

Sexual Harassment at Workplaces: Problems and Solutions in a case study of Lahore

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to investigate harassment faced by women at workplaces. The research methodology used for this study is qualitative, and semi-structured interviews have been conducted to collect primary data. A population size of one-hundred working women at public and private institutions of Lahore has been taken. Twenty working women were interviewed and themes and sub-themes were derived from the collected data. The results revealed that harassment commonly occurs in workplaces. It includes abuse, non-consensual physical contact, threats, homophobic comments, ogling, and attempts at seduction, gender-based harassment, sexual coercion, and sexual imposition. It not only impacts the psychological condition of working women but also impacts their productivity. Those women who are the only breadwinners of their families are unwilling to take any action against the culprits so as not to lose their jobs; as a result, perpetrators exploit them. Most respondents contacted were aware of women's rights, but not familiar with the Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2010. The study identified several issues related to harassment and recommended significant initiatives to train women against harassment.

Keywords: Harassment, Workplaces, Lahore, Problems, Solutions

Introduction

Women are the soul of a nation. At the global level, women are viewed as harbingers of development, and their abilities and input are highly valued. It is considered that women participation in socio-economic and political life is just as important as of male citizens. Women's involvement in these affairs is conducive, even essential for a country's development (Ireson, 2018). To accomplish this goal, a supportive and secure workplace must be established where women may fully realise their potential for personal and career advancement in a secure environment.

The constitution of Pakistan has guaranteed fundamental rights to all citizens regardless of gender. Women have been granted several rights in the constitution. But for effective implementation, it is necessary to raise awareness, among the public, regarding laws in effect. Hence, women must be made aware of all the available protective mechanisms if they are to live with dignity, be treated with respect, and be able to exercise their constitutionally protected human rights as equal citizens (Wilson, Saeed & Rahman, 2020). Unfortunately, there are a few perpetrators who support violence and maltreatment against women. It halts the professional, socio-economic, and political development of women. Unfortunately, harassment, a morally repugnant act, is frequently observed at organizations. It halts the growth of a person in professional life. It is difficult to accept, yet is the reality for many women in Pakistan.

Harassment nurtures an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment. It may be practiced by using words, gestures, or other acts intended to irritate, abuse, demean, intimidate, humiliate, or disgrace another person (Otto, 1997). The United Nations defines harassment as, "Any improper or unpleasant behaviour that could be expected to offend another person or be viewed as humiliating to him/her (Maina, 2018).

Online Cambridge dictionary defines harassment as "illegal behavior towards a person that causes mental or emotional suffering, which includes repeated unwanted contacts without a reasonable purpose, insults, threats, touching, or offence language". Sexual harassment is one of the most prevalent forms of harassment and is described as any unethical behaviour that a woman deems threatening or hurtful. But unfortunately, several professions and sectors are plagued by this unwelcomed behaviour. It includes unethical acts for getting attention, and verbal, and non-verbal abuse.

We cannot deny the strength of empowered women, and when sexual harassment occurs at the workplace, several factors make them hesitant to report the offenders, including fear of losing their job and embarrassment or shame about being harassed. According to a European study, up to 50% of female workers in European Union countries have experienced sexual harassment at workplaces, at least once in their life. Regrettably, there is little documentation of sexual harassment at workplaces in Asian nations, yet the prevalence of the harassment can be determined by examining the steps taken by several Asian nations to institutionalize the means of combating this unethical behaviour. For instance, several countries have institutionalized the Anti-Harassment acts, for example, Pakistan, Philippines, and Thailand. These acts indicate a zero-tolerance policy against sexual harassment at workplaces. Thailand updated its labour laws in 1998 to add punishments for workplace sexual assault (McCann, 2005). Malaysia and other Asian nations established several laws to give women a secure environment in workplaces. In Pakistan, there were 24038 known incidents of violence against women between 2008 and 2010, and 531 of those involved workplace harassment (Wu, 2018). In addition, a few incidents of sexual harassment at work were and

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still are reported in the newspapers and on television, revealing how unsafe the workplace is for women in Pakistan. The Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Bill was passed by the government in 2010 to give working women a safe and secure environment (Sarpotdar, 2013). It provided a thorough framework for reporting and handling workplace harassment. Governmental, private, and non-governmental organizations are all required to endorse and set the Code of Conduct under this Harassment Act. The minimal standards for how employees, management, and business owners are expected to behave in the workplace are outlined in this Code. This act had the potential to improve the working conditions for women. Though it was a great initiative, unfortunately, it remained a mere piece of paper.

Pakistan has also ratified international agreements and several documents to support women's rights on all forums however there is a lack of implementation in every sector. Hence, sexual harassment is prevalent at several workplaces in Pakistan. The researcher has found that sexual harassment is occurring at several public and private organizations in Lahore. This problem has been highlighted and possible solutions have been given.

Research Objectives

- To evaluate the difficulties faced by women at workplaces in regard to harassment.
- To assess the various forms of harassment at workplaces experienced by women.
- To comprehend the level of knowledge or awareness that women have about their rights
- To analyze the contribution of women in raising their voice against harassment
- To find that what kind of harassment women face at workplaces in Lahore
- To analyze whether the working women of Lahore are aware of the laws passed by the government of Pakistan or not.

Research Questions

- Does sexual harassment occur in Pakistan at workplaces?
- What difficulties do women face at their workplaces?
- How does sexual harassment affect women at work?
- How many working women know about their rights?
- How many working women know about "Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2010)"?
- Do women raise their voice against harassment?
- Are women trained to tackle such situations?

Research Design

The phenomenological design has been used to conduct this research. The primary goal of phenomenological research is to gain an understanding of a particular issue by seeing it through the perspective of those who have experienced it first-hand.

Sampling

Five public and five private institutions have been selected. 100 working women were selected as population size. A sample of twenty working women was taken and semi-structured interviews were conducted. A purposive sampling technique has been used and semi-structured interviews were conducted. The targeted population ranged in age from 23 to 45. Keeping in view research ethics, the names of the organizations and the persons have been concealed as the topic under study is considered a sensitive issue.

Analysis

Several rights have been granted to women through the constitution of 1973. Unfortunately, the practical implementation of the provision of these rights and security seems weak. Workplace harassment is a prevalent, yet socially stigmatised issue in Pakistan that encourages an unhealthy working environment.

The Protection against Harassment for Women at the Workplace (PHWW) Act 2010, established by the parliament of Pakistan in 2010, makes it unlawful to make any sound, present an object, utter a statement, or seek sexual favours that may be construed as Harassment. The Act includes sanctions like removal and dismissal from service, forced retirement, and demotion. This Act addresses three crucial aspects of workplace safety.

First, a code of conduct must be included by employers in their management policies as per the Sexual Harassment law. Second, the law mandates that a three-person inquiry committee should be created inside an organization to handle Sexual Harassment complaints. In cases where the complainant is not satisfactorily addressed with the committee's decision, the employers must offer an appeal process, such as an ombudsman, to handle harassment-related complaints. But unfortunately, its implementation is very weak and most of the working women are not aware of this act.

Respondents for this research are working in banks, different corporations, government organizations, educational institutions, advertising agencies, and the media.

When asked if they were familiar with 'workplace harassment', all of the respondents (100%) said they were familiar with it which shows that working women in Pakistan (both in the public and private sectors) are aware of the term 'Harassment'. Most respondents, however, said that harassment reflects racial and gender discrimination. They believe that it irritates the victim and impacts him/her

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psychologically and sometimes results in psycho-somatic illnesses. They said that the organizations' norms and ethics include keeping a physical distance, yet the offenders do not pay heed to these critical ethical guidelines.

In South Asian countries, where women are largely excluded, marginalized, and considered unimportant in the decision-making process, gender inequality is a conspicuous issue. It is believed that one of the main causes of violence against women is this gender disparity. Unfortunately, in many Asian countries like Pakistan, society devalues women, and this unwelcoming attitude makes women feel insecure. In such a patriarchal society the cases of sexual harassment are numerous, yet women are less likely to report such crimes.

According to the respondents, harassment can take the form of sexual, mental, or emotional assault and is always intentional. At work, harassment is frequently encouraged by inappropriate gestures and words. All the respondents considered it upsetting and even threatening. They lament that harassment promotes an unhealthy environment by violating a person's dignity.

Among the respondents, one said:

Harassment is a type of abuse where someone is subjected to another person's inappropriate behaviour, and it negatively impacts their performance at work. Women are affected by it physically and mentally while they are performing their jobs.

Another respondent said.

Any unwanted sexual advances, domineering requests for sexual favours, other verbal or written communications, physical acts of a sexual nature, or sexually demeaning attitudes that interfere with work performance or create an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment are considered harassment.

A respondent disagreed with others and spoke.

You are the one who creates your environment. I work with males, but I am confident and aware of my boundaries, none of them has ever teased me. She said harassment is unlikely to occur at any workplace unless a girl shows her weakness to others. She further added that confident and bold girls are less harassed than shy and diffident girls. So, a woman should be bold, confident, and aware of the boundaries. She should never give a chance to her male colleagues and friends to mistreat her. She should be aware of her rights and how to avail them.

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Women experience a variety of forms of harassment at work. The respondents' list of the most frequent sexual harassment types includes the following: unsolicited invitations for dates/lunches/dinners, staring, touching, jokes and conversations; as well as bullying, verbal insult, intimidation, use of indecent body language, marginalisation; and sending of insensitive emails, messages, phone calls, and pornographic movies.

A respondent said:

I have been harassed by my colleague for several months. He used to make unwanted calls, and send me inappropriate messages, and emails. Initially, I ignored him, and then I blocked him on social media apps. But then he started sending me messages and calls. I warned him that I would report him, yet he never checked himself. Later, I resigned from that office and changed my phone number and email address etc

A respondent narrated an appalling incident

My boss usually asks that I stay up late to complete the office assignments. One day I was asked to wait till he called me to his cabin. Later, he tried to show me a pornographic film and then apologized that it was mistakenly opened. Then, he began rubbing his private part which signalled to me that he had bad intentions. I shouted in the office for help and ran away. Very few office staff were present at that time. Instead of quitting my job, I complained to the police, and he was penalized.

Another respondent said:

In the organization where I previously worked, the unit office manager was harassing the female employees while everyone remained silent and did nothing. I also preferred to quit that job with the fear of being harassed one day.

When asked if they or any of their coworkers had ever experienced harassment, most respondents said they had indeed experienced harassment. However, some of the respondents did not disclose whether they had been harassed.

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Another respondent said:

At my job, most male senior executives used to make racial remarks and tease female employees about their dress code.

A respondent shared the experience of her colleague:

When I was working in the previous organization, I had a Christian colleague. Some of our colleagues used to argue and debate with her on her religious beliefs. They were rigid, fundamentalist persons who always made fun of her. Some of them tried to force her to become Muslim and aware that if she should not accept Islam she would go to hell. Such remarks made her feel insulted and ultimately, she left her job.

Such remarks are included in religious harassment and they need to be addressed by the affected organizations.

A respondent said:

Sexual Harassment is the least discussed issue in Pakistan. Every woman knows about it and several experience it. But they don't speak about it. Those living in Pakistani society consider such issues taboo. A general perception persists that it's the nature of males that they shall harass females, but she must care for herself and be defensive. Snakes habitually bite, it is the responsibility of humans to take care of and defend themselves. But this perception needs to change. Women should be empowered to speak for their rights. In case they ever experience harassment, they should respond to the perpetrator in such a way that they would never dare to harass anyone again. Women should be encouraged to speak out against all forms of exploitation, abuse, and harassment; and to use the country's protection mechanisms fully. It is important that women should be aware of these processes and fully comprehend how to use them.

A disturbing aspect of racial harassment was mentioned by one of the respondents:

I experienced racial discrimination. One of my supervisors tried to label me as black. I wanted to slap him, but I did not because it would have made the situation worse. I always ignored him, but simply ignoring him did not work for me. One day I shouted at him to stop taunting me for my looks. I believe that looks have nothing to do with work. Except that it has a deep harmful psychological impact when one is

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judged for one's colour or creed instead of one's potential and abilities.

One respondent said:

One of my friends who work in the industrial sector constantly experiences harassment. When she sits with male colleagues, many of them try to body shame her.

A respondent shared her friend's experience, saying:

A few years ago, my friend's supervisor tried to grab her, but when he realized she wasn't yielding, he fired her saying that her performance wasn't satisfactory.

Seniors and bosses often commit sexual harassment, by abusing their position of authority, against female employees that are weak or hold a junior position. They do this by either making lucrative offers to, or threatening their junior staff.

According to Willness, Steel, and Lee's 2007 study, sexual harassment frequently has a negative impact on employees' ability to execute their tasks. In this context, one of the respondents described a painful incident her friend went through, which demonstrated the link between mental illness and professional sexual harassment:

My friend got ill in office; she was in the restroom. The supervisor tried to harass her by sitting next to her. Suddenly, he grabbed her by the neck and tried to touch her private parts. She pushed him and slapped him. Later, she resigned from office and did not report the harasser. Because she thought that people around her would blame her. The family would not believe that she is innocent; rather they would ask her to quit her job and never work again. The fear of losing the trust of her family, combined with peer-pressure never allowed her to tell the truth and she suffered from depression for several months.

Researchers found that female employees continue to experience harassment despite the several protection laws passed in Pakistan. Hence, it has a negative impact on workplace performance. When asked what strategies they use to deal with the situation, most respondents said that complaining or ignoring is the best solution.

Many of the respondents thought that taking legal action against the offender would result in blackmailing and threats from the offender, worsening the situation for the victim.

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Another respondent shared the experience of being harassed:

“She said that her colleague harassed her continuously for a week. Firstly, she ignored him, and then she asked him to stop smiling and staring at her. But he did not stop. Finally, she reported him and complained to the manager. He fired both to secure the repute of his institute.”

Three levels of concerns with Sexual Harassment usually affect Pakistani women. First, women try to hide Sexual harassment acts out of the fear. Second, there is a lack of redress at the organizational and governmental levels. Thirdly, they experience victimization after reporting the issue.

When a crime or any objectionable act remains unreported, it always encourages the offender to offend again. A very small number of the women shared their daring stories about how they tackled such situations.

One of the respondents said:

When this happened to me, I was first shocked but instead of remaining silent, I spoke to some of my trustworthy colleagues. They suggested that I keep proof. I somehow managed to cleverly record the offender's voice. I submitted that audio to the head of the department. First, he denied his fault but later he had to admit it when his audios were played in front of him. Then he was fired from the job.

Most women, according to the respondents, are reluctant to discuss harassment instances with others, especially the head of the organization. This is due to a number of reasons. Most of them are concerned about social pressures, job security, and fear of family, threats, and victimization.

A respondent said that,

In Pakistan, women do not have the freedom to stand up for themselves. Many women choose to remain silent and refrain from protesting because they are afraid, and because they believe that no one would listen to them.

A respondent shared her experience:

I was working in a university as a visiting faculty member. I used to take an auto-rickshaw to travel from university to home. Sometimes one of my colleagues, who also happened to be a visiting faculty professor, travelled with me. Being colleagues, we were respectful towards each other. But one day he held my hand in the auto-rickshaw while we were going home. I tried to stop him, but he continued misbehaving because he had bad intentions. I slapped him for his

disrespectful conduct, shouted at him and asked the auto driver to stop the auto-rickshaw and drop him on that road. I remained silent on this issue in university. Later, he started sending me hateful messages and threats which continued for months. Then I decided to speak up. I warned him that I would report him to the university's authorities but he paid no heed. The threats showed that he was very vengeful over the slap and wanted to avenge his ego. I finally reported him to the university's authorities. The head of my department took strict action against this harassment. Finally the harasser was expelled from the university.

She continued saying that such actions should be immediately reported. Otherwise, the offender would continue harassing other people:

I see that women never raise their voices in such situations. There may be several factors for not speaking about their protection. For instance, financial issues, shyness, the fear of losing a job, the fear of being mocked by others, the fear of being threatened, and many other reasons. Personally, I believe that women should speak up and stand against any abuser, before the situation gets out of hand. A woman should be strong enough to tackle such situations.

She added that some women with the fear of becoming office gossip don't report the harassment, even if it is physical:

As we live in a patriarchal society, most women do not have rights as equal to those that men have. I believe that women should speak for their rights and harassment should never be tolerated. I always educate my subordinates about the importance of being aware of harassment and how to tackle the issue."

Respondents were asked what they had done against harassment so far. Most of them replied that they had never exerted any effort against harassment. Few respondents said they conducted workshops, seminars, or training sessions to empower women with the knowledge of this grave issue and the proper ways to respond to harassment. One of the respondents also mentioned that they asked the heads of the institutions to develop anti-harassment policies. Other responses include complaining to the management, being direct and blunt, getting counselling services, learning to say no, not letting male employees come into one's office unnecessarily, punishing by humiliation, avoiding sitting for long periods of time, and bringing awareness through the media. The wisest course of action, rather than simply zipping lips, is to act boldly after gaining the trust of other employees. Sexual harassment will continue to be prevalent in Pakistani

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society until women are backed up by training and confidence to speak out for themselves.

Some types of the verbal and non-verbal harassments identified in the organizations in Lahore are as follows:

- **Sexual Harassment:** Offensive jokes, seductive expressions, sexual comments, inappropriate touch, etc.
- **Religious Harassment:** Forceful conversion of beliefs, making negative and funny remarks over anyone's religion, etc.
- **Racial Harassment:** Displaying bigotry or other derogatory content, intimidation based on race, insulting jokes, racial prejudice, etc.
- **Gender Harassment:** Ridiculing anyone on the basis of his/her gender. Transgender have been prominent victims of this kind of harassment.
- **Physical Harassment:** Physically attacking, forceful cuddling, pushing, kissing, grabbing, touching and hitting etc.

Sexual harassment and other forms of harassment can have long-lasting harmful effects. Some of the effects of harassment have been identified by the researchers.

- Toxic work environment
- Change in career goals
- Loss of job
- Demotion
- Drop in work performance
- Decreased job satisfaction
- Blackmailing
- Physical Violence
- Weight fluctuation
- Depression, anger, fear, frustration
- Panic reactions, isolation, and phobias
- The psychological impact, shame, guilt, self-blame

Sexual harassment is a reality that not only violates women's fundamental rights but also prevents them from participating fully and effectively in society to the best of their abilities.

Some themes have been derived by the researchers from the interviews to tackle harassment:

- Complain to the highest official
- Ignore the harasser
- Slap the harasser
- Shout loud to call people for help
- Run away from the scene
- Report the harassment immediately
- Resignation from that workplace
- Kick the person on his sensitive part
- Dialogue with the management

When asked about the awareness of women's rights, the respondents generally voiced their opinions as follows:

- Women have equal rights as men.
- Women have the right to be treated fairly in financial spheres.
- Women have a right to work.
- Women have a right to security.
- Women have a right to protest.
- Women have a right to equal opportunities.
- Women have a right to speak against violence.
- Women have a right to have a safe environment for work.

It shows that the women were aware of their rights, but they continue to experience sexual harassment at work. In the Pakistani context, just 4 of the respondents said that they were aware of the Harassment Act, 2010 indicating that even though the Act has been passed, not all women are aware of it. The fact that not all women are aware of the Act may be the reason that awareness has not been disseminated among women.

Additionally, when a small number of cases are reported by society's confident women, they remain ignored for a long time. It demonstrates that the Women's Right Bill is merely a document, since it has not been implemented in its true essence.

Results

Pakistani women have been subjected to oppressive and rigid social, cultural, religious, familial, and tribal norms since the country's independence. The social structure of society places men at the top of the hierarchy to dominate and suppress women in both the public and private sectors; therefore, the women face discrimination, and subsequently struggle with their visibility in society. In Pakistan, discrimination in the form of violence against women has penetrated all socioeconomic classes and age groups, thus making this a countrywide issue. Sexual harassment at workplace is reportedly the most common type of gender-based violence encountered by working women in Pakistan. Considering that one of the main objectives of the national policy aims at empowering women, the government has made great efforts to mitigate the calamities that befall women in Pakistan, whether at workplace or at home. Although numerous laws have been passed at the national level in this regard - the most significant of them being the "Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010" - the implementation of these laws is where the government falls short. It is absolutely essential for every woman to be aware of her rights and legal standing in society. In fact, there is a dire need to empower women in every sector. They should be strong and confident enough to stand for their rights and security. Some of the results found in this study are as follows:

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- ✓ Workplace harassment is defined as offensive or unwanted behavior, remarks, or acts by a person at a company, organization, or any place of work. Such behaviour may include insult, intimidation, humiliation, or degradation. In Pakistan, harassment is commonly practiced, and has had a severe impact on working women's ability to work efficiently. There are several types of workplace harassment including religious/sectarian harassment in which the victim undergoes mental pressure to leave his/her religion, and embrace the offender's religion instead. This may also be done by constantly passing disrespectful remarks about someone's religion.
- ✓ There are several workplace well-being factors. For example, having a sense of security and belongingness to provide sufficient motivation to work at the organization for a long term. Harassment threatens these factors that help a person develop a sense of attachment to his workplace. Not only does it negatively affect mental health, motivational level and working potential of the employees, but also puts in jeopardy their job tenure.
- ✓ Most of the working women are aware of their rights, and they are familiar with the term 'Harassment'.
- ✓ Demeaning behaviour and verbal use were found to be the most common types of harassment at both public and private sector organizations.
- ✓ Some other forms of harassment prevalent in institutions were mental torture, hate speech, ogling, passing homophobic comments and threats. There is a connection between workplace harassment and indications of one's own wellbeing, such as stress, mental health, and insecurities.
- ✓ Sometimes, a boss or senior staff member may take advantage of their position and harass junior female employees, which then most likely remain unreported because women fear losing their jobs.
- ✓ Women do not report such cases due to the fear of the culprits. Many of them believe that taking legal action would elicit threats and blackmailing from the offender, which will exacerbate the situation for the victim. Families also refrain from speaking up out of fear of being stigmatised for life.
- ✓ Several respondents were aware of women rights, but they were not aware of the Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2010.
- ✓ Most working women, especially those who are the breadwinners for their families, are unwilling to take any action against this violence, and instead choose to quietly endure the harassment; as a result, abusers take advantage of women.
- ✓ No organization under study is providing any training to the female workers on how to tackle sexual harassment.

- ✓ People find it easier to ignore the problem than work to solve it because they lack awareness.

Remedies and Conclusion

The study recommends pertinent initiatives to examine disturbing factors at the workplace, and cognize women. The most effective methods to stop sexual harassment are prevention, training, and education. Women should be educated regarding their social, economic and political rights. For example, they should have knowledge of the laws on sexual harassment at workplace. Women should be aware of emergency contact numbers, and the NGOs that have been helping the victims of sexual harassment, as well as providing legal assistance in such cases, should be made accessible to women. It should be ensured that police officers aptly facilitate women, and be more approachable when women register complaints, and even guide them during the process, if necessary. All the public and private organizations should institutionalize the Protection Against Sexual Harassment Act, 2010, and see to it that it is implemented, so that women's rights may be safeguarded.

Implications

This research is restricted to the female employees in public and private organizations in Lahore, only. Further research should be conducted across the country, with a greater population size, to better comprehend the issue of sexual harassment at workplace, so that effective solutions may be devised. Sexual harassment against men often goes unnoticed, which is why a thorough study is required to establish its credibility in society; only when the problem is acknowledged can it be unraveled and thus, resolved.

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