

Sexual Harassment in Pakistani Academia: Sociocultural Construction of Experience

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Abstract

Sexual harassment (SH) is a widespread issue across the globe and an everyday crisis for working women. This paper draws on fourteen semi-structured interviews with heads of departments, deans, and directors of institutions/schools in higher education institutions (HEIs) to gain insights into the sociocultural contextualization of narratives to gender-based violence and harassment. The analysis suggests that the most significant explanation of SH in HEIs is the acceptance of its inevitability in public spaces and workplaces, including HEIs, though often accompanied by assertions of higher prevalence in other departments or institutions. Women, often positioned as gatekeepers of men's sexual advances, frequently endure victim-blaming. Furthermore, the persistence of SH in HEIs is attributed to the ineffective implementation and utilization of harassment laws.

Keywords

sexual harassment, academia, higher education institutions, sociocultural construction

Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) can be defined as attitudes or behaviors that cause harm, intimidate, or undermine individuals due to their (perceived) gender or sexuality and is rooted in inequitable societal norms regarding gender and sexuality (Anitha & Lewis, 2018). There is growing consensus that most victims/survivors are women and girls, while most perpetrators are men (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; O'Connor et al., 2021). This does not imply that these roles are never reversed, but it is necessary to recognize the link between GBV and the gendered norms, behaviors, or roles associated with being a woman, which often lead to disadvantages in workplaces, personal spheres, and wider society (Osuna-Rodríguez et al., 2020).

Sexual harassment (SH) is a form of GBV, encompassing a continuum of behaviors including groping, staring, leering, unwelcome touching, unwanted sexual attention, bullying, sexist jargon, suggestive comments or jokes, unwanted invitations, intrusive questions, deliberately brushing against a person, displaying sexually explicit images in the workplace, emailing or texting pornography or offensive jokes, and communicating or showing sexually explicit content through social media, text, or in person, as well as rape and sexual assault (Anitha et al., 2021; Equal Employment Opportunities Commission, 2014; SWG GRI, 2020). The concept of GBV is used in this paper to understand gender harassment, SH, sexual assault, and other forms of GBV (Latcheva, 2017) in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan.

SH is widely prevalent globally and represents an everyday crisis that potentially affects every working woman (O'Connor et al., 2021; Okechukwu et al., 2014; Popovich & Warren,

2010). It is estimated that increased participation of women in the labour force has led to higher instances of SH in recent times (ILO, 2017). Reports suggest that 30%–50% of women in the European Union (EU), 50% in the United Kingdom, and 25% in the United States endure SH in workplaces, including academia (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). SH is also widely prevalent in South Asian countries. A survey in India reported that 66% of women experience SH in public spaces (UN Women, 2010), while an online survey in Nepal indicated that 98% of women face SH. Similarly, a survey in Pakistan confirmed that one in three women has faced SH in public spaces (World Bank, 2019).

Multiple studies also suggest that SH is prevalent in workplaces in Pakistan (Ali & Siddiqi, 2019; Bhatti & Ali, 2022; Hadi, 2018; Khan, 2020) and specifically in HEIs (Bhatti & Ali, 2022; Khokhar, 2018; Thakur et al., 2019; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2016a, 2016b).

Although the gendered construction of women's experiences of violence, as well as the prevalence and impact of sexual violence in academia, has been the focus of a growing body of global scholarship (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Shaffer et al., 2018), there is much less exploration of the sociocultural construction of SH in HEIs, particularly in the Pakistani context

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(Hadi, 2018). Everyday forms of sexual violence, such as microaggressions (Sue, 2010), nonconsensual sexual attention, derogatory remarks, suggestive comments, inappropriate gestures, intimidation (online/offline), bullying, and sexual assault, are widespread experiences for women and girls in various contexts in Pakistan (World Bank, 2019), including HEIs (Yousaf & Schmiede, 2016a, 2016b).

Drawing on the experiences of women academics (victims/survivors) and men academics (harassers/perpetrators), this article seeks to understand within broader sociocultural contexts and structural conditions shaping the women and men academics' personal and social constructions of experiences in HEIs in Pakistan.

SH in HEIs

GBV and harassment are widespread in workplaces and HEIs globally. Despite gender equality campaigns and pressures on HEIs to maximize their talent pools, women continue to face discrimination and experience GBV worldwide (Cook & Glass, 2014; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Morley et al., 2017; Taylor-Abdulai et al., 2014). A growing body of research highlights that women wage earners across the globe often tolerate SH as part of their jobs (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Chaudhuri, 2010; Dey, 2013; Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1993; McDonald, 2012; McDonald et al., 2015; Morgan, 2000, 2001; Niaz, 2003; Osuna-Rodríguez et al., 2020).

Multiple studies from the United Kingdom, the United States, the European Union, and Australia confirm the high prevalence of SH and violence in HEIs, with many students reporting such experiences in recent years (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Henning et al., 2017). Similarly, the experiences of women staff in HEIs are well documented, although the prevalence among staff tends to be slightly lower than among students (Longman, 2018). A recent report by the University and College Union (UCU) in 2021, based on a large sample from the United Kingdom, revealed that 39% of participants had directly experienced sexual violence, witnessed it, or acted as a confidant(e) to someone who experienced it. Marginalized groups such as staff on nonpermanent contracts, individuals with disabilities, and trans and nonbinary staff members were found to be at a higher risk of experiencing direct sexual violence.

Simultaneously, studies from the United States, which included detailed surveys on experiences of SH and the impact on marginalized groups, reported higher incidences of SH (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; McDonald, 2012). Although nine out of ten countries have laws against SH in workplaces globally, nearly six out of 10 countries lack adequate legislation addressing SH in HEIs and schools (Tavares & Wodon, 2018). For decades, women's movements worldwide have highlighted issues of women's physical vulnerability and their intersection with other forms of repression. Despite these efforts, GBV and the SH of women (as well as men and nonbinary persons) in workplaces remain pervasive and

normalized across all levels of HEIs, affecting both students and staff (UCU, 2021).

SH at Work in Pakistan: Prevalence Within Academia

Concurrently, SH and violence are widely prevalent in workplaces in Pakistan (Ali & Rukhsana, 2019; Imtiaz & Kamal, 2021; Khan, 2020; Salman et al., 2016). Research focused on HEIs in Pakistan has also highlighted the prevalence of these issues within academia (Bhatti & Ali, 2022; Hadi, 2018; Yousaf, 2018). Studies on SH in HEIs in Pakistan have primarily focused on women students and teachers (Agha & Magsi, 2017). The Dukhtar Foundation, a non-governmental organization, launched a telephone helpline to report workplace SH. According to their data, 82% of complaints were from female university students who reported harassment by teachers (Yousafzai, 2020).

Limited studies addressing the experiences of women academics and staff indicate that they are frequently harassed by both senior and junior men colleagues (Bhatti & Ali, 2022; Khan & Ahmed, 2016; Yousaf, 2018; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2016a, 2016b). Sex discrimination in the workplace is prohibited under Pakistan's *Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010*. The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC) has made it mandatory for all HEIs to implement this law. However, compliance has been inconsistent across universities. Despite HEC's efforts to revise and strengthen the harassment policy, effective from July 1, 2020, the implementation remains incomplete. The HEC reported that only 85 universities have confirmed the policy's implementation, while 125 universities have yet to update the HEC on its status. Nevertheless, the harassment policy mandates that all HEIs in the country implement the policy, and noncompliance could lead to regulatory action against these institutions (HEC, 2020).

Generations of women in Pakistan have faced GBV, including SH, discrimination, male-dominated networks, and workplace intimidation, which serve as significant barriers to creating safe and inclusive work environments (Saher et al., 2014; Sharma & Sehrawat, 2014). Consequently, HEIs face increasingly complex challenges in providing a safe working environment for women.

The literature on SH in HEIs identifies it as a leading form of GBV faced by women and girls globally, including in Pakistan (Naz et al., 2013).

The Federal Ombudsman for Protection Against Harassment received 1,140 workplace harassment complaints across Pakistan, of which 1,063 were resolved, although the breakdown by organizational sector remains unknown (Ministry of Human Rights, 2021). A survey conducted by *Dawn* newspaper, involving 300 women from various organizations, including HEIs, found that SH, abuse, and discrimination are pervasive yet largely unreported. Many women remain silent or are reluctant to lodge formal or informal complaints, while those who do report harassment often face inaction or dismissal by management (Dawn, 2018).

Sociocultural Construction of SH

SH and violence are omnipresent threats, and many women face negative social reactions, blame, and stigmatization when they disclose, report, or publicly speak about their experiences (Ali & Kramar, 2015; Krahe, 2016; Oguz, 2000). How women construct their experiences of SH and respond to it is greatly influenced by the cultural context of the society in which they live (Merkin, 2008).

In the Pakistani cultural context, women have historically worked in domestic spheres and were often accompanied by male family members when venturing outside their homes. In cases where women engaged in paid employment, it was typically within gender-segregated workplaces, such as schools or women's colleges. Over the past two decades, societal changes have led to increased access to higher education for women and the entry of middle-class women into the labor market (Babur, 2007). These changing trends have resulted in greater participation of women in the workforce, commuting alone, and interacting with men in nonsegregated environments. However, with the rise in employment opportunities, women have encountered new challenges, including SH and violence at workplaces (Ali & Kramar, 2015), including in HEIs.

Many studies on GBV from both the Global North and South have highlighted the issue of underreporting of SH experiences (Gordon & Collins, 2013; Kirkner & Ullman, 2020; McDonald, 2012; Sandhu et al., 2014). Research indicates that only a small proportion of SH cases are formally reported, consistent with other forms of gendered and sexual violence (UCU, 2021). Predominantly, due to concerns about their reputation, many women choose not to report their experiences or even share them with their families (D'Cruz & Rayner, 2013; Sandhu et al., 2014). Similar findings from India reveal that most women managers claimed they had not faced SH at the workplace while advancing in their careers. However, in personal, off-the-record discussions, many admitted to having experienced harassment but refrained from reporting it due to fears of insult, shame, intimidation, social stigmatization, and being labeled (Sandhu et al., 2014).

As in other parts of the world, SH is a common experience for women in Pakistan (Ali & Siddiqi, 2019). However, many women are reluctant to formally report harassment due to fears of social stigma, reputational harm, job loss, shame, and dishonor to their families (Hadi, 2018; Yasmin & Jabeen, 2017). In addition to societal pressures, the reluctance to report or seek formal protection stems from ineffective legal and policy enforcement, as many laws in Pakistan are only symbolically implemented (Bhatti & Ali, 2022; Hadi, 2018; Yasmin & Jabeen, 2017). Ali et al. (2021) found that, although SH makes women's work experiences unpleasant and harmful in Pakistan, they are often unwilling to report it due to fears of losing their jobs and respect in the workplace.

SH contributes to occupational gender segregation, exclusion from the paid labor force, and has detrimental effects on work performance and well-being (Loi et al., 2015; McCrady, 2012). It can also involve deliberate and hostile behaviors

designed to deter women from entering, staying, or advancing in their professions (Dey, 2013). However, there is limited research on the sociocultural contextualization of SH experiences in Pakistan (Hadi, 2018).

This article aims to address this gap by drawing on interviews with fourteen men and women heads of departments, institutes, and schools in HEIs in Lahore, Pakistan, to explore their experiences and the sociocultural construction of SH in HEIs.

Research Methods

This article draws on fourteen semi-structured interviews with heads of departments, deans, and directors of institutions/schools in HEIs. The participants included eight men and six women. Both men and women were recruited because previous research in Pakistan has often focused exclusively on women. While this focus is valid, given that women are most likely to be victims of GBVH, interviewing male academics provided valuable insights into men's understandings and the sociocultural contextualization of responses to GBVH. This approach is important for understanding the complexities of construction of experiences.

Although this article primarily draws on women's experiences (as they were more likely to share their encounters with sexual violence in HEIs), it also analyzes insights from the eight male participants who reflected on their experiences of handling SH complaints and on the sociocultural construction of sexual violence against women.

The interviews were conducted by four members of the research team, lasted between one and two hours, and were audio-recorded and transcribed. The study was conducted in Pakistan, with data collected from four public, private, and public-private (partly publicly funded) universities in Lahore. Lahore was intentionally selected because it has the highest number of HEIs in Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province. Researcher's bias was managed through reflexivity, data triangulation, and investigator triangulation. Considering the gendered and sensitive nature of gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) in higher education, reflexivity enabled the researcher to remain critically aware of her own positionality as a researcher, through maintaining a reflexive journal and ongoing self-questioning. The researcher has acknowledged potential biases and challenged assumptions that might have influenced the framing of interview questions and the interpretation of responses. At the same time, diverse participants (men and women working at various hierarchical positions heads of departments, deans, and directors) were included to capture a multi-faceted understanding of responses to GBVH (Consumers et al., 2018). In previous researches in Pakistan men participants are often overlooked, so this study offered a broader sociocultural contextualization of GBVH. To further support the credibility of the analysis; emerging themes had discussed with fellow researchers, so multiple investigators helped reduce individual bias, allowed alternative interpretations to be considered, and presented a more balanced and robust analysis of the complex constructions of experience within the data.

The participants were heads of departments, deans, and directors of institutions/schools, with six women and eight men included in the sample. Their work experience ranged from 7 to 27 years, and all participants held doctoral degrees except for two. Although the sample size is small, the strength and uniqueness of this study lie in the inclusion of both men and women academics, providing a broader understanding of experiences of SH and its sociocultural construction.

Once the interviews were completed, the data underwent a thorough coding process. First, all interviews were transcribed, and notes and field observations were compiled. Areas corresponding to the research questions were highlighted. Next, the transcripts and notes were re-read to annotate relevant sections. Researchers then collected the annotations and organized them under labels that corresponded to themes (Bengtsson, 2016).

After finalizing the themes, homogeneity and external heterogeneity were measured to produce a coherent and meaningful analysis. Homogeneity ensured that themes were mutually exclusive, while external heterogeneity ensured that themes did not overlap across sections. The interconnectedness of themes was revisited to refine the analysis. During interpretive analysis, interviews, field notes, and generated themes were examined through a social perspective and the researchers' viewpoints to interpret the evidence (Judger, 2016).

Ethical approval was obtained before the study, and participants were informed about its purpose. Written informed consent was collected for voluntary participation. Participants were given the right to stop the interview or decline to answer any questions they found inappropriate.

Culturally aligned pseudonyms were used, and institutional affiliations were anonymized as either public, private, or public-private to protect participants' identities.

SH Common Yet Denied

Although SH has been widely prevalent in Pakistani society, manifesting as behaviors such as staring, suggestive comments, unwelcome advances, intrusion of personal space, and even sexual assault, traditional gender segregation in society often kept women accompanied by male family members outside the home. However, societal shifts driven by increased higher education opportunities for women and their entry into unsegregated workplaces, as well as commuting alone, have contributed to an increased prevalence of SH.

SH in HEIs is a leading form of GBV faced by women in Pakistan (Naz et al., 2013). However, due to fear of shame and stigma attached to personal character and family prestige, many women tend to downplay or avoid publicly acknowledging their experiences of SH (Sandhu et al., 2014; UCU, 2021).

All study participants acknowledged the inevitability of SH in public spaces, particularly workplaces, and confirmed its widespread prevalence in Pakistani society, including HEIs.

You know men will keep on harassing women when they come out of their houses. For educated women, it is a long road to come out and work in universities. It is widely prevalent in our society, and it

is everywhere; women have no other option but to tolerate it if they want to come out of their house. (Dr. Ms. Samina)

Sexual harassment is an everyday reality, whether we accept it or not. It is very common; I know women get harassed every day in our society everywhere on roads, streets, workplaces, you name it. I think there wouldn't be any place where women are with men and have not experienced it. (Mr. Umer)

Despite acknowledging the pervasiveness of SH in society, thirteen participants stated that no incidents had been reported in their departments, institutes, or schools during their tenure as heads.

In our department, both men and women are working, and all are mature. I am very strict regarding discipline. During my headship, there has been no such case; no one has ever complained about such experiences. People are respectful. (Dr. Ms. Ruhi)

There was, however, a consensus among participants that HEIs, as an extension of society, inevitably reflect societal patterns, including SH.

I don't think there is any issue of harassment in universities; women don't get harassed within universities. Just in case there are one or two cases occasionally, you know the university is part of the larger society. It is prevalent everywhere in society; women get harassed everywhere on roads, in markets, you name it. So, if it's so widespread, then there's a probability it might happen in universities as well. There are good and bad people in society, so it's the same in universities. But collectively, in educational institutions, women are not experiencing as many problems compared to other workplaces. (Dr. Mr. Ali)

Limited Accounts of Known or Reported Harassment

SH in HEIs is well documented globally (UCU, 2021). In Pakistan, most studies on SH have focused on women students and teachers (Agha & Magsi, 2017). However, a few studies addressing the SH experiences of women academics and staff have found that they are frequently harassed by both senior and junior male colleagues (Yousaf, 2018; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2016a, 2016b). A recent study on the experiences of women leaders in academia highlights that masculine norms and institutionalized gender-based power relations significantly contribute to SH in HEIs (Bhatti & Ali, 2022; Subramaniam et al., 2014). Consistent with other forms of GBV, SH is persistently underreported (UCU, 2021), with underreporting identified as a major barrier to addressing its prevalence and implementing preventive measures (Kirkner & Ullman, 2020).

Male heads of departments described instances where women academics were deliberately placed in vulnerable situations. A woman head of department narrated two such incidents.

I know a woman colleague in another department who was assigned late evening classes, requiring her to use public transport. She told me that a male colleague often offered to drop her off after class, but

she felt his intentions were inappropriate. Similarly, there are other cases where situations are created to make women feel vulnerable, allowing others to take advantage. (Dr. Ms. Anum)

She shared another example:

A colleague was pressured by her head of department to complete an urgent assignment over the weekend. She was then asked to work from the HOD's home office along with a few other colleagues. Although she didn't want to go, she felt forced to comply and later felt scared and intimidated. These situations are deliberately crafted to trap women at work. (Dr. Ms. Anum)

A male head of department explained how precarious work contracts exacerbate women's vulnerability to SH:

We had a female colleague who experienced harassment, but she never reported it. She was working on a temporary contract, which made her particularly vulnerable. Contracts are typically renewed every six months, and this process is exploited. Even women with permanent contracts face harassment, but contractual staff are at greater risk. In one instance, a woman was asked to leave for not complying with her harasser's demands. How could she disclose her experiences? People would judge her, and there would be retaliation. (Dr. Mr. Shahid)

Underreporting remains a significant issue, with most women reluctant to lodge formal complaints or speak publicly about their experiences. Among the six women participants, two reported experiencing SH directly. All male participants were aware of incidents where women colleagues were harassed, often informally shared or dealt with in private. However, formal complaints were exceedingly rare.

A male head of department recounted an incident where three assistant professors were forced to resign after rejecting the sexual advances of their HOD:

In one university, three assistant professors—two on permanent contracts—were asked to resign due to noncompliance with the HOD's demands for sexual favours. None of them lodged formal complaints, fearing judgment and stigma. Their departure only came to light after one of them shared her story with a colleague. This shows how women are penalized for noncompliance, while perpetrators remain unaccountable. (Dr. Mr. Nasir)

Women often rely on informal whisper networks to share information about harassment and harassers, indicating a lack of safe, formal channels for addressing SH (Johnson, 2023).

I know some colleagues who feel uncomfortable working or sharing offices with certain male colleagues. Although these men may not act overtly, the discomfort is palpable. (Dr. Mr. Umer)

Participants highlighted the sociolegal barriers that deter women from reporting SH.

When lodging a formal complaint, the burden of proof lies with the complainant. How can you prove someone touched you

inappropriately and then walked away? Without evidence, women face mockery, shame, and stigma. (Dr. Ms. Samina)

The repercussions of public disclosure further discourage women:

Once a woman publicly complains, a media circus ensues. Her name and workplace are displayed everywhere, and while the perpetrator remains employed, the woman loses her reputation, and sometimes her job. (Dr. Ms. Samina)

One participant described a case of a male clerical staff member harassing women by sending inappropriate messages:

In our university, a clerical staff member obtained the contact details of all female employees and sent them obscene messages. Initially, I didn't discuss it, fearing judgment. Later, other women shared similar experiences, giving us the confidence to report the matter. The university investigated and identified the culprit, a warning issued to him, but he retained his job. (Dr. Ms. Atiya)

Constructing the Causes and Responsibility for SH in Society

As biological determinism has been used to argue that women are genetically predisposed toward nurturing behavior, whereas men are inclined toward adventure and violence, it also emphasizes that men are physically and intellectually superior, while women are morally superior (Prinz, 2014). By placing women on a "morally higher ground," they are confined to a narrow ideology of morality and are expected to conform to it. This concept perpetuates oppression and violence against women (Brescoll et al., 2018). Women are burdened with specific values and ethics that dictate how they should behave (Scott & Martin, 2006). Any deviation from these moral standards is perceived as an offence, and a community or family's "honor" is often tied to women's adherence to these values. This leads to the subjugation of women who do not conform to such expectations.

Research further shows that men, more than women, are likely to blame women for harassment and endorse negative views about female victims, which minimizes male perpetrators' culpability (Brescoll et al., 2018; Dawson, 1995).

A male head of department emphasized the need for women to respond assertively to men's sexual advances, implying that men's behavior depends on women's resistance. It is assumed that men will make such intrusions, and it is up to women to demonstrate that these advances are unwelcome. If women make this clear, men are expected to desist:

When women are not strong enough, men take advantage of their weakness, shyness, and lack of confidence. Such issues (harassment) only arise when a man gets the chance. If a woman is strong enough to take strict action against perpetrators, she can resolve the matter then and there, and it will not escalate. Women should act, retaliate, and show no tolerance for such behaviour. Somehow, there is tolerance on women's part—they allow such

behaviour to happen. Otherwise, men cannot dare to do anything inappropriate unless there is some acceptance on the women's side. Such matters reach the institutional level much later. I think if women retaliated and took strict action, these issues wouldn't go further. Women should resolve such matters firmly at the outset. (Dr. Mr. Atif)

Similarly, a female head of department attributed harassment to women's demeanor rather than men's behavior. She explained that her own conduct prevented harassment, as she believed men respond to the signals women send through their appearance and behavior:

Yes, women do experience harassment in our society. But it depends on how you carry yourself and conduct yourself outside. Thanks to God, I have never experienced any harassment. No one has ever dared to harass me because I never give anyone the room to harass me. If you are strong, bold, and confident, you can deal with a harasser, and no one will dare approach you. I am not labelling, but somehow, there are signals from women, like their dressing or tolerating indecent behaviours. As I said, I conduct myself in a way that no one has ever dared to harass me throughout my career. I've never experienced it. (Dr. Ms. Ruhi)

Another female head of department highlighted victim-blaming attitudes as a barrier to reporting harassment. She explained that women are often blamed for their own harassment, with their behavior or appearance perceived as provocative:

You tell me one thing, if someone hurls a comment at you or gives you a gesture, what can you do? How would you prove it? Let's suppose you file a complaint. The law wants evidence, how would you provide evidence for such incidents? Meanwhile, you'll expose your identity, and everyone will know you've been harassed. People will start gossiping about your character, and how will you explain to everyone that it wasn't a physical encounter but just an everyday experience? If you use the law to report such incidents, even people around you will think you're blowing it out of proportion. They will suggest you should have conducted yourself in a way that prevented the harassment. So, women think it's better to stay silent than be blamed. You know, in our society, it's largely assumed that men's sexual desires are uncontrollable. (Ms. Aliya)

Awareness of SH Laws and Mechanisms

Protection against SH in HEIs is crucial, not only because it threatens individual freedom and the conducive environment of institutions but also because it violates personal space (McDonald et al., 2015). Until recently, an overwhelming proportion of HEIs in Pakistan had not fully implemented the harassment laws. Often, laws in Pakistan are symbolically implemented, existing primarily on paper rather than being enforced on the ground (Hadi, 2018).

Institutional heads in supervisory or leadership positions are obligated to be familiar with the Harassment Act (2010), uphold its procedures, and inform staff members about its existence. However, few study participants had heard about the law, and

even fewer had read it or ensured its implementation through initiatives like faculty and student seminars or displaying the Act prominently within their institutions.

Only one woman head of department demonstrated full awareness of the Act. She had organized a seminar and displayed the law within her department.

We organised a seminar in our department. It was compulsory for students and faculty to attend. Through the seminar, I learned what the law entails. After the seminar, we displayed the law in our department as well, so those who missed the seminar or wish to consult it can see it displayed. (Dr. Ms. Ruhi)

However, implementing the law remains challenging in Pakistani society. The burden of proof lies on the victim, and the privacy and identity of complainants are often not fully protected. As a result, women fear societal scrutiny and are reluctant to utilize the law. A male head of department highlighted that the law's implementation must align with cultural values, as the disclosure of complainants' identities often deters women and their families from coming forward.

But this matter is not as simple as it seems. It might work in developed countries where institutions are strong, and enforcement is genuine. In societies like ours, powerful individuals wield influence that often places them beyond the law's reach. The poor lack access to justice due to limited knowledge and resources. For the middle class, societal expectations create additional barriers. In many middle-class families, neither women nor their male family members would support using the law to report harassment, as doing so would mean disclosing their identity. It's very complicated here; having the law is good, but under current circumstances, I don't think women can fully benefit from it. (Mr. Umer)

Discussion

The analysis highlights that SH in HEIs in Pakistan is shaped by a complex set of sociocultural constructs. Key factors include the normalization of SH in public spaces, the expectation that women must act as gatekeepers to prevent men's sexual advances, and victim blaming. The ineffective use of SH laws further exacerbates the situation.

Underreporting of GBV, including SH, has been a concern globally, including in the United Kingdom (UCU, 2021). However, in Pakistan, the issue is influenced by multiple social and cultural factors. The neo-institutionalist approach suggests that individuals in the workplace are not only governed by institutional rules but also shaped by societal pressures, values, and perceptions (Ball & Craig, 2010; Uggen & Blackstone, 2004). In many South Asian countries, including Pakistan, SH in public spaces is often viewed as routine, which makes it difficult for women to report such incidents. Fear of social stigma, damage to reputation, and concerns about family honor contribute to women's silence, further limiting their mobility and career progression (Jones et al., 2018).

Additionally, in Pakistan, many constructions of SH are influenced by biological determinism, where men are seen as

innately inclined to display hypersexual behavior. Women, in turn, are viewed as responsible for protecting their sanctity and family honor by controlling men's advances through their behavior (Prinz, 2014). Victim blaming is a key factor in underreporting SH, with the victim often being held responsible for provoking or deviating from cultural norms (Brescoll et al., 2018).

However, research shows that factors such as physical appearance, behavior, or dress do not determine SH, rather, the responsibility lies with the harasser (Quick & McFadyen, 2017). The implementation of SH laws and effective prevention education could address the prevalence of SH, but in Pakistan, many HEIs have yet to fully implement the harassment act (Yousaf & Schmiede, 2016a, 2016b).

Despite the widespread prevalence of SH in Pakistani HEIs, the lack of legal proof and the disclosure of the victim's identity often discourage women from reporting. Social scrutiny, fear of job loss, and concerns about family honor all contribute to women's silence. In addition, the ineffective implementation of the harassment law in HEIs exacerbates these challenges.

This study fills a significant gap in the literature regarding socio cultural construction of SH, reporting challenges and sociolegal obstacles in Pakistan. The findings offer valuable insights into the systemic barriers that hinder efforts to tackle SH in academia. As women increasingly enter the workforce, it is crucial to ensure safe and secure working environments for individual and collective economic growth. Collective resistance within HEIs could potentially drive change and address the issue of SH, provided that the implementation of SH laws is strengthened, and societal attitudes are transformed.

Limitations

A main limitation of the research was the small sample size. The study participants deans, directors, and heads of departments had multiple responsibilities, and it was challenging to get appointments for in-depth interviews. Therefore, the data were collected until point when new data began to confirm or repeat previously collected information.

Another limitation was that all interviews were conducted in the respondent's offices. Participants were often multitasking during the interviews, which led to pause and interruptions. In some instances, the researcher had repeated the questions to ensure that questions were understood correctly.

However, the study's strengths are its extensive qualitative data, diverse participant and inclusion of men participants in GBVH in Pakistan, where men are often overlooked in existing literature.

Conclusion

This analysis reveals that the most significant sociocultural construction of SH in HEIs is the implicit acceptance of its inevitability in public and workplace settings. Factors such as victim-blaming, ineffective implementation of harassment

laws, and the societal burden placed on women as gatekeepers of men's sexual advances perpetuate SH in Pakistani HEIs.

Underreporting remains a critical issue due to systemic challenges, including the burden of proof on victims, societal stigma, fear of identity disclosure, and limited institutional support. The SH is determined by perpetrators rather than women's appearance or behavior, societal norms often place responsibility on women, further discouraging them from reporting incidents.

This research addresses a significant gap in understanding SH in the Pakistani context by exploring sociocultural construction of SH, reporting challenges and sociolegal obstacles in Pakistan. It highlights the importance of secure working environments for women, particularly in the context of their increasing participation in the workforce.

To resist SH in HEIs, a collective and transformative resistance led by women within these institutions could be crucial. The efforts combined with the effective implementation of harassment laws and awareness initiatives, are essential for promoting safe and equitable educational sphere. To address these issues is not only critical for individuals but also for wider societal and economic development.

Data Availability Statement

Data will be made available upon request.


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