

# Attitudes and Perceptions of Medical Students Regarding Work Place Harassment Act: An Interpretive Paradigm

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Harassment at workplace is a worldwide phenomenon and remains a major threat to the work performance of the workers. In this regard, Government of Pakistan introduced "The Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010".

**Objective:** This study explores the attitudes and perceptions of medical students about the effectiveness of this act within the university environment.

**Methodology:** The study is qualitative in nature and follows interpretive paradigm. In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty male and female students from two universities (one from private sector and one from government sector). Thematic analysis was carried out to analyze data.

**Results:** The results reflected that the majority of students were unaware of the legislation. It is found that the universities have generally failed to play a constructive role in raising awareness among the students about this harassment act.

**Conclusion:** Harassment committees were found to be ineffective. It is recommended that universities should not only increase awareness among the students through various steps but also implement this harassment act 2010 in letter and spirit to make it more effective.

**Keywords:** Harassment Act 2010, Gender Justice, Women Empowerment, Work place Harassment

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## INTRODUCTION

Harassment is a social problem across the globe that hinders participation of women in public sphere. It is viewed as the most common form of violence against women.<sup>1</sup> While it affects both men and women physically, socially, economically and psychologically, women are more vulnerable as they occupy submissive status, especially in the patriarchal societies.<sup>2</sup> Statistical evidence also indicates that incidents of harassment against women are more frequent than those against men, highlighting that women are generally more vulnerable to workplace harassment than men.<sup>3</sup> They face harassment in different social settings such as workplaces, educational institutions, markets, streets, bus stops, and even on the social media forums like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook etc. Women are harassed the most at their workplaces.<sup>4</sup> They occupy traditional jobs such as waitresses, nurses, secretaries which are more likely to be subjected to harassment. Women are belittled at workplaces by catcalling. Women who adapt traditional male jobs such as in the field of construction, medicine or investment banking, often suffer profound harassment that forces them to quit their jobs.<sup>5</sup> According to Pakistan Penal Code Section 509, Harassment is a crime anywhere in the country.<sup>6</sup> A research study conducted in Pakistan has shown that about 58 percent of the nurses and female doctors were sexually harassed, by other doctors, male nurses, attendants, patients and visitors.<sup>7</sup> It not only hampers women economic participation but also lower their productivity and discourage them from continuing their employment.

Harassment can also be seen in other parts of the world. For example, in 2013, an online survey was

conducted by National Union of Students to see the extent of sexual harassment in United Kingdom universities and found that 37% of female and 12% of male students were facing sexual harassment.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the top ten countries with higher 'Rape Crime Rate' in the world includes South Africa, Sweden, USA, England and Wales, India, New Zealand, Canada, Australia, Zimbabwe, and Denmark and Finland.<sup>9</sup>

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) in 2018, reported that the total number of cases related to sexual violence, between January 02, 2013 to May 3, 2018, were 7,246.<sup>10</sup> Aurat Foundation's Gender Parity Report 2015 revealed that there were 251 attempted rape, 75 harassments, 24 trafficking, 1,070 gang rape and 12 sexual assault cases. Most of these cases were reported in Punjab province. This shows that harassment is a common phenomenon.<sup>11</sup> Educational institutions are also seen as a commonplace for harassment in Pakistan. The Executive Director of Higher Education Commission Pakistan, while addressing the Brainstorming Session for Formulation of Gender Policy Framework at Higher Education Commission (HEC) said that the ratio of women as compared to men in universities has drastically increased over the years but with this increase social constraints and social issues like harassment have also amplified. Most of the cases were directed towards female students by the male professors or teachers that distressed the female students psychologically and affected their studies. One of the major reasons of harassment in universities is the unabated powers allocated to the teaching faculty i.e. in terms of marking and grading, making them more powerful.<sup>12</sup>

The statistics revealed that the number of harassment cases decreased with the passage of time during last four

years. However, it is uncertain whether it is the effectiveness of Harassment Act 2010 or is it because of the fear of stigma attached to such acts, or due to difficulty in reporting the incident owing to patriarchal power hierarchies, that has lowered the reporting of such cases. Nonetheless, the core reason of the persistence of harassment issue is lack of awareness regarding the laws. While Harassment Act has been in practice since 2010, owing to lack of awareness about the Workplace Harassment Act, women are unable to report the incidents.

For better implementation of the law, it is important that public is aware of the policies that are made for them. If they are not aware, they do not benefit from the laws that are made for their wellbeing.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the current study is aimed to identify the level of awareness and perception about workplace Harassment Act among students in medical universities.

## METHODOLOGY

**Design and Setting:** To determine the student's knowledge, views and experiences about harassment act, a broader qualitative design was used. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used to recruit the participants. This research followed the Interpretivist approach as it was basically subjective in nature and believes in creating realities through interaction.<sup>13</sup> Social constructivism was used as epistemological position of the study. As constructionists believe that knowledge is perceived as human understands nature and himself, more specifically, reality is constructed through our experiences.<sup>14</sup> Therefore acquiring knowledge in terms of research becomes a subjective and transactional activity which helps create findings.<sup>15</sup>

**Sample Selection:** 40 medical students were selected from two different universities of Lahore; one from private and one from public sector. The reason of selecting one private and one public university was to gauge as to which sector i.e. government or private has implemented the Workplace Harassment Act more effectively and to what extent students of these universities were well versed with the legislation in discussion. Ten boys and ten girls were selected from each university.

**Conceptual Framework:** To explore the study deeply, asocio-cultural model was used which is an extension of feminist theory. A socio-cultural model briefs that Sexual Harassment is a manifestation of socio-sexual behavior at workplace which occurs owing to the socio-cultural constructs that perceive men as sexual agents and women as sexual objects.<sup>16</sup> This model depicts that sexual harassment usually takes place in male dominated workplaces. Vogt et al.<sup>17</sup> suggested that male dominated work milieu was more conducive to the acts of Sexual Harassment as in order to succeed in such an environment, men have to demonstrate power, toughness, hawkishness, dominance, aggressiveness and competitiveness. In such settings, women were considered as unwelcomed strangers that potentially diminish the perks and benefits that were otherwise attributed to hegemonic group of males, thereby resulting in surging rates of harassment.<sup>18</sup>

**Data Collection:** Requesting the participants to participate in the study was used as a strategy to recruit them for the

research. They were given the option to quit at any time. Moreover, participants were told about the purpose of the study and ethical approval was taken from them. They were informed that monetary benefits will not be given to take part in this research. Dignity and privacy of all the participants and their protection was prioritized and for this purpose fictitious names were given to participants. Semi structured interview guide was designed to acquire the needed responses and it was based on repo building questions, key questions and closure questions to make the detachment process easy.

**Data Collection Tools:** Tape recorder was used to record the participant interview. Extensive literature review and personal observation during interview was also a tool of data collection. To gain further insight, Alliance against Sexual Harassment Act (AASHA) related documents were analyzed. Furthermore, the document of Workplace Harassment Act, 2010 was also analyzed.

**Ethical Consideration:** An informed consent was taken from the participants before the interview while maintaining their confidentiality and anonymity.

**Data Analyses:** After gaining the required information, data were analyzed thematically. It focused on examining themes within data. Thematic analysis relates to phenomenology in that it focuses on the human experience subjectively.<sup>19</sup> This approach emphasized upon the participants' perceptions, feelings and experiences as the paramount object of study. This allowed the respondents to discuss the topic in their own words, free of constraints from fixed response questions found in quantitative studies. Recorded interview was verbatim transcribed and then translated into English. Inductive and deductive coding was also done and similar code was categorized under themes. To assure the trustworthiness of research, analysis of report was consulted with study participant.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section thematically discusses each of the key areas gleaned from data analysis pertaining to awareness and perceptions about the act, and role and perceptions about its sanctioned on-campus harassment committees. In seeking to center the narrative of victims, the section dedicates a major chunk to the impact of harassment on victims especially their educational performance, the process of reporting an incident, and social stigma attached to reporting; these three sub-themes are discussed in conjunction with broader social trends of moral depravity or hypocrisy when it comes to the marginalized, patriarchal intent and legislation, and failure, or reluctance to say the least, of university administrations in prioritizing harassment free campuses. On the basis of data analysis, following themes are extracted:

**Awareness about Harassment Act:** Depressing results were garnered when question regarding the awareness of Harassment Act was asked. The results showed that students were oblivious of the Workplace Harassment Act. They opined that no such efforts were made that could actually highlight the passage of the Act. All of them were of the view neither media nor university apprised the public of the Act as the Act should have been publicized. The passage of the Act never made it to the headlines of mainstream media and universities did not notify students

officially of the formation of any such committee. However, in private university there was mixed response. Some students did state that they saw a short, muted post on Facebook page regarding constitution of the harassment committee. Nonetheless, majority of the students knew regarding the definition of harassment but were found unaware of the Harassment Act. Furthermore, the male students felt that the harassment act often implicated them wrongfully. They were hard done by the administration and complained that the girls are generally given undue importance, especially when they complain about any male student of harassing them.

"Girls are always listened to. Our male teachers always see us with suspicion even if we ask for notes from a girl. Teachers are quite ready to accept any claim made by any girl against us, without thorough investigation"

Their claim is not investigated holistically and their mere statement proves to be the judge, jury, and execution for the accused. Teachers in department also berate the accused student and he is often stigmatized, which affects his studies. It must be stated that none of the male students disputed the contents of the Harassment Act rather they raised concerns about its implementation. Another intriguing finding to come out from the study is that most girls do not consider starting a form of harassment.

**Role of Harassment Committees:** There was mixed response from the private university students. Some students were satisfied by the working of the committee. However, students also opined that the milieu of reporting a harassment act is not conducive. One of the students said about the harassment committee:

"Everybody knows it is there but nobody talks about it. And what is the use of talking about it really? Everybody knows when any matter goes to committee, it is lingered on unnecessarily. It is just useless. Most of the people settle their problems outside such committees."

So, in an event of harassment, a petrified victim is uncertain as to how he/she should report the act and what is going to be the response from the committee. In Public Sector University, the committee members clearly lacked transparency which was the major reason of distrust of the students. Any complain of involvement of male teacher was also not taken seriously and complainant often found herself to be at the receiving end of the power abuse. Moreover, the students often identified harassment committee as "Students Affair Committee". It showed that there was no dedicated effort in spreading awareness regarding harassment in the government sector university. All in all, in both private and government universities there is dire need to up the ante viz-a-viz sexual harassment as current efforts require massive improvement.

**Reporting Incidents of Harassment:** When it comes to reporting the crime, students are generally unaware of harassment committee. Those who are aware also hold back due to number of reasons. The fear of whole situation being escalated into public domain, and the shame one has to face in the university is a big hurdle in reporting. Furthermore, it is possible that family of the victim is also informed, formally or informally, of the whole incident and owing to conservative mindsets, many families think that their family honor has been tarnished. This leads to two scenarios. One, families' feel false sense of shame and

parents themselves stop their daughters from pursuing the whole case or worse ask victim to discontinue her education, or, there rises a sense of revenge against the harasser. Both the scenarios are disturbing for the already harassed victim. Moreover, often there are threats from the harasser that lead to the fear of retribution and victim never makes it to the reporting phase. Then, there is distrust in the state apparatus i.e. police and judiciary. Again, students are aware of no such mechanism that encourages reporting of such incidences. Rather, students are of the opposite view that police may exploit the whole situation for money and other hideous deeds. Lack of awareness, family honor, fear of retribution and stigma, and broken state structure is what prevents the victim and her family from reporting the crime. Both male and female students state that the state of society is such that females generally do not consider it safe to go out and report these incidents as they believe the girl will always be exploited by the police, lawyers and the media. Safe spaces provided for women, regarding harassment reporting, by the government are scarce and are under-advertised. In case of no redressal of grievance within the university, a girl has no avenue to reach out for justice. This lack of counter mechanism and moral depravity in the society is what stops the victim from reporting the crime in the first place. One of the students remarked:

"If harassment is tough to face, reporting it is whole lot tougher. Everyone treats you differently. Some people try to avoid you. The whole university looks at you as if there is a pair of horns grown over your head. Nobody likes to be the odd one out."

**Stigma Attached to the Victims:** If a student overcomes difficult phase of reporting and finally reports it to the harassment committee, he/she has to face further consequences. Due to prevalent conservative mindset, there is immediately a sharp divide that rises among the institute. First of all, rather than investigating the incident, character of the student comes under scrutiny from not only the committee but from the whole institute. She is asked uncomfortable questions with zero empathy. She is suspected at such a micro level, even her dressing is questioned. It must be lucidly stated that in universities, perception in the public eye influences key decision. One of the students raised her fears,

"My friend who went to a university where there was modern environment. She was harassed there and when she reported the incident, her harasser paid off some junior-level clerk who falsely told his fellow colleagues that he saw my friend at the backyard of the canteen in dark with the accused. This rumor spread like wildfire and the next thing you know she had to drop the case. For her, campus became unbreathable, and it remained so till the end of her graduation."

Whenever someone speaks, the patriarchy shuts her down and the victim is made to feel that if she has committed a wrongdoing by being at the place of harassment. Patriarchy always questions women, whether she is victimized or not. Students opine that the victim somehow has to always justify herself. The roots of the male patriarchy are so deep in the society that girl is often considered weak and a soft target for such heinous act knowing that she will not speak up. Various cases in the

past have shown that female students were harassed and exploited by the teachers and class fellows in the university because it was expected that they would not speak against the act. Comments about dressing, use of phone, and her frank behavior with other people are made. Phrases such as 'She must have led him on', 'It takes two to tango' are often used.

**Failure of Universities to Prioritize Anti-Harassment Drive:** Harassment had detrimental effects on the academic life of students. Victims were perturbed psychologically. There was a feeling among the victims that harassment could well be a recurring phenomenon. It resulted in fear, loss of confidence, and absence from the university. The whole process had deteriorating effect on student's grades as 75% attendance rule also resulted in shortage of attendance. Short-attendance led to student not being allowed to take exam. Over and all, the harassment affected studies and career of the students. Another opinion to emerge out of the study was that universities do not have anti-harassment as their number one priority. Although seminars are conducted, students are not apprised properly of the sessions. One student told:

"I am a member of British Council Library. Any event or holiday is informed to me by the library via email regularly which helps me to keep track of all the developments."

Same cannot be said for the educational varsities with much larger resources and infrastructure than a small library. Therefore, there is an urgent need to sensitize the issue to root out the menace of harassment.

## CONCLUSION

The study has revealed multiple facets of the phenomenon of sexual harassment among university students. The role of sexual harassment committees has been deemed significant in enhancing the positive perception regarding the role of universities. Failure to report sexual harassment has come out as one of the factors that have prevented to stymie the rise of such incidents. Furthermore, structural patriarchy creates a toxic environment for women which leads to injustice and, at times, males overpowering the rules. This transgression must be stopped by providing level playing field to both genders, especially in education sector, by rooting out patriarchy and sensitizing the issue. A system of injustice and predatory practices cannot produce quality professionals and leadership; therefore, it is necessary to enhance the awareness standards at the university level.

Moreover, an orientation session and a separate course must be inducted in degree programs across the board. In disciplines where female students are more in number, two foundation level courses may be inducted. Furthermore, universities should take steps that protect the identity of the victim. A mechanism should thus be established that keeps the victim anonymous. Victim

shaming should also be discarded altogether. All in all, universities need to up the ante in regards with spreading awareness against sexual harassment, take this drive one step further and prioritize the protection of students facing this menace.

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