

A Qualitative Study of the Female University Students' Experiences on the Psycho-Social Consequences of Sexual Harassment

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Abstract

In Pakistan, incidents of female sexual harassment are often reported, but there is a lack of reliable information on the context of the matter and its consequences. In this regard, this study focuses on female students studying at public universities in Lahore, Pakistan, who frequently use public transport and are subject to sexual harassment. They were asked about their experiences of harassment in public places. Using the qualitative method, data was gathered with the help of three focus group discussions, and conclusions were drawn using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Incidents of sexual harassment mainly occur on different public transport. We found that such incidents are also proven to be a big hurdle in the continuation of education for female students, apart from their deep effects on the social and psychological condition of young female students. The researchers found most of the respondents were afraid of reporting such incidents because of defamation of their character and less faith in the law enforcement agencies of the country. Awareness of existing laws in the country that protect women, particularly implementations of the laws, good governance, the positive role of law enforcement agencies, and a better conducive environment for female students specifically related to their mobility, can help reduce incidents of sexual harassment in the country.

Keywords: Social Psychological Influence, Sexual Harassment, Female Students, Lahore.

Introduction

Sexual harassment is defined and described as a behaviour that is not welcoming in nature. It is unperceptive and includes implicit overtones. In any case, a victim faces inappropriate sexual advances in public or at work (Worke et al., 2021). It is a phenomenon responsible for creating a certain environment where an individual feels frightened, disgraced, and shameful. There have been different types of sexual harassment identified by researchers, particularly in the fields of sociology, social work, and human psychology. The researchers have also reported that any individual's perception and understanding of sexual harassment is vital to understanding this issue with deep insight (WHO, 2019). While talking about types of harassment, primarily five types of sexual harassment have been classified. This includes sexual remarks that are inappropriate and sexist. Sexual advances describe the wide-ranging physical and verbal conduct of any individual, which includes pressuring someone to meet or passing remarks about their body. Sexual bribery, which is another type of harassment, is reported chiefly in the workplace. It involves promises of status elevation made to the subordinate, usually in exchange for favours that are sexual. Sexual coercion is influencing someone by using pressure or a persuasive position to get someone to come on your terms and agree to sexual relations. Sexual assault includes touching someone in a manner

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that is sexual without the consent of another person (Tripathi et al., 2017). Despite these types being acknowledged in most parts of the world, sexual harassment has been defined in different contexts in multiple research reports on the issue.

Similarly, some studies have indicated the outcomes of sexual harassment. However, it is pertinent to mention that the research conducted in the context of sexual harassment is taken differently in the western world as compared to the Islamic regions. Talking, writing, and reporting sexual harassment is considered taboo in Islamic cultures, mainly because it leaves the phenomenon unexplored in general (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Mellor & Golay, 2014; Raver & Gelfand, 2005). Pakistan has been unable to provide equal rights to women despite constitutional guarantees as compared to men. Due to certain social and cultural beliefs, gender discrimination is a known fact in Pakistani society, and women are subjected to violent behaviours (Ferdoos, 2005). Women in Pakistan are living in a male-dominated society. In many parts of Pakistan, women's mobility is limited due to male dominance. Purdah (veil) is also observed in many parts of the country, leaving women struggling to get employment opportunities and less interaction with men, thus leaving the question of societal equality (Syed et al., 2005). Besides these cultural barriers, women in Pakistan are also deprived of a more significant number of educational facilities, and with fewer occupational choices, their identity is compromised (Ferdoos, 2005; Ali & Kramar, 2015). Pakistan is among those countries where the school dropout rate is very high.

Similarly, few per cent of women can make it to higher education in Pakistan (Sultana, 2017). In the presence of such social, economic, and cultural factors, the incidents of sexual harassment reported in universities and colleges in Pakistan related to women's mobility, in particular, further aggravate the situation of female education in the country (Imtiaz & Kamal, 2021). The research has revealed a significant dropout rate among students, and they are more likely to leave their institution if they experience any physical, verbal, or sexual harassment (Mengo & Black, 2016). The field of education is undoubtedly a key to uplifting the socio-economic development of any country. The journey toward progress is impossible without empowering women in the country (Mehmood, Chong, & Hussain, 2018; Tembon & Fort, 2008). Girls' education is compulsory for the sake of the equitable socio-economic development of the country. (Kelly et al., 1982; Chowdhury, 1994; Adcock, 2013; Odili et al., 2003; Ojobo, 2008). Female empowerment can undoubtedly be strengthened and reinforced when more women enrol in higher education. An empowered, educated woman influences decision-making and makes the right choices for her life (Siddique, 2003). Women and young girls in pursuit of educational goals and seeking jobs who face harassment on public transport or the streets can only become victims of anxiety and frustration, thus confining themselves in the four walls of their houses eventually (Yousaf & Schmiede, 2016). The rapid increase in population has made Pakistan a nation facing numerous challenges in public transport in general. There has been a massive demand for safe public transport, but the country's limited resources have left this issue unaddressed in many aspects. In such circumstances, female students in particular face multiple issues and challenges (Tabassum & Suhail, 2022). The issue becomes graver for young college or university girls using public transport. The public transport system, in general, is crowded, untrustworthy, and choking for females, providing easy room for incidents of sexual harassment. Students have to face specific psycho-social issues while confronting harassment and abuse at the same time (Humayun et al., 2017). With these facts, travelling alone is generally considered a threat to young girls in many rural and urban settings. This deters girls from obtaining education, and those who reach higher education also feel discouraged (Sathar & Haque, 2000; World Bank, 2007; UNESCO, 2010).

In general, the societal behaviour towards the victims of harassment is dismissive, blaming, and apathetic. Most of the victims, mainly young girls, do not report the incidence of harassment as they fear that in case of reporting, either they will be blamed or their education will be compromised as parents would not let them go to college or university. The strong patriarchal cultural norms of society that approve of misogynistic attitudes of boys in general further endorse the act of harassment in public spaces. As a result, the institutional and constitutional mechanisms remain inadequate to protect young girls and women (Fido et al., 2020; Imran, 2016; Chowdhury & Fileborn, 2020). In addition, there are certain barriers while reporting harassment issues, including a lack of trust in law enforcement agencies of the country (Saleem et al., 2021). The current study aims to investigate the challenges faced by young students pursuing their education and facing sexual harassment while using public transport. The study will highlight the considerable factors behind incidents of harassment and its effects on young girls that hamper their capacities and capabilities and also cause the discontinuation of their studies due to harassment incidents.

Objectives

- 1- To find out the perception of students on experiencing different forms of harassment, especially sexual harassment.
- 2- To explore the social and psychological consequences of sexual harassment on young girls.
- 3- To see the attitude of people in society witnessing harassment incidents.
- 4- To find out the coping mechanism adopted by these young girls after experiencing sexual harassment incidents.

Methodology

In this study, the effects of sexual, physical, and psychological harassment on young college-age girls in Lahore were investigated. The empirical data was gathered using the qualitative methodology. Researchers' capacity to fully explore social phenomena has considerably benefited from applying qualitative research methods. This strategy has also been highly beneficial since it offers more excellent knowledge of the social dynamics underlying the patterns, actions, and customs that have exacerbated the harassment problem in Pakistani society (Morgan, 1998). Qualitative researchers concentrate on a significantly smaller number of respondents while delving significantly deeper into those subjects, settings, subcultures, and circumstances to better understand how and why people perceive, reflect, adopt roles, interpret, and interact. Focus group discussions have been used as a data collection technique. Focus group discussions are a more helpful method for learning how people feel, act, and react in various situations; hence, they are employed in studies to understand the socio-psychological issues and dynamics of groups; having a lot in common can be better understood through focus group discussions. To make it simpler for the researcher to contact the respondents, a list of Lahore city's public sector female institutions was generated, and three of the universities were randomly selected while also taking into account their geographic proximity to one another. In each university, one focus group discussion was conducted. The respondents were chosen based on the following standards:

Inclusion Criteria

- Girl students from age 17 to 22 years of age.
- Girls share similar socio-economic status.
- Students in 1st year of university after completing 12 years of education and students in bachelor's programs.

- Girls travelling from their homes to their educational facilities using a variety of public transportation methods.

Exclusion Criteria

- We did not include those girls who travelled with male family members.
- The girls with high social class.
- Girls who reach university through a personal vehicle.

The approval from Vice Chancellors of the women's universities was gained in advance. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to analyze the study's data. Understanding how people perceive their experiences is aided by the qualitative study's interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) method. The researcher uses IPA to gather in-depth first-person accounts from research subjects (Smith et al., 2009). By identifying common themes during focus group talks, the researchers tried to understand how subcategories and categories are linked. The data later turned into meaningful constructs by expanding the stated categories.

Results

Three focus group discussions involving twenty-four students were held on each university's campus. Three public universities in Lahore were approached to select the female students, who were asked to arrive at the designated site within the institutions on the specified date and time. Every participant in these focus groups had some experience with various types of harassment. The data analysis revealed the following themes.

Socio-Demographic Profile of the Respondents

In total, the perceptions of 24 respondents were recorded via three focus group discussions in three different public sector universities in Lahore. The median age recorded by the respondents was 18 years. All of them had been using different modes of public transportation. About 60 per cent of them had been using public buses and minivans operated by the government, and they had to travel almost a kilometre to find a bus. About 25 per cent of the respondents reported using rickshaws, and the rest were using a ching chi rickshaw (a vehicle that is opened on all sides, close to a general rickshaw but usually shared and economical in use). A greater majority reported having an average family income that falls between 80 thousand and 120 thousand rupees per month. The average distance of each respondent from their university to their home was 12 to 16 kilometres, as recorded by the researcher.

Female Students' Perception of Harassment

A majority of the students travelled to their institutions via public transportation. The majority of respondents agree that there is a common type of harassment they encounter regularly, i.e., physical harassment. The term "eve-teasing," which describes sexual harassment or other types of harassment in which someone makes another feel uncomfortable with their gestures or by presenting themselves invitingly or improperly, was not well known among students.

One of the students stated,

"For a longer period, I thought unless a girl was harassed physically, no other means of harassment existed. My friends have very little knowledge on types of harassment; neither are we given any kind of awareness on this in our educational institutions".

Another added,

“As through your research and questioning that you are asking, I now feel that I am harassed every day when I step out of my college, through the eyes of strangers on me, through meaningful smile and gestures.”

Another respondent said,

“What I think is that I could probably only report any harassment incident to police if I am physically assaulted.”

The majority of the girls think anything less than this is normal and ignore it. A majority of the respondents (20 out of 24) did not have any information about any bill or law on harassment. One of the young admitted, saying,

“I don't know which law protects me. My family also would not want me to take any legal action on my own for my protest. The general public in this country is always afraid of going to the police station”.

Harassment Hotspots and Experiences of Harassment in Public Transport

The majority of respondents who were asked to identify harassment hotspots identified neighbourhood streets and bus stops as among the prime sites where female students were most likely to experience harassment. The majority of respondents said that men/boys between the ages of 18 and 40 were involved in this activity. A respondent said,

“Whenever I come out of my university, I see few faces, usually young, standing every day at the same places. I feel their only purpose for coming outside our educational institutions is to harass us. Neither we report, nor does police take any action”.

Few of the respondents also showed discomfort with the attitude of bus drivers and conductors while young girls travel in local transport. The respondents mentioned a few new buses and modes of public transport having separate ladies' seats, but a number of the other vehicles still do not have such facilities, and there, along with interaction with other people, the girls go through weird attitudes of bus driver and conductor. One respondent informed,

“I take a bus of a particular number every day, and I am not comfortable every time I enter the bus as I have to face meaningful smiles and gestures of bus conductor; I feel fearful, and the only thing I can do is to avoid.”

Experience of Physical Harassment and its Consequences

A majority (22 out of 24) of the respondents who participated in the focus group discussions acknowledged having been touched physically while awaiting a bus or using another form of public transportation. A more significant proportion of people reported suffering sexual harassment in addition to this sort of physical harassment, including ogling, staring, and other gestures. Sexual harassment is a dangerous sort of abuse that many people fear, and it could potentially negatively affect their personalities. One person said,

“Since I endure numerous sorts of abuse every day, it has been incredibly difficult for me to travel to my institutions. I occasionally think about giving up my studies and moving back inside the four walls of the house.”

Another added,

“I used to see a middle-aged man daily on my bus, and I would become very uncomfortable with his staring and gestures. Later, that man followed me to my home. I would have sleepless nights with fear of being hurt by him someday. I gathered courage and talked to my father, who reported it to the police, and that man was arrested later.”

That similar sort of incident was narrated by another girl but with the twist of the family being suspicious of the girl’s character once a young boy started following and standing outside that girl’s house. She revealed:

“The boy I would encounter daily with two of his friends started following me to my home. I belong to a lower-class family, and my house is in a small community where outsiders are easily noticed. My family somehow learned of this and stopped me from going to university as they thought I was involved with this boy. My confidence was shattered badly, and I could see fingers raised on me. I could hardly resume my studies after that boy disappeared himself, and my family sent me back to my institute”.

Most people are aware of the severe psychological effects that incidents of harassment have had on women. The respondents reported feeling anxiety, a loss of confidence, restricted mobility, silence, and even sleepless nights. One of them said,

“I have lost so much confidence; every day, as I travel to college, I experience different forms of assault. I even stopped attending family events and stopped believing in guys. I’m rapidly turning sociopathic. I once had a group of males from my walk home after leaving college to follow me for days,”

One respondent recalled,

“I used to get a lot of unusual looks and approaches on the bus. I was so afraid that I was unable to tell anyone. I used to periodically use anxiety meds, which made me less interested in my academic pursuits”.

Reaction of Bystanders

According to the respondents, girls should generally feel safe in busy areas since there are people to watch out for them. However, almost (23 out of 24) of them acknowledged feeling afraid and horrified in public because of guys constantly behaving in a wrong manner and harassing them. Another significant finding was that most respondents asserted that on seeing any incidence of harassment, members of the public and observers typically keep quiet. Among the girls, one said, Sadly, there are people nearby who are aware of our uneasiness, whether we are strolling down the street or utilizing a public transportation system. Still, they never make an effort to stop us unless there is actual physical harassment present. In our country, ogling and chasing women are not regarded as harassment; instead, legal action is only taken when a woman is raped.

Another added,

“Most nearby individuals advise girls to accept harassment rather than retaliating angrily if they see a girl being targeted. I constantly get the advice to switch up my mode of transportation or take a short vacation

to get rid of the harassers. I think these suggestions are quite odd.”

Factors Behind Harassment and the Legal State of Affairs

Few respondents (10 out of 24) acknowledged the incidents of experiencing various forms of harassment while travelling with their parents. Among the handful who had been sharing, the majority had been instructed to only share with moms. One said,

“I expect my brother will feel the same way if my father learns about these incidents. He would be angry with me and might ask that I stop attending college and limit my mobility.”

The majority of girls who were asked if there was any support available in college for them to increase their awareness of harassment and coping techniques said there were no information resources on such significant issues available at universities. According to the respondents, universities don't hold seminars or educational debates. As stated by one girl,

“Open discussion of some topics in public places is prohibited. The situation has gotten worse for girls as a result of ignorance, and several instances of rape and acid-throwing are now being reported.”

When asked to name the main causes of the prevalence of different types of harassment in society, most respondents mentioned illiteracy, lack of knowledge of the repercussions of their actions, and an inefficient legal system. Another key topic of the discussion was the respondents' views on the clothing code for girls as a preventative strategy to stop harassment, which was found to be evenly divided. The majority of research participants said that women in our culture experience sexual and psychological harassment regardless of what they are wearing or how much of their bodies are covered. One said,

“Even though I dress appropriately and wear a full gown when I leave my workplace, I frequently experience harassment. I've been watched and followed a lot.”

The overwhelming majority of respondents said that improving societal structures, particularly the institution of the family, would help to address the existing situation and victimization of girls as well as their experiences with different types of harassment. One participant said,

“Parents are essential in helping children, especially boys, develop specific values. The institution of the family has failed, and society is falling apart in this manner.”

According to another respondent,

“Institutions of higher education have an equally significant role. We neglected to put up a check and balance because we were so concerned with ensuring that our curricula suited the demands of the time. A major failing of our society's familial, religious, and educational institutions is that moral values are only learned through books and not applied daily.”

The respondents suggested that educational institutions launch awareness-raising efforts for women's rights. They supported measures taken by the government to protect young women as

well as the introduction of strict anti-harassment laws. Many others stressed the significance of the media in increasing public awareness of the issue of harassment in all of its forms.

Discussion

With a population of 240 million, Pakistan is combating certain social, economic, and cultural factors hampering its progress and development (United Nations, 2022). Women constitute half of the population of this country. It is the recognized phenomenon that any country's growth and development are impossible without women's empowerment (Rauf, 2022). The research and different recognized reports, unfortunately, reveal a negative picture of Pakistani women. Despite the advancements the world has made in different fields, women in many corners of Pakistan are still subjected to violence and harassment (Bhatti & Ali, 2022). The mobility of women is restricted due to social and cultural elements and gender stereotypes, misinterpreting religious beliefs and sex segregation control women's lives. Women in Pakistan are not given the proper roles, responsibilities, and status; thus, their role as producers and providers is negated (Saeed et al., 2022). With other challenges women face in Pakistani society, the provision of educational facilities and women's enrollment and continuity in higher education are perhaps the biggest challenges that the country faces. The overall dropout rate among girls is very high in Pakistan, even at the school level. Fewer females can somehow secure admissions and get a chance to reach higher educational institutions (Batool & Liu, 2021).

Here, after such struggles, for those women who can join higher educational institutes, the incidents of harassment during women's mobility, specifically while using public transport are one of the biggest hurdles for women achieving education goals. This eventually discourages women from continuing studies and further damages the country's growth by keeping women out of employment and education (Tabassum & Suhail, 2022). The current study has concluded that the majority of female students using public transport in Lahore belong to low-income families. The girls, while using different modes of transport, are subject to different forms of harassment daily (Imtiaz & Kamal, 2021). The study indicated social and psychological effects of harassment on young girls that leave long-lasting effects on their personalities (Ahmad et al., 2020). The girls are fearful of their parents and are reluctant to share these sorts of incidents due to the factor of shame and fear of questions about their prestige.

Conclusion

Sexual harassment incidents are taking place on buses, and other means of public transport, and current research revealed that people do not like to intervene or stop the harasser but rather advise girls to stay home or change their routes. There has been significantly less knowledge of available legislation on harassment on girls' part. The research also reported mistrust of the respondents regarding the law enforcement agencies reporting harassment incidents. The study suggests better and safer means of transportation for girls and awareness campaigns on harassment laws in the country. There is a dire need to rectify law enforcement agencies' image in the country. The media can play a pivotal role in creating awareness of sexual harassment issues on public transport in the county. There is indeed a high time to stop considering sexual harassment as a phenomenon that is taboo and that cannot be publically discussed and reported.

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