

# **Sexual Harassment at Workplace in Pakistan- Issues and Remedies about the Global Issue at Managerial Sector**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper is an attempt to assess the implementation of women rights in Pakistan and challenges confronted by women besides evaluating their contribution in raising their voice against harassment through the lens of working women. The phenomenological method was used for this study. The population consisted of all the public/private institutions in Karachi, where women are employed. Total number of n=200 was selected as a sample size through purposive sampling. Ten working women from ten public and private institutions each were interviewed to derive themes and sub-themes associated with the harassment of women at workplace. The results revealed that harassment is routinely practiced at workplace in Pakistan and has genuinely impacted the working women to carryout work effectively. They are mostly harassed in private sector than in public institution. Harassment mostly takes place in the form of verbal abuse, mental torture and threats. To secure job, most of the working women, particularly those who are the sole bread earners are unwilling to take any action; as a result, culprits are misusing women. Most of the respondents were aware of women rights but were unaware about Protection against Harassment of women at the Workplace Act, 2010. The research suggests strong interventions to provide training to women and to scrutinize disturbing factors at workplace for women.*

**Keywords:** Sexual Harassment, Workplace, Issues, Remedies

## **Background**

Women are the soul of every nation. The shifting paradigm of globalization has resulted in their increased participation in the work force. In global context, they are considered as the indicators of development and their skills and potentials are highly recognized.

Unfortunately, there are few culprits in every society who promote violence against and mistreatment of women and advance barriers to halt their social as well as economic development. Such

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violence when touches the boundary of workplace where educated people are employed, raises the brows of intellectual tanks.

Harassment is one of the serious unreasonable & reprehensible conducts which are routinely practiced at many workplaces. Though this revealing truth is bitter to be absorbed, yet it is the reflection of the current state of working women in the world.

United Nations defines harassment as a kind of behaviour (verbal or physical) that hinders work or promote offensive work environment (UN, n.d.). One of the most common types of harassment is sexual harassment which is defined as an unethical code of conduct which a woman finds threatening or offensive (Goonesekere, 2004). This unwanted sex-related behavior (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Magley, 1997) and concealing phenomena is the part and parcel of all occupations and industries (Hunt, Davidson, Fielden & Hoel, 2007). It could be in the form of gender harassment (e.g., verbal/nonverbal behavior abuse); or unethical act for gaining attention (e.g., touching, calling); or sexual coercion (e.g., sexual bribes or threats) (Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995).

We cannot refute this fact that the empowered women are strong, but at workplace, if they face sexual harassment, many factors make them reluctant to make allegations against the culprits which include fear of losing their jobs... and embarrassment or shame at being harassed.

A research was carried out in Europe estimates that up to 50% of female employees in European Union countries have experienced sexual harassment (UNISON, 2008). Unfortunately, evidence towards sexual harassment at workplace in Asian countries are not well documented but in many Asian countries, harassment is being practiced which can be evaluated through the steps taken by many Asian countries to institutionalize ways of dealing with the problem. In 1995, the Philippines passed an Anti-Sexual Harassment Act which promoted zero-tolerance for workplace sexual harassment (ILO, n.d.). Thailand amended its Labour Code in 1998 to include penalties for sexual violations at workplace (ILO NATLEX, n.d.). Similarly, Malaysia and other Asian countries passed several bills to provide secure workplace environment to women in Pakistan, a report of the Commission on Inquiry for Women in Pakistan recognized that sexual harassment in the workplace does take place in Pakistan (Malla, n.d.). According to Parveen (2010), a total 24119 of violence against women cases were reported in Pakistan during 2008-10 among of which only 520 workplace harassment cases were filed. Beside that the newspapers and electronic media portray few cases of sexual harassment at workplace, which show that the work place in Pakistan is not safe for women. Keeping in view the recent and past incidents, government passed The Protection against

Harassment of Women at Workplace Bill in 2010 in order to provide safe and sound environment to the working women. Turning the bill into a law was a big step but unfortunately, the law served as a piece of paper. It was assumed that a male culprit would think million times before harassing any women, but all laws fell flat. Pakistan is also signatory to few International documents to advocate women rights at every platform but the element of practical implementation of rights are missing.

This research will try to extract some realities of harassment at workplace in Pakistan through the enriched experiences of working women.

### **Research Objectives**

- To assess the challenges confronted by women at work place
- To evaluate the types of harassment women faces at workplace
- To understand the information or awareness level of women about their rights and their contribution in raising their voice against harassment

### *Research Question*

- Is sexual harassment practiced at workplace in Pakistan?

### *Subsidiary Question*

- Are respondents familiar with the term harassment?
- What are the views of respondents about the commencement of harassment at workplace?
- Are respondents trained to tackle such situations?
- Are respondents aware of their rights?

### **Research Design**

The phenomenological method is used for this study. The main focus of the phenomenological researcher is to see things from the lens of experienced people and for gaining insight into the essence (Rose et al 1995) and to provide rich textured description of lived experience.

### *Sample & Method*

The population consisted of all the public/private institutions in Karachi, where women are employed. Total number of n=200 was selected as a sample size through purposive sampling. Ten working women from ten public and ten private institutions were interviewed to derive themes and sub-themes associated with the harassment of women at workplace.

### Analysis

Harassment at workplace is a social stigma which promotes unhealthy environment.

As much as sexual harassment is increasing day by day at workplaces in Pakistan, it is taken less leniently as ever.

The respondents for this particular research were working in banks, multinational companies, government sectors, educational institutions, advertisement agencies and media. When the respondents were asked if they are familiar to the work harassment, all the respondents (100%) agreed which show that the working women in Pakistan (both in public and private sector) are familiar to the word 'harassment'. Most of the respondents believed that harassment is mostly the reflection of gender biasness and racial discrimination, and such uncomfortable act upset and mentally assault individuals and sometimes, even causes psycho-somatic disorders.

The trend of gender inequality is very common in South Asian societies, where women are mostly marginalized and considered least important in decision making process. This gender inequality is deemed as one of the leading factors of violence against women (UNFPA-AFPPD, 2003). Sociologists co-relate sexual harassment with workplace inequalities or gender inequalities and other kinds of discriminations related to workplace (Lopez, Hodson, & Roscigno, 2009). Unfortunately, society does not value woman and unwelcoming act makes female uncomfortable. Maintaining physical distance comes under the norms and ethics of organization but the culprits does not value these key ethical considerations.

One of the respondents shared:

*"Harassment is a form of abuse that affects one's performance at work adversely, due to another person's inappropriate behaviour. It disturbs individuals (mentally and physically) during the course of his work performance."*

The respondents are in view that harassment is intentional and could be in the form of sexual, mental or emotional abuse. Gestures and unethical words are the common treat through which harassment is often promoted at workplace. All the respondents found it disturbing as well as threatening at times as the dignity of a person is invaded through this kind of act which eventually promote unhealthy environment.

Another respondent said:

*"Harassment means any unwelcome sexual advance, aggressive demand for sexual favors or other verbal or written communication or physical conduct of a sexual nature or sexually demeaning attitudes, causing interference with work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment, or the attempt to*

*punish the complainant for refusal to comply to such a request or is made a condition for employment.”*

When they were asked if they agree that sexual harassment takes place at workplace, 100% respondents agreed. Through the interviews, a shocking phenomenon was derived that it mostly takes place at private institutions than in public institutions.

One of the respondents said:

*“It does take place everywhere including office environments where females are in minority and are working shoulder to shoulder in performing their job responsibilities. Females continue to suffer in our hostile lawlessness environment due to lack of organizational policies and human resources.”*

One of the respondents disagrees and shared the following words:

*“It is you who makes your own environment. I work with men but not even a single man ever teases me because I am empowered and I know my boundaries. Unless a person show her weakness, it is not likely to take place at any workplace.”*

Another respondent shared her views about the self will of women:

*“It happens a lot in our context, particularly because men think that the working women “need” their jobs so they can do anything they like and get away with it. Women must learn to say no and to protect and defence their own selves.”*

There are many types of harassment women faces at workplace. The following are the list of most commonly gestures use for sexual harassment shared by the respondents include gazing, touching, bullying, unwanted jokes and dialogues, gender bias, intimidation, verbal insult, giving lift, placing arms on the shoulders, touching of hips, indecent body language, marginalizing women, negative emails, showing porn movies.

One of the respondents shared bitter reality:

*“My boss asked me that I have to sit for late to complete the assignment. He called me to his cabin and asked me to wait. Later he tried to show me a porn movie and apologize me that it was opened by mistake. Later he started rubbing his main part, which gave me the sign that his intentions were bad. I ran away, and rather leaving job, I complained police and he was penalized.”*

Another respondent shared her past experience:

*“In one of the organization, where I was working in the past, the manager of the unit office was misusing the female employees while we*

*all were quiet and did not take any action. I also preferred to leave that job."*

The respondents were asked if they or any of their colleagues ever faced any sort of harassment and what was the nature of that harassment, mostly agreed. Most of them did not share whether they were victimized or not, however 96% of the respondents agreed that either they or their colleagues faced harassment. One of the respondents said:

*"Mostly guys and senior management used to tease girls on the dress code and passed racist jokes at my workplace."*

One of the respondents shared disturbing element of racial harassment:

*"I was racially discriminated. One of my bosses played a blame game with me and tried to label me black. I wanted to slap him but I can't because that would worsen the situation."*

Another respondent said:

*"One of my colleagues who work in the industrial sector always faces harassment. Many men try to look deep into her neck and make fun of me when they sit with other boy's gang."*

Another respondent shared experience:

*"Many years ago, my friend's boss tried to grab her but when he realized that she wasn't going to cooperate him, he just fired her on the pretext that her work wasn't satisfactory."*

Sexual harassment is commonly practised by seniors or boss because of their power and status, particularly when the female employees are either weak or employed at a junior post. Through the interviews it was derived that boss or senior management staff take such bold step by threatening or offering lucrative offers.

Willness, Steel, and Lee (2007) have viewed that most of the time; sexual harassment badly affects the job performance. Despite of modernism and open-mindedness, workers still are getting harassed and due to which lack of effectiveness on job performance is seen in Pakistan. The present research has somehow proved this phenomenon with the results where the employees were openly harassed by their supervisors with the perception to continue their jobs. Some of the respondents complained of mentally disturbed environment which affected their job performance.

One of the respondents shared traumatic situation faced by her friend which show to correlation of sexual harassment at workplace with mental disturbance:

*“My friend got sick and was resting in a rest room. She was all alone. The boss tried to sit beside her and make her comfortable by his conversation. Suddenly, he held her very tightly and kissed her cheeks. She was helpless and unable to move because of harsh holding. After that, he touched her breast very badly and then she pushed him with full force and ran off.”*

Women in Pakistan should always accompany other female or inform colleagues during extra hours of working and avoid sitting for late hours in the absence of other staff.

When the respondents were asked which tactics they use to tackle the situation, majority believed that complaining or ignoring is the best possible solution. Following were the important themes derived from the responses

- Complain the administrator
- Ignoring
- Resignation
- Stress Management Training
- Peaceful Dialogue with HR
- Kick the sensitive part of that person
- Scream hard
- Go straight to the parents or wife of that man to complain

One of the respondents shared her distress situation:

*“There was nothing much that could be done because even when some of us complained it was treated as being arrogant, accusing or exploitative by the guilty party, which sadly was always accepted by the senior management rather than ask for details or believe the complaint raiser.”*

Many of the respondents believed that taking action against the culprit is equal to losing job. One shared:

*“My friend complained the boss about being harassed. The boss fired me to secure the image of organization”.*

This unreported act usually motivates the offender to continue the offensive behavior (Hoffman, Hamlin, 2002). Ali (2010) mentioned:

*“Pakistani women generally go through three different levels of issues within SH (sexual harassment) process. Firstly, women endeavor to hide SH due to Islamic modesty and cultural traditions. Secondly, once they decide to take action there is a lack of redress at organizational and government level. Finally, once they report the issue they face victimization.”*

However, there were few respondents who shared their daring act to deal with such situation:

*“When this happened to my friend, at first she was speechless but rather keeping silence, she shared this tragedy with few reliable and trust worthy colleagues. With their help she recorded his voice very cleverly. Then we forced the culprit to accept the mistake. Initially that person was denying but afterward, he accepted. She also submitted the recordings to the boss. That man was finally dismissed from the job.”*

The respondents shared that most of the women avoid sharing their concern to discuss this problem to others, particularly to the head. Many reasons are behind this bar. Few of them are afraid of consequences against women, societal pressure, fear of Insult and threat, position power, and job security

Such traits provoke sexual harassment as fear of losing the job upon filing the complaint (Björkqvist, Österman, & Hjelt-Bäck, 1994) is the weakest sign of inviting sexual harassment.

One of the respondents said:

*“Women are never given rights to fight for themselves since birth. Due to fear, anxiety and work depression, many of the women decides to stay silent and do not protest because nobody will listen.”*

Another respondent shared:

*“As far as my experience is concerned, women never raised their voices. There might be certain reasons like financial problem, feeling shyness, fear of losing job, sensitivity, feeling of destroying her image and reputation in front of their colleagues, fear people mock her, fear of threatening and many more. I personally feel that women should have to have raised voice and take action against abuser of any kind of verbal, physical, mental, religious or emotional harassment before it would get vulnerable. It is the right of every women to fight against such abuser so they would be conscious and fearful and must think that women are also powerful than men. Now here question arises that why always women become the morsel of abuser? Why women tolerate such shameful act of the opposite gender? There is dire need to raises their voices. Her little action makes the difference and spread awareness to the numerous people of the society where males are always dominant and females considered [suppressed].”*

Other respondent said:

*“If the nature of harassment is physical or sexual, they don't complain so they don't become a topic for gossip at workplace. In case of marginalization, most women don't claim an equal right as their peers for fear of losing their jobs as we are living in a patriarchal society.”*

Another respondent shared:

*“Many women raise their voice about Harassment. The woman who fails to do so is mainly because of the consequences of raising voice. Usually the conclusion of such situation is resignation from current work place.”*

Since there is a negative attitude of people in many cultural settings within Pakistan towards working of women, the working women mostly find it easy to keep quiet to avoid losing job.

When the respondents were asked what have they done to raise awareness against harassment or will do, majority said that they did nothing however few of the respondents said that they arranged workshops, seminars, trainings, to empower women. One of the respondents also shared that they requested the head to make harassment policies which were recently finalized by their organization. Avoiding such situation is not healthy however few said that they prefer ignoring such situation. Other responses include complain to management, blunt and straightforward, counselling, learn to say no, don't allow the male member to visit your office unnecessarily, punish by humiliating, avoid sitting for late hours, talk to other women colleague, raising awareness through media.

One respondent said:

*“I am very vocal about harassment at work places and always orient my program officers and subordinates about how important it is to be aware of what harassment is and never to let someone do it to the issue.”*

One of the respondents said:

*“First of all I scrutinize organizational policy and gauge the status of the person who does so, in terms of authority. Second I put my case first verbally by discussing responsible person and then in writing. If I wasn't considered then I shout (with politeness and they don't respond because they know they are guilty) even on bosses. This is very common in private organization especially in educational.”*

Taking bold step after taking other employees into confidence is the best possible solution than zipping lips. Unless women are empowered with training and develop confidence, sexual harassment may continue to prevail in Pakistan society.

When the respondents were asked about women rights, all shared their awareness through sharing their views. The rights derived from the interviews are:

Right to Equality	Right to Work
Right to be Treated Fairly	Right to Protest
Right to fought for their rights	Right to Security
Right to be a Women	Right to Negotiate
Right to Employment	Right to Equal Opportunities
Right to Speak	Right to save Work Environment
Right to be Respected	Right to speak against violence
Right to Employment Opportunity	

The women knew about their rights and still faced/experienced sexual harassment at workplace because of many underlying issues. One of the reasons may be the generalization of women rights. In Pakistani context, when the respondents were asked if they know about the Women Bill Right, only 4 respondents agreed which show that although the bill is passed but its awareness is still not disseminated to all the women which may be the reason for taking no step against the culprits. Moreover, when few cases are reported by confident women segment of our society, it is unheard which shows that the Women right bill is serving just as a piece of paper with many loopholes. One of the surveys was conducted to see the perception of sexual harassment at workplace, knowledge and attitude of working women towards aforesaid bill in Lahore. The findings of the study show a positive relationship between the perception of sexual harassment at workplace and attitude towards the protection against harassment of women at the workplace act 2010 (Mahmood & Ahmad, n.d.).

## Results

- Working women are aware of their rights and familiar with the term harassment
- Harassment is routinely practiced at workplace in Pakistan and has genuinely impacted the working women to carryout their work effectively
- Sexual harassment mostly takes place in private sector than in public institutions. Harassment mostly takes place in the form of verbal abuse, mental torture and threats
- Mostly boss or senior management staff harasses junior women clerk at workplace
- To secure job, most of the working women, particularly those who are the sole bread earners are unwilling to take any action; as a result, culprits are misusing women

- Most of the respondents were aware of women rights but were unaware about Protection against Harassment of women at the Workplace Act, 2010

### **Conclusion**

The research suggests strong interventions to provide training to women and to scrutinize disturbing factors at workplace for women. The best tools to eliminate sexual harassment are education, training and prevention. Women should be provided with training to deal with such situation and provided with safe working environment and strict internal policies should be made by each organization to function effectively. At the same time, Women rights should be implemented practically by the Government of Pakistan.

### **Implications**

The research is limited to the participants from public and private workplace in Karachi. Further researches can be conducted all over Pakistan with a large sample size to investigate the similar case. Case Study can also be conducted to understand the in-depth of harassment at workplace. Sexual harassment face by male gender can also be evaluated.

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