



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Exploring Workplace Incivility and Harassment against Women at University Level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: A Qualitative Approach**

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**ABSTRACT**

Workplace harassment is one of the mostly reported issues confronted by women in the modern day workplaces around the globe. Studies have found varying causes underlying the phenomena of workplace harassment in various time and places. This study aims to learn about various contributing factors and underlying causes of workplace harassment within the universities of Pakistan. A qualitative research method was adopted to collect data from 12 female faculty members of Hazara University Mansehra through an interview guide. The collected data was thematically analyzed as suggested by Braun and Clark (2006). Four major themes were extracted, and the results reveal that female workers are confronted various forms of workplace harassment. Furthermore, the findings indicated that patriarchy in the institution, a lack of proper implementation of workplace harassment policies, and a power imbalance between male and female workers contribute to workplace harassment. The majority of men occupy authoritative positions in institutions that contribute to workplace harassment. The government and institutions ensure the proper implementation of policies within workplaces and also organize awareness programs to provide workers with knowledge about policies related to workplace harassment.

**Keywords:** Discrimination, Harassment, Patriarchy, Power, Workplace

**Introduction**

Workplace harassment is widely explored in various settings since 1980s when the pioneering work of Leymann has conceptualized and articulated the idea of negative behaviors in occupational settings (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010; Zapf & Einarsen, 2005). The phenomena of workplace harassment is extensively defined as "the repeated actions intended to inflict psychological distress on one or more individuals, for various reasons, and they lack the ability to protect themselves" (Michail Michailidou & Mavromoustaki, 2023). Although subsequent studies since Leymann have employed various terms such as harassment, bullying, or harassment at work, there is a consensus among most scholars that these terms denote a similar or identical conduct (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010).

Harassment in the workplace is a prevalent and escalating issue in contemporary workplaces (Rahman et al., 2024). Studies have found that every individual has to deal with the sad reality of harassment at work. The concept of harassment encompasses not only psychological form but also extends to ethical and sexual aspects (Michail Michailidou & Mavromoustaki, 2023). The cause of harassment may differ according to the circumstances and the environment in which it occurs (Wajahat et al., 2021). As societies evolved to become more multifaceted and complex, the nature, forms and incidence of harassment correspondingly varies across societies (Rahman et al., 2024). The term workplace harassment denotes interpersonal conduct that has the objective of causing harm to another worker within the work environment. It has unquestionably negative impacts on one's physical and emotional well-being, as well as their ability to effectively perform at workplace. It can manifest as abusive language, physical or violent

aggressiveness, bullying at work, or sexual misconduct (Singh & Ramdeo, 2023). Workplace misconduct also refers to sexual misconduct or unwelcome sexual contact within professional environments. This conflation has become increasingly common in the last few years, likely influenced by the wider cultural and social implications of the *Me Too* movement. However, significant academic focus has been directed toward the issue associated with sexual harassment in job settings (Waugh, 2023). Within the legal framework of the European Union, sexual harassment is defined as any kind of undesirable nonverbal, verbal, or physical behavior of a sexual nature that aims to violate an individual's esteem, particularly by creating an adverse, demeaning, insulting, or offensive atmosphere (European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), 2023). Gender harassment refers to actions that express derogatory, antagonistic, or demeaning sentiments regarding an individual's gender, frequently directed towards women. The actions are not intended to provoke sexual interactions and may not always contain sexually explicit content (Madsen & Nielsen, 2023).

## Literature Review

The patriarchal structure in Pakistan has led to a pronounced imbalance between genders in areas such as schooling, job prospects, and decision-making processes (Naseer et al., 2016). In industries predominantly occupied by men, cultures characterized by hostility towards women, encompassing sexual assault, bullying, and passive-aggression actions, frequently gain acceptance (Sarwar, 2024). In Pakistan, women often experience a deficiency in confidence, leading them to go through their struggles in silence, due to their personal vulnerabilities (Humayoun, 2017). Consequently, they obscure occurrences of sexual misconduct in order to safeguard their image (Sarwar, 2024). Historically, women have been viewed as marginalized and relegated to a secondary status, while men have been perceived as holding a superior position within the organizational structure of numerous groups, institutions, and places of employment (Österman & Boström, 2022).

An imbalance of power within a company is a main driver in harassment at work. Harassment may occur when individuals in a position of power use their power to intimidate or control others, such as when managers harass employees. The disparity in power dynamics among men and women is indicative of the working atmosphere, revealing how such settings can be unfriendly and threatening to those who are marginalized, particularly women (Österman & Boström, 2022). Due to stereotypes about gender-based responsibilities, women are mistreated in certain industries because they are seen as less suitable. In the pursuit of advancement and attaining elevated positions within the organization, certain men factions appear to promote an atmosphere that contribute to harassment of women, thereby hindering their promotional opportunities. Women are used as a tool by males to keep them in subordinate positions at work through harassment (Rehman et al., 2021).

The presence of gender bias and prejudice constitutes a significant factor contributing to the harassment of women in job settings. The disparity in treatment and inequitable practices faced by women within an organization, particularly when compared with their male counterparts regarding promotions, work tasks, compensation, and additional benefits, may create an environment conducive to harassment. The aggression exhibited by men for women, rooted in gender dynamics, manifests through gestures, actions, and remarks intended to undermine their dignity. Each year in Pakistan, a significant number of female workers' experience harassment from their male colleagues in various workplaces (Rehman et al., 2021; Ali et al., 2022).

Further lack of reporting the incidents of harassment from women to the appropriate authorities also contributes to the prevalence of such harassment. Merely 5% of victims' report harassment occurrences; women often refrain from reporting owing to fears of job loss, stigmatization, shame, patriarchal influences, and inadequate responses to victims. One issue is that women refrain from reporting incidents due to insufficient support

from authorities to hold the perpetrators accountable (WHO, 2012; Keplinger et al., 2019). Conversely, women often abstained from reporting because of their distinct individual pursuits. Numerous educational institutions fail to address this issue with the seriousness it warrants, perceiving such occurrences to be normal within the institution. Consequently, victims find themselves unable to confront the situation alone and frequently refrain from reporting it. There is a decrease in the number of institutions that demonstrate their level of urgency and worry about the matter (Abe, 2012). Women quit from their positions rather than report harassment to authority due to the ineffectiveness of organizational policies (Vara-Horna et al., 2023). During the #Me Too movement, numerous individuals affected by the phenomenon reported their experiences, finding peace in the act of sharing what happened to them (Rubab & Sultana 2022; Ali et al., 2022).

Additionally, the prevalence of male dominance and patriarchal structures within an organization fosters an environment favorable for harassment of women across various contexts, including at work. These concepts are deeply embedded in societal norms and institutions that afford men greater privileges and authority over women, thereby reinforcing sex disparities. The phenomenon of sexualizing and demeaning women's bodies manifests within established patriarchal frameworks (Keplinger et al., 2019; Oliphant et al., 2020).

## **Material and Methods**

### **Nature of the study**

Owing to the exploratory nature of the topic, this study has used qualitative research paradigm and phenomenological research design. The study locale was Hazara University, Mansehra. Data was collected from female faculty members of Hazara University through proportionate sampling technique.

### **Population and Sample Size**

The researcher collected data from 15 respondents from the targeted population, reaching saturation point on the 12th interview. In-depth interviews were conducted to collect data from the targeted population. The researcher employed an interview guide to collect data, which contains open-ended questions.

### **Data analysis**

The collected data were transcribed from the local language (Pashto and Urdu) to English. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis as suggested by Braun and Clark (2006). Codes were formed and grouped with the generated themes from the data. Review all the generated themes and confirm that the codes were appropriate for each theme. To ensure the quality of the data analysis, the researcher included original text in thematic statements. Moreover, the researcher extracts four major themes from the collected data through interviews, adhering to Braun and Clark's (2006) procedure. Themes include experience of WPH, patriarchy in institutions, lack of proper policy implementation of harassment policies in the institution, and power imbalance.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical consideration is one of the significant components in scientific investigation. Scientific and exploratory study on this topic was challenging as it deals with socially and culturally sensitive issue of workplace harassment. Therefore, a great deal of care was thoroughly maintained to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the respondents. The data was collected and analysed carefully and no name, personal information and location of the respondents were kept secret and the information provided were analysed for

academic purpose only. Furthermore, care was also observed to mention that the information provided to any universities or institute of higher education in the study locales.

## Results and Discussion

### Experience of Workplace Harassment

Harassment at the workplace usually disturbs the life of a female employee where she works. It is a compelling issue that profoundly impacts the lives of women. In this intimidating work environment, women workers find it difficult to focus on their tasks effectively. The threat of harassment at work leads women to avoid contact with male coworkers. Furthermore, the experience with WPH imprints the female mind's horror image of the male counterpart. Waugh (2023) asserts that women have consistently participated in the workforce throughout history, yet harassment and discrimination have often tainted their experiences. Many communities have historically marginalized, repressed, and viewed women as inferior to men. A respondent experienced WPH narrates:

*"I experienced harassment in the working environment from my male counterpart. Upon my arrival at the department, my two coworkers engaged in a discussion about my outfit and referred to me by various derogatory names. I am young, which is why they make comments about me, and I believe that young women are more prone to harassment at work."* One other respondent said that:

*"I experienced harassment in the working environment from my male counterpart. Upon my arrival at the department, my two coworkers engaged in a discussion about my attire and referred to me by various derogatory names. I am young, which is why they make comments about me, and I believe that young women are more prone to harassment at work. The head of the department discriminates against me by assigning supervisory roles to male colleagues. He asserted that, as a woman, I am unfit for such roles, and I viewed this as a form of workplace harassment."* Another study participant point out that:

*"I have never experienced harassment at work. I was there as part of the teaching faculty for a couple of years. The men and department heads where I teach respect me in every department. I am a young and new lecturer, but my male counterpart never felt that I was a female and inferior; rather, they respected me as they respected senior teaching faculty members."*

### Patriarchy in institutions

Pakistan exhibits a patriarchal social structure across all social settings. The family and institutional structures are patriarchal, with men in charge. Men hold the top positions in the hierarchy of various institutions. In an environment where men occupy the majority of administrative and decision-making roles, the women feel marginalized and helpless (Rehman et al., 2021). The respondent said:

*"There is male dominance in the workplace, and this patriarchal environment leads me towards harassment. My file work is delayed by the head of the department, who was originally harassing me because I am female. Furthermore, I am not afforded the same opportunities for supervisory roles, such as exam internal controller or other similar roles, as men are."* Another respondent narrates that:

*"Whenever I spoke in an important meeting, silence would interrupt me because of my gender. My male counterpart, especially the department head, frequently deprived me of speaking out in meetings. I once presented my point of view in a meeting, but they did not give much importance to it."*

### **Lack of proper implementation of harassment policies**

Institutions that implement harassment policies improperly contribute to workplace harassment. The proper implementation of policies serves as a preventive measure against workplace harassment. It regulates male workers' unwanted attention and attitude toward female workers. Keplinger et al, (2019) study found that harassment persists at the workplace due to not reporting the harassment case to the authorities. The respondent said that:

*"I do not report the harassment case because I have a fear of retaliation, and authorities do not take proper action against the perpetrator. I also have the fear of losing my job after reporting the harassment case and harming my professional reputation at the institution. The institution does not properly implement harassment policies, making the harassment acts ineffective. The respondent added that most employees are unaware of harassment."* Another respondent narrates:

*"In terms of abuse, I experienced harassment from my male colleague, and I reported it to the authorities. The authority created a committee in which male members were gender biased and did not support my case; rather, they insisted on taking my case back because it would have stigmatized you in the institution. This committee is biased and shuts down cases with the perpetrator's apology. These are the primary reasons I believe the policies within the institutions are ineffective."*

### **Imbalance of power**

The distribution of power also reflects the workplace environment. Typically, power imbalances within institutions lead to a range of issues, including workplace harassment. Harassment occurred in a setting where authority is only held by men. In order to maintain their power within the institution, these authorities foster a hostile environment where female workers are constantly at risk of harassment. Studies of Österman & Boström, (2022) found that discrimination in power distribution within workplaces contributes to harassment in the working environment. A respondent narrates that:

*"Men occupy the majority of authoritative positions in our institutions, leading to a power imbalance that discriminates against me as a female worker. Such imbalances cause workplace harassment, such as commenting on my dress and physical appearance. The department head discriminates against me by assigning supervisory roles to male colleagues, claiming that I am not capable of handling them as a female, a behavior I perceive as workplace harassment."* Another respondent stated that:

*"Power imbalances lead women workers to harassment. Such a problem arises when men hold authoritative positions within institutions. I have encountered various unwanted jokes from my male colleagues in the workplace. Male coworkers occasionally treat me unfairly, which constitutes harassment for me as a female employee."*

### **Discussion**

The number of women entering the labor force is increasing daily in workplace settings, where they collaborate with men to contribute to the economy. The growing number of working women creates various problems for women in the workforce; one of the major issues facing working women is workplace harassment. Harassment disturbs the working equilibrium of female employees, which in turn disrupts their entire lives. They frequently face threats of harassment, which can have a significant impact on their lives. The harassment in the institutions occurs due to various factors, and such contributing factors trigger the problem of workplace harassment. The study's results indicate that the patriarchy within institutions, inadequate implementation of harassment policies, and

power imbalances are the primary causes of harassment. Additionally, the study shows that working women encounter harassment in their workplaces. Male coworkers harass female employees by calling them various names, which is considered harassment. Male coworkers often make various comments and jokes against female employees, which constitutes harassment. Mostly young female workers are vulnerable to workplace harassment. Traditionally, men have held leadership and management positions due to their inherent organizational authority, whereas women hold lesser employment positions (Kapila, 2017; Mahfooz, 2020). The percentage of women applying for positions with them is likewise lower due to the intimidating and male-dominated organization/institution (Anwar and Burfat, 2021). Experiencing workplace harassment (WPH) presents numerous challenges in the lives of women. Sometimes women who experience harassment at work want to give their resignation, and sometimes they want to switch jobs. The resignation and switching to a new job create more problems in women's lives. Pakhtoon communities forbid women from leaving the house or working in environments with mixed genders. The institution also shows respect for female workers due to their unique geography and culture. According to the study's findings, working women in Pakhtun society's institutions have a secure environment in which they feel safe. The primary cause is Pakhtun societies' strict cultural norms, which restrict women from working outside and limit them to taking care of their families and children (Shad et al., 2023). Not all female employees experience harassment; some have the same opportunity to work as male coworkers. Because they live in a rigid Pakhtun culture that values women and accords them more respect, the male counterpart respects women at work. WPH has a wide range of effects, including social, psychological, and professional ones. Due to the fear of WPH harassment, many women have no permission to work outside the home, especially in Pakhtun society. These families also have a fear of stigmatization in society, which is a barrier for women to work outside. But there is a strong social justice system in Pakhtun society, which has its own penalties for the accused. Such a system helps reduce the harassment of women in society. According to Shad et al., (2023) women's stigmatization in society and male dominance also prevent them from reporting cases of unacceptable conduct that they witness from their male counterparts while working. In Pakistan, the patriarchal structure persists in all aspects of life. Patriarchy is prevalent in both institutional and family settings, leading to instances of harassment within these settings. According to the study, female workers experience harassment due to male dominance in the institution. The bosses delayed work, which is a sign of harassment. Harassment occurs when those in positions of power use their power to intimidate or control others, and it occurs when supervisors harass their subordinates (Österman & Boström, 2022). Male dominance and patriarchy in organizations keep WPH in various settings, such as the workplace. The patriarchy has a strong presence in society everywhere, and men are more authoritarian in institutions than women (Keplinger et al., 2019; and Oliphant et al., 2020). The main mechanism that maintains women's subordination to men is patriarchy (Anwar & Burfat, 2021). Improper implementation of harassment policies also contributes to harassment in the work environment. Female workers often refrain from reporting harassment cases because they fear retaliation, the possibility of losing their jobs, the authority's failure to take appropriate action against the victim, and the ineffectiveness of the harassment policies. Sometimes the employees are unaware of the harassment acts. Female employees mostly consider that we are living in a rigid culture, which is a barrier to reporting harassment. Another barrier to reporting harassment is the fear of stigmatization within institutions and society, particularly among victims. Male employees exhibit gender bias and fail to support females in cases of harassment, increasing women's vulnerability to harassment and rendering the institution's policy ineffective. Abe, (2012) study found that Since victims are unable to handle the situation on their own and are frequently hesitant to speak about it, many educational institutions fail to take this issue seriously. They believe that these kinds of incidents are common in the institution. Harassment also causes stigmatization of women employees in the institution and in society. The institution's insufficient support for female victim employees prevents women from reporting harassment and makes policies ineffective. In such cases, a lack of societal support also

makes the policies effective inside and outside of the institutions. In the study of Keplinger et al, (2019) found that women do not report harassment cases due to the fear of embarrassment, stigmatization, lack of response to the victim, and losing their job. But the study of Rubab & Sultana, (2022) found that #Me Too movement make the women confident to report harassment cases and feel comfortable while sharing such experiences. Moreover, harassment occurs in the working environment due to the imbalance of power distribution in the workplaces. Such workplaces concentrate power and authority in the hands of men, thereby subjecting women to harassment. The findings indicate that assigning the supervisory role to male employees leads to discrimination against women in the workplace. The male counterpart claims that females cannot handle such roles, which she perceives as workplace harassment. The study of Rehman et al., (2021) finds that women are considered less suited for some positions as a preconceived notion regarding roles based on gender.

### **Conclusion**

Harassment affects women from all walks of life for various reasons. Harassment at work disturbs the overall equilibrium of workplaces. Women workers experience harassment in terms of comments, calls with various names, and delaying their work with the intention to harass women workers. Patriarchy is the cause of harassment against women at work. In such institutions, men exercise authority and power, leading to discriminatory conduct, which women workers perceive as harassment. Furthermore, these institutions often fail to properly implement policies against harassment, which prevents victims from reporting such incidents. The victims often face inadequate support, and in certain instances, the perpetrator's apology serves to resolve the case. Moreover, the imbalance of power also creates a hostile environment for women workers.

### **Recommendations**

Government institutions, organizations, and educational institutions ensure the proper implementation of harassment policies. Further, the educational institution may hold seminars and awareness campaigns regarding harassment acts. Moreover, the Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) workplace harassment by conducting workshops on workplace harassment for mass awareness. The role of media is crucial in highlighting the cases related to workplace harassment and they must ensure proper reporting through research and follow up procedures.

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