

Street Harassment and Psychological Distress Among Pakistani Women: Assertiveness as a Moderator

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Abstract

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between street harassment and psychological distress, with assertiveness as a moderator, among Pakistani women to address an important gap in the existing literature. The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational research design and a purposive sampling technique to collect data from Pakistani women aged 18 to 40 years who had a minimum educational qualification of intermediate. Three instruments were administered: the Mexican Sexual Street Harassment Questionnaire, the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), and the Simple Version of the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (SV-RAS). The findings revealed significant negative associations between assertiveness and street harassment, as well as between assertiveness and psychological distress. In contrast, street harassment was positively associated with psychological distress. Moderation analysis indicated a significant moderating role of assertiveness, such that higher levels of assertiveness weakened the positive relationship between street harassment and psychological distress, suggesting that assertiveness serves as a protective factor against the adverse psychological effects of street harassment. The study addresses an important gap in research conducted within the Pakistani cultural context and highlights the theoretical and practical implications of the findings.

Keywords: Street Harassment, Psychological Distress, Assertiveness, Pakistani Women

Introduction

Street harassment can be defined as unwanted behaviour occurring in public spaces that encompasses leering, catcalling, sexual comments, inappropriate gestures, stalking, and unwanted touching. Women routinely experience this form of harassment in public spaces; such behaviours significantly violate personal dignity, autonomy, and psychological safety and may cause trauma (Fairchild, 2023; Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023; Keel et al., 2024). Women frequently experience harassment while traveling, attending educational institutions, shopping, or during sports or

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extracurricular activities, making public spaces physically and psychologically unsafe and restricting their liberty (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2022; Islam, 2023; Roberts et al., 2022). Studies have revealed that repeated exposure to street harassment elevates feelings of fear, insecurity, and humiliation, ultimately affecting women's well-being and overall quality of life (DelGreco & Christensen, 2020; Roberts et al., 2022; Saqib et al., 2025; Thornton et al., 2024). In patriarchal societies like Pakistan, gender inequality, cultural norms, and victim-blaming attitudes frequently demotivate women from reporting harassment, thus perpetuating its prevalence and negative psychological outcomes (Khaleel & Ahmed, 2024; Shahid et al., 2024; Shahid et al., 2025). Numerous indigenous studies have demonstrated that street harassment is a significant contributor to severe anxiety, profound depression, and extreme stress. These conditions subsequently lead to diminished self-esteem, psychological and behavioral maladaptation, and impaired professional functioning. Moreover, such experiences detrimentally impact individuals' mental, social, and personal well-being (Akram et al., 2020; Naqvi et al., 2026; Ikram, 2022).

Psychological distress can be defined as emotional suffering characterized by symptoms like anxiety, depression, and stress, which impair routine functioning related to academic, occupational, social, and practical domains (Almeida-Meza et al., 2025; Arvidsdotter et al., 2016; Parikka et al., 2025). Persistent exposure to threatening and stressful environments may contribute to psychological distress, particularly among women (Akbar & Ghazal, 2023; Wood et al., 2025). Previous studies have reported that victims of street harassment demonstrate higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, which ultimately diminish their self-confidence, self-esteem, and life satisfaction as compared to women who do not experience harassment (Douki et al., 2003; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Rowlatt, 2025). Furthermore, the anticipation of harassment may itself be so detrimental that it leads to altered daily routines and limited social participation, thereby fostering emotional distress and reduced psychological well-being (Ferro et al., 2026; Gaikwad et al., 2026; Murty et al., 2026). These findings indicate that street harassment is not just an unpleasant encounter but also a significant cause of mental health issues.

The association between street harassment and psychological distress can be explained through several psychological mechanisms. Repeated experiences of harassment may elevate the perceptions of vulnerability, lower perceived personal control, and enhance chronic hypervigilance in public settings (Hanna, 2025; Mierow et al., 2026; Rai & Rai, 2025). Research conducted in different cultures has consistently reported strong associations between experiences of public sexual harassment and symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, and trauma-related distress (Del Gallo et al., 2024; Gewirtz-Meydan & Lazar, 2025; Hashim et al., 2025; Mahdavinoor et al., 2025). However, individual differences exist in psychological responses to harassment, reflecting that particular personal characteristics may protect women from psychological distress.

One psychological characteristic that may affect women's responses to street harassment is assertiveness. Assertiveness means the ability to express one's thoughts, rights, feelings and boundaries confidently while respecting the others' rights (del Carmen Meza-Mejía et al., 2024; Gutgeld-Dror et al., 2024; Kalzhanova et al., 2022). Assertive individuals are generally more likely to respond efficiently to interpersonal challenges, resisting inappropriate behavior and seeking relevant institutional support when necessary (Arwansyah & Suharyanto, 2025; Jandhyala & Kumar, 2024; Mc Donald & Bond-Barnard, 2025; Wu et al., 2026). In the context of street harassment, assertiveness may lead the women to confront perpetrators, establish personal boundaries, or come up with adaptive coping strategies rather than enduring negative experiences (Auerbach Walker & Browne, 1985; Hollander, 2018; Jandhyala & Kumar, 2024; Rakos, 2025). Prior literature has associated assertiveness with higher self-esteem, psychological resilience,

emotional regulation, and lower anxiety, stress, and depression levels (Mirzaei, 2024; Molina Moreno et al., 2025; Osuagwu & Adeyeye, 2025). Similarly, women with lower levels of assertiveness reported greater helplessness, emotional vulnerability, and self-blame following harassment, elevating their vulnerability to psychological distress (Amirroud et al., 2025; Castaños-Cervantes, 2024).

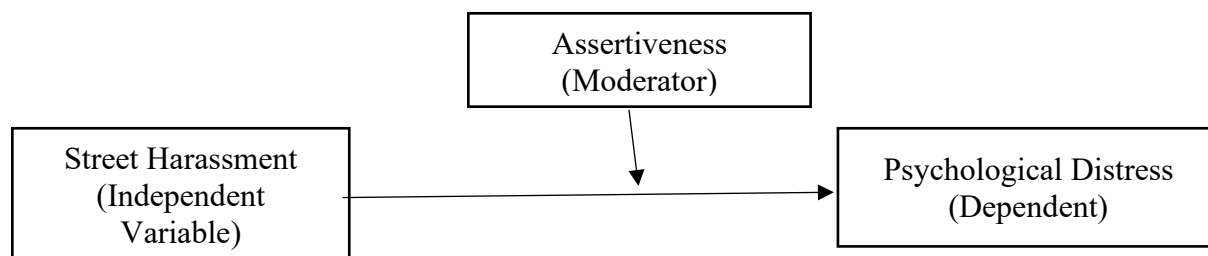
Within the Pakistani context, street harassment is a highly prevalent social issue affecting women across educational institutions, marketplaces, workplaces, and public transportation systems (Akram et al., 2025; Latif, 2026). Traditional gender norms, unequal power relations, and societal stigma often demotivate victims from expressing their experiences or seeking legal support (Afza & Amir Rashid, 2009; Ashraf & Ali, 2018; Rizvi et al., 2014; Shaheed, 2009; Tariq, 2025). Although several indigenous studies have demonstrated the prevalence and forms of street harassment, relatively few have assessed its psychological outcomes using psychological models. Existing studies have paid comparatively little attention to psychological resources of women that may protect against the adverse mental health influence of harassment. Therefore, understanding factors that foster resilience among Pakistani women remains a timely and essential research priority.

Research Gap

Although international research has consistently reported the adverse psychological outcomes of street harassment, empirical evidence from Pakistan remains overlooked. Existing Pakistani studies have primarily focused on the forms, prevalence, and legal implications of street harassment, with relatively little consideration given to its impact on psychological distress. Furthermore, previous research has focused on direct relationships between harassment and mental health outcomes while overlooking women's strengths that may mitigate these influences. Particularly, assertiveness has not received adequate empirical attention as an effective moderator in this relationship. Addressing this gap is likely to contribute to explaining protective psychological factors that can reduce the psychological distress associated with street harassment among Pakistani women.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1987). According to this theory, psychological consequences following stressful or traumatic experiences depend not merely on the stressful event itself but also on individuals' cognitive appraisal and available coping strategies. Street harassment comprises a chronic interpersonal stressor that contributes to women's sense of safety and psychological well-being. Women who exhibit higher levels of assertiveness are more likely to perceive greater personal control, communicate and maintain boundaries effectively, and use adaptive coping strategies, thereby reducing the psychological impact of harassment. In contrast, women with lower assertiveness may perceive fewer coping resources, elevating their susceptibility to psychological distress. Thus, assertiveness is likely to serve as a protective moderator that buffers the negative relationship between street harassment and psychological distress.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

The above conceptual model depicts street harassment as the independent variable that predicts psychological distress, the dependent (outcome) variable, while assertiveness serves as a moderator that determines the strength of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. In the context of the present study, assertiveness is expected to weaken the effect of street harassment on psychological distress among Pakistani women.

Rationale of the Study

Street harassment as per the global empirical evidence has undermine women's mental health, liberty, educational contribution, and workplace related functioning in Pakistan. Despite higher public awareness of gender-based harassment, empirical research has explored the psychological mechanisms that may protect women from its adverse consequences remains highly overlooked particularly in the cultural context of Pakistan. Examining assertiveness as a protective factor may enhance insights into psychological resilience and inform evidence-based implications aimed at improving women's coping mechanisms, confidence, and mental well-being.

Objective

To examine the relationship between street harassment and psychological distress with assertiveness as a moderator among Pakistani women.

Hypothesis

H1: Assertiveness will significantly moderate the relationship between street harassment and psychological distress among Pakistani women, such that higher assertiveness will attenuate the positive effect of street harassment on psychological distress.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational research design to find the relationship between street harassment and psychological distress among Pakistani women. The study also assessed the assertiveness as a moderator between street harassment and psychological distress. A cross-sectional design was considered suitable as it enabled the examination of associations among the study variables at a single point in time.

Sampling Technique and Sample

The study adopted a non-probability purposive sampling technique and collected the data from 278 women. Initially, 330 participants were approached to collect the data. After screening for incomplete responses, missing data, and eligibility criteria, 278 questionnaires were retained for the final analysis, yielding a response rate of 84.24%.

Inclusion Criteria

- Pakistani women.
- Aged between 18 and 40 years.
- Having at least an intermediate qualification.
- Able to read and understand English.
- Willing to participate voluntarily in the study.

Exclusion Criteria

- Women younger than 18 years and older than 40 years.
- Participants who did not provide written informed consent.
- Questionnaires with incomplete responses or substantial missing data.

Measures**Street Harassment**

Street harassment was measured using the Mexican Sexual Street Harassment Questionnaire developed by Gurrola-Peña et al. The instrument consists of 17 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (It has never happened to me) to 5 (It has happened to me very frequently in the last year). The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency with an overall Cronbach's alpha of .92 (Gurrola-Peña et al., 2025).

Psychological Distress

Psychological distress was measured using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10). The scale comprises 10 items and its responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (None of the time) to 5 (All of the time), with higher scores demonstrating greater psychological distress. The K10 has demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .88 to .93 (Kessler et al., 2002).

Assertiveness

Assertiveness was measured using the Simple Version of the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (SV-RAS) developed by Iain McCormick (1985). The scale consists of 30 items rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Very unlikely of me) to 6 (Very likely of me). Items 1, 2, 4, 5, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 19, 23, 24, 26, and 30 are reverse-scored. Higher total scores indicate greater assertiveness. The scale has demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$).

Procedure and Ethical Considerations

The study followed the APA 7th edition ethical code of conduct throughout its procedure. For instance, permission to use the instruments in the study was obtained from the authors via email. The participants were approached in Karachi, Islamabad, Lahore, Narowal, and Faisalabad using a consent form, demographic questionnaire, and study instruments. Initially, the consent form was provided to the participants, which clearly stated the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any stage of the study without any sort of penalty. Upon written signature on the consent form, demographic and study instruments were given for data collection purposes.

Statistical Analysis

Once the data was obtained, it was entered into IBM SPSS Version 26 for analysis purposes. Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, and Pearson product-moment correlation were computed.

The moderating role of assertiveness was assessed using Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Version 4.2), Model 1 (Hayes, 2022).

Results

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (N = 278)

	Frequency	Percentage	Mean (SD)
Age			28.06 (5.81)
Marital Status			
Single	138	49.6	
Married	107	38.5	
Divorced	27	9.7	
Widowed	6	2.2	
Educational Qualification			
Intermediate	109	39.2	
Bachelor	121	43.5	
Master (MS/MPhil)	38	13.7	
PhD	10	3.6	
Employment Status			
Unemployed	210	75.5	
Employed	54	19.4	
Self-Employed	14	5.0	
City of Residence			
Karachi	83	29.9	
Lahore	108	38.8	
Faisalabad	53	19.1	
Narowal	34	12.2	
Monthly Family Income			
Less than 50000	96	34.5	
50000-99999	108	38.8	
100000-149999	39	14.0	
150000-200000	28	10.1	
More than 200000	7	2.5	
Mode of Transportation			
Public Transport	100	36.0	
Ride-Hailing Service	117	42.1	
Private Vehicle	42	15.1	
Electric Scooter	11	4.0	
Motorbike	8	2.9	
Average Time Spend Outside Home on Working Days			
Less than 2 hours	77	27.7	
2 to 4 hours	21	7.6	
4 to 6 hours	69	24.8	
6 to 8 hours	39	14.0	
8 to 10 hours	63	22.7	
More than 10 hours	9	3.2	

Note. SD = Standard Deviation

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 278 participants included in the study. The participants had a mean age of 28.06 years ($SD = 5.81$), indicating that the sample primarily

consisted of young adults. Nearly half of the participants were single (49.6%), followed by married individuals (38.5%), while divorced (9.7%) and widowed (2.2%) participants represented smaller proportions. Regarding educational qualification, most participants held a bachelor's degree (43.5%), followed by an intermediate qualification (39.2%), MS/MPhil (13.7%), and PhD (3.6%). The majority of participants were unemployed (75.5%), whereas 19.4% were employed and 5.0% were self-employed. In terms of residence, the largest proportion of participants belonged to Lahore (38.8%), followed by Karachi (29.9%), Faisalabad (19.1%), and Narowal (12.2%). Most participants reported a monthly family income of PKR 50,000–99,999 (38.8%), followed by less than PKR 50,000 (34.5%), PKR 100,000–149,999 (14.0%), PKR 150,000–200,000 (10.1%), and more than PKR 200,000 (2.5%). Regarding transportation, ride-hailing services (42.1%) and public transport (36.0%) were the most commonly used modes, followed by private vehicles (15.1%), electric scooters (4.0%), and motorbikes (2.9%). Concerning the average time spent outside the home on working days, the highest proportion of participants reported spending less than 2 hours (27.7%), followed by 4–6 hours (24.8%), 8–10 hours (22.7%), 6–8 hours (14.0%), 2–4 hours (7.6%), and more than 10 hours (3.2%).

Table 2*Correlational Matrix (N = 278)*

Variables	Street Harassment	Assertiveness	Psychological Distress
Street Harassment	-	-.80***	.51***
Assertiveness		-	-.32***
Psychological Distress			-

Note. *** $p < .001$

Table 2 presents the Pearson product-moment correlations among the study variables. Street harassment was significantly and negatively correlated with assertiveness ($r = -.80, p < .001$), indicating that women who reported higher levels of street harassment tended to exhibit lower levels of assertiveness. Street harassment was also significantly and positively correlated with psychological distress ($r = .51, p < .001$), suggesting that greater experiences of street harassment were associated with higher levels of psychological distress. Furthermore, assertiveness was significantly and negatively correlated with psychological distress ($r = -.32, p < .001$), indicating that women with higher levels of assertiveness reported lower psychological distress. Overall, all study variables were significantly correlated in the expected directions.

Table 3*Moderation Analysis (N = 278)*

Predictors	B	SE	t	P	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	4.28	6.30	.67	.49	-8.12	16.69
SH	.51***	.09	5.23	<.001	.31	.70
Assertiveness	.16***	.04	3.75	<.001	.08	.25
SH X Assertiveness	-.002**	.0008	-2.80	.005	-.0037	.0006

Note. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, SH = Street Harassment, B = Unstandardized Beta, SE = Standardized Error, LLCI = Lower Level Confidence Interval, ULCI = Upper Level Confidence Interval, $R^2 = .30$, $F = 39.86$, $p < .001$; for the interaction term (SH X Assertiveness): $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$, $F = 7.84$, $p = .005$,

A moderation analysis was conducted to examine whether assertiveness moderated the relationship between street harassment and psychological distress. The overall regression model was

statistically significant, $F(3, 274) = 39.86$, $R^2 = .30$, $p < .001$, indicating that the predictors collectively explained 30% of the variance in psychological distress. Street harassment significantly and positively predicted psychological distress ($B = 0.51$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = 5.23$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of street harassment were associated with greater psychological distress. Assertiveness also significantly and positively predicted psychological distress ($B = 0.16$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 3.75$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, the interaction between street harassment and assertiveness was statistically significant ($B = -0.002$, $SE = 0.0008$, $t = -2.80$, $p = .005$), accounting for an additional 1% of the variance in psychological distress ($\Delta R^2 = .01$, $\Delta F = 7.84$, $p = .005$). The negative interaction coefficient indicates that assertiveness weakened the positive relationship between street harassment and psychological distress, suggesting that higher levels of assertiveness buffered the adverse psychological effects associated with street harassment.

Table 4

Conditional Effects of Street Harassment on Psychological Distress at Different Levels of Assertiveness (N = 278)

Level of Assertiveness	Assertiveness Score	B	SE	t	p	LLCI - ULCI
Low (16 th Percentile)	96.00	.30***	.03	8.59	<.001	.23 - .37
Moderate (50 th Percentile)	114.50	.26***	.03	8.61	<.001	.20 - .32
High (84 th Percentile)	140.72	.20***	.03	5.90	<.001	.13 - .27

Note. *** $p < .001$, B = Unstandardized Beta, SE = Standardized Error, LLCI = Lower Level Confidence Interval, ULCI = Upper Level Confidence Interval

The conditional effects analysis was conducted to further examine the moderating role of assertiveness in the relationship between street harassment and psychological distress. The findings indicated that the positive effect of street harassment on psychological distress was statistically significant at low ($B = 0.30$, $p < .001$), moderate ($B = 0.26$, $p < .001$), and high ($B = 0.20$, $p < .001$) levels of assertiveness. However, the magnitude of this relationship progressively decreased as assertiveness increased, with the regression coefficient declining from $B = 0.30$ at low levels of assertiveness to $B = 0.20$ at high levels of assertiveness. These findings demonstrate that although street harassment remained a significant predictor of psychological distress across all levels of assertiveness, its adverse effect was weaker among women with higher levels of assertiveness. Thus, assertiveness served as a protective factor by buffering the positive relationship between street harassment and psychological distress.

Discussion

The present study revealed a significant negative association between street harassment and assertiveness, demonstrating that women who experience greater street harassment tend to report lower levels of assertiveness. Street harassment was also significantly associated with psychological distress, indicating that exposure to harassment is associated with poorer mental health outcomes. These findings are congruent with previous research which found that street harassment diminishes mental well-being and possess adverse effect on psychological functioning among women (Kearl, 2010). Within the Pakistani sociocultural context, where traditional gender norms, victim blaming, fear of social stigma, and restrictions on women's mobility often discourage assertive responses to harassment, consistent exposure may further deteriorate

psychological well-being. As a result, women may be less probable to confront or report harassment, enhancing their susceptibility to psychological distress.

The study hypothesis was supported, as assertiveness significantly moderated the relationship between street harassment and psychological distress. The findings indicated that as levels of assertiveness increased, the psychological distress associated with street harassment decreased, indicating that assertiveness serves as a protective factor against the adverse psychological consequences of harassment. As demonstrated in Table 4, the effect of street harassment on psychological distress was strongest among individuals with low assertiveness and became progressively weaker at higher levels of assertiveness.

These findings are consistent with the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1987), which postulates that individuals' cognitive appraisal of stressful events and their available coping resources determine psychological outcomes. Assertiveness may serve as an adaptive coping resource, enabling individuals to communicate their boundaries, seek social support, and respond more effectively to stressful events, thereby reducing the psychological impact of street harassment. Similar findings have been reported by a previous study conducted by Tomaka et al. (1999), who found that adaptive coping strategies were associated with lower distress after harassment. Furthermore, study conducted by Berdahl (2007), demonstrated that individuals with higher social and personal resources experienced fewer negative psychological consequences of harassment.

In the cultural context Pakistani society, traditional conservative norms, fear of victim-blaming, and limited awareness to confront perpetrators often discourage assertive responses to street harassment. Consequently, women with lower levels of assertiveness may be more susceptible to experiencing psychological negative psychological consequences, whereas greater assertiveness may help mitigate these negative effects despite prevailing sociocultural limitations.

Conclusion

The present quantitative cross-sectional study revealed that, among Pakistani women, street harassment was significantly and positively associated with psychological distress, whereas both street harassment and psychological distress were significantly and negatively associated with assertiveness. Furthermore, assertiveness significantly moderated the relationship between street harassment and psychological distress in a mitigating manner; that is, as the level of assertiveness increased, the level of psychological distress predicted by street harassment decreased. The study emphasizes the importance of assertiveness as a key psychological mechanism for women, suggesting that it may serve as a protective resource that buffers the adverse psychological effects of street harassment and promotes better psychological well-being in the face of everyday gender-based harassment.

Implications

Theoretically, the present study extends the existing literature on street harassment by highlighting assertiveness as a significant moderator in the relationship between street harassment and psychological distress among Pakistani women. The findings support the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), emphasizing the role of personal coping resources in mitigating the psychological impact of stressful experiences. The study also contributes to the limited empirical evidence on street harassment within the cultural context of Pakistan, where this issue remains overlooked.

Practically, educational institutions, community organizations, and workplaces can include assertiveness training, coping-based psychoeducation, communication skills, and mental health awareness programs. Mental health professionals may also include assertiveness-building techniques in psychological interventions for women facing harassment. Additionally, policymakers and relevant authorities can use these findings to develop awareness campaigns and gender-sensitive policies that encourage safe reporting mechanisms and foster supportive environments for women.

Limitations and Future Suggestions

The first and most noteworthy limitation is that the sample was selected from only a few Pakistani cities. Future studies are recommended to include participants from a wider range of regions across Pakistan to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the study used English-language questionnaires for data collection, although an intermediate qualification was set as the minimum educational criterion. Future studies are encouraged to use validated Urdu versions of the instruments, as not every individual with an intermediate qualification in Pakistan has sufficient English proficiency to provide accurate responses. This may improve the precision and validity of the findings. Future research is also recommended to examine assertiveness as a mediator between street harassment and psychological distress to better understand the underlying psychological mechanisms linking these variables. Additionally, future studies may include adolescent females, as they are also vulnerable to experiencing street harassment and may exhibit similar psychological outcomes.

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