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## Sexual Harassment in Academia: Perceptions and Understanding about Sexual Harassment among University Female Students in Pakistan

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### Abstract:

*Individuals often report experiences that conform to objective definitions of sexual harassment, but rarely report the subjective perception of the phenomenon. The present research proposed that individual difference factors may mediate this commonly observed discrepancy. The research examined female student's perception and understanding of sexual harassment in academia. The data was collected by using qualitative method and employing multi-method; six in-depth interviews and one focus group discussion was conducted. Then thematic analysis was done, and in thematic analysis, five themes were emerged. It was explored that female students have better understanding of the concept of sexual harassment. Their perceptions about the phenomenon vary from person to person with the following themes (a) sexual harassment occurs in academia (b) junior students face more sexual harassment as compared to senior students, (c) beggars and outsiders cause sexual harassment in academia (d) harassment by clerical staff, (e) teachers also harass university female students. The reason, which students perceive are the cause of sexual harassment, are, (f) male dominance; and (g) lack of ethical and moral*

*training of people.*

**Key words:** Sexual harassment, University, female students, academia

## **Introduction**

Sexual harassment is demeaning to the human dignity; it may occur in offices and public places etc, but, sexual harassment in academia is embarrassing as educational institutions, especially, institutions of higher learning have mandate to provide peaceful environment for work and leaning (Higher Education Commission 2011). Sexual harassment in academia is contradictory to healthy educational and working environment as it hinders the performance of sufferer of any kind of harassment. Previous studies prove this phenomenon in academia, a study conducted on females revealed that victims of harassment face issues of depression, anxiety and lack of confidence in their lives (Fitzgerald et al. 1988). The magnitude that (Fitzgerald et al. 1988) find out is that almost 60% females face sexual harassment in one way or the other, but, how person perceives sexual harassment depends upon many factors as York (1989) states that sexual harassment perception is purely a subjective phenomenon. York (1989) further states, "Behavior that one person considers as sexual harassment another might see it as an innocent flirtation" (p.381). How a person perceives sexual harassment is based on gender, culture and many other factors as Rotundo et al. (2001) and Dougherty (1999) find out that the perception about sexual harassment depends on the gender. Rotundo et al. (2001) conducted Meta-analysis to investigate the magnitude of difference between male and female understanding regarding sexual harassment. This study revealed that women were more sensitive about gestures and voices about sexual harassment

whereas male's point of view was different. They consider this issue but not as seriously as females.

Similarly, Dougherty (1999) argues that a gap exists between men and women understanding regarding the sexual harassment. Men consider sexual harassment a men's power over standpoint and related fear of marginalization with women's power with stand point and related fear is physical harm. So Dougherty (1999) and Rotundo et al. (2001) studies converge at one point that gender plays a decisive role in shaping the perception of a person about sexual harassment. One important position that Dougherty (1999) crop up is that women's fear of physical harm while man's fear of marginalization are sexual harms faced by both genders. Benson and Thomson (1982) discovered that female students were more expressive to indicate that male harass them and it affect their performance in academia. Whereas male admit the prevalence of sexual harassment but did not mentioned that these behaviors were offensive or interfered with their academic progress and career development. Further conducted a study to explore the attitudes and experience in teachers student's relationships. Male and female students both indicated the types like physical advances, sexual bribery, undue attention and sexiest comments, but Further Bursik (1992) highlights the power relations and types of sexual harassment articulated under the power influence as in power relations, harassment is more prevalent and it varies by level of power sources and context of harassing situations. The power issues in this study also discuss the context of supervisory harassment.

This research aimed at finding the pattern of perception of University female students about sexual harassment using multi method data collection technique. This is different from previous research that, (1) it is a qualitative investigation; and (2) most of the previous researches have focused on both genders while this study focuses only female students as

previous researches revealed that females are more sensitive towards sexual harassment and they perceive it differently. Therefore, the researches strived to discover sexual harassment in particular context of academia among University students.

### **Objectives of the study:**

The underlying objective of conducting this research is to know, (1) the nature of sexual harassment in academia, if any, (2) the level of awareness and understanding of this phenomenon. The objective of subjective or qualitative research for this topic is important because of some limitations of survey research as “survey researchers may try to impose a definition on respondents' estimates of incidence but not know whether that definition is, in fact, what people actually applied to decide that a behavior was sexual harassment” (York 1989, 38).

### **Research Questions**

1. To what extent University female students understand the phenomenon of sexual harassment?
2. Which behaviors do University female students perceive as sexual harassment?
3. Who are harassers in University female student's perception?

### **Focus of this Research:**

This study is particularly aimed at capturing the University female students perception about the sexual harassment that might depends on their particular context and so many other factors as according to York (1989), sexual harassment is not an objective phenomenon but rather it is highly subjective and depends on so many socio cultural factors. It means that a particular individual will perceive different behaviors as sexual

harassment regardless of any legal definition. York (1989), “Behavior that one person considers as sexual harassment another might see it as an innocent flirtation” (381). It focuses only female students and the sexual harassment they face from, (1) other students of the same university; (2) teachers; (3) administration and (4) outsiders. Outsiders mean any person who is not directly related to the institution. The rationale for including ‘outsider’ is that so many people come inside the university they may be the relatives of other students or of employees or they can be drivers of vehicles or beggars.

## **Significance**

Sexual harassment has become an issue of the day so to explore about the perception and understanding regarding sexual harassment among University female students, a qualitative study was conducted. This study will help in catering the issue: It will provide significant findings about sexual harassment and the level of understanding of sexual harassment among University female students of two public Universities in Pakistan. Academia administration can utilize the findings to extend this research for proper formulation of policy to combat this phenomenon in University.

## **Research Design**

### **Population**

A population is the set of all elements for which measurements are possible. A population can consist of products, workers, customers, firms, prices, or items about which the decision maker or manager is interested. Another word used to identify population is the Universe (McNabb 2008). The population for this research consisted of University female students in two Public sector Universities of Lahore, Pakistan.

### **Sample:**

Sample is a portion of a population (McNabb 2008). The researcher conducted her study in university of the Punjab. This university is largest university of Pakistan located in Lahore .University female students were selected through purposive sampling method under which used convenient sampling from the Punjab university hostels, six university female students of part two of master's degree programme in Punjab University hostels. Reason for selecting part two students was that they were knowledge and knew the prevalence level of sexual harassment in academia while studying in co-education. To select the sample of hostilities University female students was feasible for researcher to access the site and to collect data. The data was collected through in-depth structured interviews with each participant between 20 July 2013 and 25 July 2013. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, and according to the feasibility of all participants, the interviews were conducted in venue of their choice, in their rooms. That location was particularly important in terms of to maintain privacy that we, as the researchers, were able to form. The participants were comfortable and, within venue of their own hostel room and better were able to talk freely about their perception and personal experiences about sexual harassment. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All participants were given a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. The sample consisted of women between the ages of 20 and 30 years. The educational level of the participants was master's level and above, four of them were students of masters in part two, and one was M.Phil and one was PhD scholar. Gender of researchers also facilitated our permission to the University female students, as several participants made it clear that they would not have participated if a male researcher conduct interview on such sensitive topic. However, the researcher's position as either the insider or outsider is not rigid. For this article, data were

drawn from six in depth interviews and one focus group discussion. Researcher selected in depth interview because in-depth interviews were used when seeking information on individual, personal experiences from people about a specific issue or topic, when to describe the people perceptions in individual voices and stories regarding sexual harassment. It is important of gaining a detailed insight into research issue from perspective of the study participants themselves. This reflects the emic perspective that is essence of qualitative research.

As according to York (1989), sexual harassment is a subjective phenomenon, so, inductive/ qualitative method of research was employed to get in-depth responses from the participants. The selection of particular research method is linked to the research problem. Some methods are more effective in getting certain types of questions and specific dimension of a research question (Biber and Leavy 2006). The population for this research was all the University female students. Sample consisted on six female students were selected using convenient sampling. Data was collected using multi method comprising in-depth interviews (each 55-70 minutes) and one focus group (120 minutes) was conducted after informed consent of the participants. These techniques were used as research questions require both breadth and depth (Morgan 1996). The interviews were recorded after informed verbal consent of the participants. They were ensured about their confidentiality and anonymity. During interviews reflexivity was maintained as it is the heart of qualitative research. Eye contact was also maintained and probes were used. After conducting each interview they were transcribed on the very day to get involved with the data. Transcribing the research data provide the researcher with an opportunity to get involved with his or her research material right from the beginning of the data collection (Biber and Leavy 2006). Then the researchers go through the transcriptions and listen to the recordings repeatedly to become familiar with the data. In

exploration phase, the researchers read the textual and video or audio data and thinks about it (Biber and Leavy 2006). In data, reduction researchers coded the non-numerical data. Coding means extracting meaning from the non numerical data which can begin as soon as the researcher begins to collect the data. Based on these codes, data was interpreted and ultimately conclusion was drawn based on below interpretations. After interpretations five themes were emerged that are discussed in finding.

### **Thematic analysis**

#### **Perception of Female students about sexual harassment:**

The analyses of data suggest that those female students whom researchers interviewed and those, with whom focus group discussion was conducted, all perceive that sexual harassment is an issue in academia. Some of the following excerpts from the transcriptions support this phenomenon.

#### **Harassment does exist in academia:**

Female students perceive that sexual harassment is an issue in academia. As most of the students tried to respond in term of the magnitude of this problem; i.e. one respondent said that 50-60% female students face sexual harassment in one way or another; another respondents said that 60-70 percent of female students face harassment, and another said, "All girls face it in one or another form. I have seen this issue with other girls also". One of the female students responded in a different way. She said that students do face harassment but only the one who face it can explain it well other people only spread rumors. It appears that female students have also observed many other students facing sexual harassment. *All girls face it in one or another form. I have seen this issue with other girls.*

#### **Behaviors that were considered as sexual harassment by**



### **female students:**

University female students have better understanding of the phenomenon of sexual harassment. One student said, *“Disturbing anyone’s life teasing and annoying behaviors are sexual harassment, especially, when a male tease or disturb a female.”* The responses showed similarity about the frequency of occurrence of particular behaviors as most of the students consider that whether those behaviors occurs once or repeatedly they will be considered as harassment. *Sexual harassment includes wide range of behaviors. It is usually repetitive. I mean that in harassment the other person (harasser) is constantly involved in such behaviors which disturb others life”.*

*“Sexual harassment occurs when female are harassed in any way by males”.* Most of the female students perceive that only male sexually harass the female students, but only one student said that in her view *“female students also harass the boys when they were in majority and single boy walking beside them but side by side she also revealed that boys do not have physical threats as girls do face”.* She said, *“I would add to it that some male students also face harassment but as your topic is specific to female students so I will discuss only about females students”.*

### **Junior female students face more sexual harassment:**

Female student’s point of view is that female students who are newly enrolled in the University face more harassment as compared to old ones. *“It happened with my friend when she was in first semester a in University she troubled from harassment as a boy always followed her in department, library and also make her calls and messages. This behavior had strong impact on my friend psychologically that she did not complete her degree and went back home”.*

The respondent further said that according to her point of view *“new students face more harassment because they are not aware of the environment, so, they become victims of sexual*

*harassment*". Narrating her experience one participant of focus group said, "We were afraid to help the girl above mentioned because at that time we were in our 1<sup>st</sup> semester. If it would happen now we definitely, do something. These people disturb newcomers and innocent girls". The senior students had more experience and maturity and if they are harassed in any way, they overcome it and handle it easily while for new comers fall victims.

### **Who was/were the harasser?**

From the in-depth interviews, it came to know that in University male students, clerical staff, outsiders and very few teachers were the harassers.

### **Male students:**

Female participants said that male *Students usually took mobile numbers then give their friends and they harass their female friends in different ways.*

From the data of focus group discussion an in-depth interviews researchers came to know that boys harass female students in different ways. Boys tease female students on roads and underpasses and bridges of the University.

One of the respondent revealed that "*I was walking on the footpath they knowingly collide their bike with me. I fell down but this time I could not stood up. The boys ran away. Some people surrounded me. I only know that some people surrounded me and there was blood coming out my nose*".

Others ways used by male students is to discuss about female students and sharing indecent jokes in presence of girls. Mostly they do these behavior outside of their own department.

Another respondent said that "*Boys stand close to girls and, share vulgar jokes with each other. When girls were alone some people also touch them and they are on their bikes. Many of the boys of our department do so. They usually discuss the girls of their class. They call bad names for girls. For me they*

*use the word “langry” (disable) and for one of my class fellow they used a word, hmm should I say that word? aahn they call her (abusive word) because she is very modern and outspoken. They also call one of our class fellows as “Masi” and “Zubaida Appa”.*

Female student’s point of view was that newly enrolled male students do such activities because most of the students in University come from small cities and single sex schools. Therefore, for that matter they do not have manners about how to behave with girls and how to show respect for them. A respondent said, *“Mostly students of BS (hons) do so”.*

### **Clerical staff:**

According to a participant, administrative staff or clerical staffs also harass them.

One respondent said that *I faced harassment from a clerk in admin block.*

Another respondent described her experiences as *“he said to me that I have just received the question papers from your teacher you can have them. This will be my pleasure but with the condition you have to come with me a place of my choice”.* Another respondent’s view was that the clerical staffs try to free with the female students.

Further, a respondent revealed. *“One person in administration of our department used to give his phone number to girls. One person, he is sweeper, of our department is very bad. Whenever female students go to him he used to show very indecent gestures”.*

### **Outsiders:**

Students share different experiences of sexual harassment from outsiders. Some participants said, *“When students come back to hostel many people disturb them on the under pass and people on vehicles ask them “Lift chahye jaan (can we drop you dear)”.*

Mostly participants shared that outsiders were a major

source of sexual harassment. One participant revealed, *“I myself have experienced that outsiders mostly beggars showed their private parts while begging at different places. Another participant said that Some “Rikshaw wala” (rickshaw drivers) indecently expose themselves in front of girls. Infect outsiders are a major source for harassment for female students. This is a common practice by outsiders. Outsiders gave unbearable comments when we pass on university roads even in front of our department.*

### **Very few teachers**

Some of the respondents said that teachers are rarely involved in such behavior. However, other said that students, employees, even some teachers and outsiders are involved in this dirty act of harassment

One of the respondent said, *“That male teachers become grudging in marks and grades when a female student refuses whom they like or expect some favor in relationship making”.*

Further, a respondent said, *“I think teachers are rarely involved in such activities. However another participant revealed that “teacher mostly talk about women more in class in discussion mostly talk about the sensitive topics related to women that sometimes tease them psychologically as boys later discussed those matters in negative way”*

### **Reasons of sexual harassment**

Female student’s point of view is that lack of moral training of males and lack of respect for female gender are the main reasons of sexually harassing the female students. Male dominance in our society is also a main cause of such behaviors.

### **Lack of ethics/moral training**

Many of the students explained that people lack values, ethics and moral training lack of moral training of males is the main reason of sexual harassment. *“Such people were educated only*

*in terms of degrees but not in terms of moral values. Such are actually mentally sick people”.*

Some respondents said, *“People, nowadays, are immoral; values are declining”.*

### **Male dominance**

Female students consider male dominance as another reason of sexual harassment. One of the reasons is no response from girls. Males considered them weak so they think that whatever they are doing is their right and mostly, I have seen that people even don't consider it as harassment rather they call it 'shugal' 'Masti' and 'cher chaar' etc.

According to female students, boys in our society are trained in this way that they can do whatever that wants on the other hand girls are trained to be submissive, that's why males consider it their right to rule over females in every setting.

*“Double standards for boys and girls in the families all are reasons behind this issue. In our culture boys are taught, I would say, that it is their right to rule over females. They express this learning everywhere”.* As males know that females mostly will not report to any one, they become powerful. Girls do not tell anyone if they are being harassed so males become more powerful and they again and again repeat their behavior. *“University female students are harassed because females are considered weak”.* Further, a participant said, *“In any case of sexual harassment females are considered to be equally involved even if they are not involved”.* *“Our society is male dominated and if female report such things they are considered bad”.*

### **Discussion**

Institutions of higher learning have the mandate to provide good learning environment where scholarly work could be pursued without any fear but existing situation in academia is contrary to above mandate. Sexual harassment in academia

received a lot of attention and consideration (Fitzgerald et al. 1988; Murrell et al. 1995). Previous studies reveals that almost 60% of women face some form of sexual harassment (Fitzgerald et al. 1988), it had negative impacts on their lives Fitzgerald et al. (1988), and they reported issues of depression and anxiety lack of confidence in their life. The present study offers a viewpoint to understanding the issue of sexual harassment in a academia. Students have better understanding about sexual harassment as they stated sexual harassment as repetitive humiliation based on sex, visual displays, and unwanted sexual attention, physical interference with individuals and overt and covert pressure for sexual favors constitute sexual harassment. Further, in this study, almost all participants have consensus that male dominance and power relation and double standard for male and female are the core causes of sexual harassment in University. Study also revealed that senior students harass the junior or new comers because they are not aware of university environment.

The purpose of this study is to sensitize the understanding about the sexual harassment among university students as sometime people confuses harassment with other behaviors like flirting sometimes feels good whereas sexual harassment not and if other person feel same than is mutual consent exist. Stein (1994) stressed that flirting and joking are different from sexual harassment as these are enjoyable but sexual harassment annoys. However, when something offends the person then it may be sexual harassment. Monroe (1999) states that however sexual harassment is not compliment of friends or mutual jokes, conversely mutual relations must continue.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, this research aimed at exploring the perceptions and understanding about sexual harassment in academia. The

focus of study is sensitization about sexual harassment in academia. Despite the limitations of this study, researchers believe that these findings will make valuable contributions in this regard. This research shows that female students have better understanding about the phenomenon of sexual harassment and they perceive it as an issue of considerable magnitude in academia and difference exists in gender plays a role as females take it seriously while males take it lightly and do not include most of their behaviors as sexual harassment. Most of the students perceive that only male harass females and the reason behind it is the male dominance and double standards for male and females in our society and lack of ethical/moral training of children by their parents.

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