this study reinforce previous research on the dangers of sexual violence and harassment in social impact. The social impact of sexual harassment is far-reaching and complex, encompassing stigma, social rejection, and the erosion of interpersonal relationships. Victims often face significant social repercussions, including isolation and difficulties in maintaining healthy relationships, which can perpetuate a cycle of victimization and emotional distress. The intersectionality of identity factors and the role of social media further complicate the social dynamics surrounding harassment, highlighting the need for comprehensive strategies to address these issues. By fostering a culture of support and accountability, society can work towards mitigating the social impacts of sexual harassment and creating safer environments for all individuals.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the literature on the social and psychological impact of sexual violence reveals profound and lasting effects on victims, encompassing a wide range of mental health challenges,

social stigmatization, and disruption to personal and professional lives. Victims often face significant psychological burdens, including PTSD, depression, anxiety, and diminished self-worth, which can severely affect their quality of life. Socially, the stigma associated with sexual violence frequently isolates survivors, creating barriers to support and healing and contributing to feelings of shame and self-blame. Moreover, cultural and institutional responses to sexual violence often fail to provide adequate support, leaving victims to navigate complex and hostile systems that can exacerbate their trauma.

The findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive support systems and policies that prioritize victim-centered approaches, focusing on mental health support, destigmatization, and social reintegration. Education and community engagement are essential to foster empathetic understanding and dismantle harmful stereotypes associated with sexual violence. This review highlights the critical role of trauma-informed care and the importance of societal and institutional changes to prevent retraumatization, facilitate healing, and promote resilience. Further research is encouraged to develop and assess interventions aimed at mitigating these social and psychological impacts, ultimately leading to a more supportive and inclusive environment for survivors.

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### **Authors Contribution**

ZZ Drafting a concept and Writing and Improving, NRD improving the quality of the manuscript.

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