

Incidence and Dynamism of Sexual Harassment in South Asian Students

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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment has become social evil in the modern era throughout the world. It is continuously raised with the passage of time among university students and teachers. Especially female students are facing such kinds of negative activities at the workplace. Some female students create an attraction for male students at higher educational sector in Pakistan because it is natural phenomenon because it is true that the esthetic sense exists in the nature of female. It is noted that sexual harassment has become a common issue in every field of life. Especially from the social and cultural aspects it has become a dilemma of our society. It is also found in educational institutions. It is against the dignity of humanity and especially for family ownership. The female students cannot take the report because they do not want to be mistrusted in front of their guardians.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the feelings and responses of harassed students on facing sexual harassment on the university premises. Empirical data were collected from 260 students (144 male and 116 female) of 12 departments of University of the Punjab, Pakistan. A stratified random sampling technique was used to collect the data. A questionnaire of 53 items was developed and tested. All the questions were close ended, based on five point Likert scale (from strongly agreed to strongly disagreed). The reliability of the questionnaire was 0.83.

Findings of this paper show that seldom complaints were reported on sexual harassment faced by the students in the university. They reported that the male students code such kinds of negative and sexual comments and use vulgar language towards female students. A great care is to be taken for this concern on large scale. It is recommended that awareness sessions should be conducted for the students and the faculty and trainings should be provided. Along with formal policies, the informal culture of the higher education institute should facilitate the victims in preventing and seeking justice.

Key Words: Sexual Harassment, University, students, trends in harassment reporting, Pakistan

Introduction

In the age of developed world, although the sexual harassment has seen in the work place yet it is not studied well for last two decades. (Thomas and Kitzinger, 1994). Gutek and Dunwoody (1987) investigated the perception of the people towards sexual harassment. The result of this study shows that the females feel hesitation and resistance from their parents and teachers about reporting sexual harassment (Reilly *et al.*, 1982); There are rare chances of a small number of students affected by the sexual harassment but do not want to complain due to the disgrace (Adams *et al.*, 1983; Konrad & Gutek, 1986). It is more about the effects

of the behavior, rather than the intention behind it that determine the occurrence of sexual harassment.

Unfortunately, it is national delima in Pakistan according to the cultural context. A large number of women cannot highlight such kinds of negative activities like sexual harassment because they do not find the positive response in front of their family members as well as their teachers properly. They consider that they are accused. This is particularly a possibility for women who undertake paid employment in a mix-gender environment (Syed and Ali, 2013). Secondly, women may find it difficult to report the cases (Meek and Lynch, 1983), the women do not create resistance and seldom highlight the such kinds of issues in front of their peers and the committee also because they have no any reference among the committee members who can provide favour for them.

Thirdly, the professional women have become brave to raise the right of women against sexual harassment but they could not get the fruitful outcome towards the implementations. For example, two years ago, the termination of the services of a professor in University of the Punjab, Lahore, who reportedly kept a bedroom next to his office on university premises, was initially applauded. However, recently, despite the university's resistance, he has returned to the university due to political pressure. As a member of the enquiry committee which provided evidence against the habitual harasser, I acknowledge that the wider culture of corruption in Pakistan perpetuates the organizational cultures, making it difficult for cases against sexual harassment to yield the required results.

Literature Review

The most important factor determining judgment of sexual harassment is the behavior involved. Sexually explicit behavior and behavior involving threats or warning is more likely to be judged as sexual harassment as compared to other less-threatening behavior (Guteket *al.*, 1980; Reilly *et al.*, 1982). Touching is more likely to be rated as sexual harassment as opposed to comments, catcalls or gestures (Guteket *al.*, 1982; Reilly *et al.*, 1982; Dunwoody *et al.*, 1985). Most of the studies report that usually the younger ones experience more harassment as compared to the older counterparts (Coles, 1986; Gutek, 1985).

Until 2010, harassment at work was not even recognised as a punishable offence in Pakistan. Since there was no relevant legal system in place to report cases of harassment, statistical data was scarce (Abbas, 2009), and even when available, the cases were considered underreported or unreported due to shame and dishonour of the family (Ahmed, 2014). A significant landmark in improving women's situation in Pakistan was on 9th March, 2010 sign the anti- sexual harassment, called Protection Against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act of 2010. Unfortunately, many women, as well as men, are not even aware of any organizational laws against sexual harassment (Asgharet *al.*, 2009). According to a study, as much as 68 percent of women in Pakistan have been victims of sexual harassment. Within the workplace, the figure is nearly 80 per cent (Ali, 2013).

Sexual Harassment in the respectable profession of Teaching

In Pakistan, teaching and health sector are considered the most socially- suitable profession for women (Mirza, 1999; Ali, 2013; Umer and Rehman, 2013) even when the jobs in this sector are not very well-paid and are usually in the public sector where the general culture is that of bureaucracy, favoritism, redtape with little accountability (Islam, 2004). The respect in teaching profession comes from social and symbolic capital and generally, teaching is considered an ideal profession for women in Pakistan.

The level of social respect associated with teaching is despite the evidence of sexual harassment in this profession. First year after the passing of Anti-Harassment Law, 1000 cases were filed from all over the country, including academic institutions. As the law is applicable to academic institutions as well, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan demanded all universities to comply with the Anti-Harassment Law in 2011. The guidelines issued by HEC provided examples of the unspeakable sexual harassment, some of the actual reported cases are provided here:

- “Sexual gratification from graduate students (PhD, MPhil, Masters) by their supervisors”
- “Sexual epithets, jokes, written or oral references to sexual conduct, gossip regarding one's sex life”
- “Asking female students to visit personal offices of their supervisors/authorities in-charge after office hours to discuss their grades and assignments”
- “Unwelcome staring, whistling, brushing against the body, sexual gestures, or suggestive or insulting comments”
- “Inquiries into one's sexual experiences”
- “Male teacher asked the female student, if you want "A grade, you need to take your final exam at my home”

(HEC, 2011, pages.4- 6)

As Sadruddinn (2014) insists, sexual harassment genuinely impacts working women in Pakistan, and although it is a routine practice, however, it is more prevalent in the private sector compared to the public sector. This is because the structures and processes of private institutions are such that jobs are insecure, and women who are the sole bread earners of the family suffer harassment and exploitation in exchange of job (Sadruddinn, 2014). Women become helpless victims of harassment and cannot lodge complaints or file a case against their male colleagues or male management (Mahmood *et al.*, 2011).

Research Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of this study was to examine student's experiences of sexual harassment in the academic sector of Pakistan. This study was a multi-level examination of sexual harassment as experienced by oppressed male and female students.

Research Design

Generally research design is dependent upon the nature and objectives of the research study (Morrison, 2007). Data may be collected through different ways i.e. through questionnaires or by interviews (Fogelman & Comber, 2007). Interviews may be conducted to get the subjective opinions about the real life experiences of the participants. Therefore, this study comes from pragmatic paradigm that emphasizes individuals and their experiences, to understand their unique experiences in the form of questionnaire (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). The population of study was all the post graduate students enrolled in University of the Punjab, Lahore. After specifying the population according to the time and resources the researcher draws a sampling frame. Researcher selected 260 students of Punjab University, Lahore campus including females and males. In which 144 were male and 116 female students. A stratified random sampling technique is used to draw a sample. The sample is drawn from a population (Punjab University) subgroups were drawn as different departments. A random selection was made for sampling. These departments were selected randomly from the subgroups of different departments of University of Punjab.

- Punjab University Law college
- Department of Physics
- Department of Botany
- Department of statistical studies
- Department of Political Sciences
- Department of Philosophy
- Department of Mathematics
- Department of Economics
- Institute of Education & Research
- Institute of communication studies
- Institute of Chemical Engineering & Technology
- Hailey college of commerce

The instrument used for this study was developed by Noreen, (2009). The instrument was a questionnaire that is modified and retested again at post graduate level, consisted on 53 items. The questionnaire was well prepared having close ended options. The opinion of expert was taken in respect of validation of questionnaire before finalizing it. The questionnaire deals with the topic of sexual harassment in Punjab University. The main themes of questionnaire were perception of students regarding sexual harassment, prevalence of sexual

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harassment in Punjab University, Lahore. Reporting trends and awareness regarding the laws and policy guidelines by HEC and Government of Pakistan.

Keeping in mind the background presented earlier in introduction section, the data was collected for perception, prevalence and reporting trends of sexual harassment in Punjab University after modifying the questionnaire the researcher went to the field for data collection.

Findings and Recommendations

The study shows a significant number of respondents take sexual harassment as a problem faced by the students of University of the Punjab. There is difference between male and female perspective towards behavioral manifestation of sexual harassment. There are some types which proved controversial. Some of respondents think them as sexual harassment and other don't, like referring to an adult a hunk and staring at someone. Most of respondents considered that sexual harassment is a problem to be faced by the students of University of the Punjab and female students are more at the risk of sexual harassment

A few number of respondents said that they and their friend, class-fellows or peers have faced sexual harassment in University of the Punjab. The harasser is from students and faculty member.

There are different forms of sexual harassment which are prevalent in Punjab University. Verbal and physical type of harassment is more prevalent in University of Punjab. Such type of harassment students have to face more frequently.

The harassment forms which are more commonly used to harass female students are staring, sexual comments and vulgar language are also used to address. Most of respondents felt angry, degraded and diffident and their motivation level decreases.

A majority of female respondents said that they just ignore harass, and their reaction to harassment was to avoid that person.

A very small number of respondents registered the complaint, most of the respondents said that the process of complaint was secret and some of them said that a change was noticed in the attitude of the harasser after complaint. A majority of the respondents said that their family and friends were supportive on registering complaint.

A majority of respondents said that they register a complaint against harasser, most of female respondents disagree with the system, while male respondents said that they were satisfied with the policy guidelines and this was useful for them.

Majority of respondents said that the policy statement was as good as it should be. Majority of respondents said that the workplace harassment act 2010 could help to deal with the harassment issues in Punjab University.

Recommendations

- The laws are available against sexual harassment but awareness level among the people is very low. The whole information regarding laws as well as process of registering a complaint should be pasted at notice boards every year when new students get admit in university. When the new faculty members are appointed they should be educated through seminar regarding the laws.
- There should be strict punishment for harassment regardless of his/her post and rank.
- The reporting trends are very low. The results show that female are more likely to keep quiet because of cultural patterns. Men and especially women should be vocal about harassment issues so that people around don't dare to harass them.
- No one should appear vulnerable or weak enough to become an easy victim of harassment.
- Topics like sexual harassment are never discussed openly. People avoid discussing these issues openly. These trends need to change. These sensitive issues should be discussed in staff meetings as well as with students. So, the problem can come to light and should take step to minimize the issue in learning environment.
- University students should be taught the morality and ethics and Islamic values and teachers should shed light on the issue in Islamic context.
- University should conduct workshop and create awareness regarding laws and policy of sexual harassment and encourage the students to report harassment cases.

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