

Sexual Harassment in Academia: University Female Student's Experiences and Reporting of Sexual Harassment in Pakistan

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Abstract:

The research examined University female student's experiences and response to 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. Then thematic analysis was done, and in thematic analysis, six themes were emerged. It was explored that University female students face harassment in one way or the other. The perpetrators include (a) fellow students (b) administrative staff, (c) outsiders and (d) none of the respondents have personal experiences of harassment from their instructors, however, their collective view was that very few teachers are involved in this act. Most of the respondents said they tried to avoid the perpetrator, however, a few respondents reported either to their family members and their teachers. Harassment caused physical, psychological stress and also badly affected the academic performance of students.

Key words: Sexual harassment, university, female students, academia

Introduction

Sexual harassment is a subjective phenomenon the description of which varies from person to person. An act which one person considers as sexual harassment may be considered a joke or flirtation by another. York (1989), states that sexual harassment is purely a subjective phenomenon and "Behavior that one person considers as sexual harassment another might see it as an innocent flirtation" (381). So, the person who faces sexual harassment can explain the phenomenon well. Different people face different types of harassment and the mode of occurrence of harassment may also vary as for example, a person may be constantly harassed by one person or he/she may also face harassment from different individuals in different situations.

In an academic setting, the type of harasser especially in gender harassment may include the supervisor/teacher, fellow students, administrative staff etc. According to Fitzgerald (1988), no research has been conducted related to the behavior of teachers related to harassment. Fitzgerald (1988) conducted a study by taking a response of 235 faculty members using structural analysis a considerable number (26%) of whom reported that they harass their students. According to Paludi (1991) of teachers are involved in sexual harassing their students it may be the worst kind of harassment because it involves power relation.

The response to sexual harassment by victim can depends on many factors. The reporting and response to sexual harassment may vary according to so many socio cultural context and individuals own standing. Mostly in academia the victims especially the students report to their instructor. But mostly the authorities and administration ignore it because harassment is intangible an unconscious phenomenon that permits authorities to ignore it. (Paludi 1991). Hoffmann (1986) had a view that educational institutions mostly ignore the

structural detail underlying the issue of sexual harassment that's why the situation is worsened for the victim. If sexual harassment is not addressed properly it can affect student's mental, physical and academic performance (Paludi 1991). Similarly Connell and McDermut also have found out that female students who face sexual harassment face posttraumatic stress disorder (Connell 2000; McDermut 2000).

This research aimed at finding the pattern of experiences of University female students about sexual harassment using multi method data collection technique. According to Adams (1983), females are more likely than males to report experience with the subtler forms of harassment. This research also covers the mode of occurrence of sexual harassment, reporting and various types of impacts of harassment on female students. This study answers the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of University female students regarding the sexual harassment?
2. Who are perpetrators in academic context?
3. In which ways female students are affected by sexual harassment?
4. What are the reporting trends among University female students about harassment?

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 researchers strived to discover sexual harassment in particular context of academia among University female students.

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 a public sector university of Lahore, Pakistan.

Sample:

Sample is a portion of a population (McNabb 2008). The researchers conducted their 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 program in Punjab University hostels. Reason for selecting part two students was that they were considered by the researchers that they may not hesitate sharing their experiences, if any. To select the sample hostilities University female students was feasible for researcher to access the site and to collect data. The data was collected through in-depth unstructured 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 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 University 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 findings. After interpretations six themes were emerged that are discussed in finding.

Findings

In this study, the focus is on personnel experiences of university female students that include the mode of occurrence, way of reporting and impacts of sexual harassment on female students.

The Perpetrator:

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

1. Male Students:

University Female students described that male students give their mobile numbers to their friends and harass them in different ways. *Students usually took mobile numbers then give their friend and they also harass University female students in different ways.* Boys tease female students on roads and

underpasses and bridges of the university. *I was walking on the footpath they knowingly collide their bike with me and I fell down.* Others ways used by male students is to discuss about female students and sharing indecent jokes in presence of girls students. Mostly they show these behaviors outside of their own department. *Boys stand close to girls and, share vulgar jokes with one another. They usually discuss the girls of their class. They call bad names for girls. They also call one of our class fellows as "Masi" and "Zubaida Appa".* Female student's point of view is that newly enrolled male students do such activities because most of the students in university come from small cities. So for that matter they do not have manners about how to behave with girls and how to show respect for them. *Mostly students of BS (hons) do so.*

2. Administrative Staff:

According to female students administrative staff or clerical staff also harasses them. One respondent said that *I faced harassment from a clerk.* 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"* another respondent's view was that the clerical staffs try to free with the female students. Another respondent said. *"One person in administration of our department used to give his phone number to girls.*

3. Outsiders:

Students share different experiences of sexual harassment from outsiders. Some respondents said, *"When students come back to hostel many people disturb them on the under pass and people on vehicles ask them "Lift chahye".* Others shared that outsiders are a major source of sexual harassment. *I myself has experienced that outsiders mostly beggars and some "Rikshaw wala" show indecent exposure. Infect outsiders are a major source for harassing female students. This is a common practice by outsiders. Outsiders gave unbearable comments when we pass on university roads even in*

front of our departments.

4. Male Teachers:

Most of the respondents said that teachers are rarely involved in such behavior. *Students, employees, even some teachers and outsiders are involved in this.* However the consensus of students is that the teachers are least involved in the act of harassing female students as one student responded, *"I think teachers are rarely involved in such activities. However if they are involved this is the most serious type of harassment"*.

Mode of Occurrence of Sexual Harassment:

From the transcriptions it came to know that there are two ways of occurrence of sexual harassment. Either one person constantly harasses a student or students face harassment from different harassers at different times. Some students face repetitive harassment from the same perpetrator e.g. one respondent said:

1. Constant by one perpetrator:

It happened for a lot of times. Every day I have to listen something new and wrong against me. You know harassment is the worst thing for a girl. He constantly disturbed me for one year.

2. More than one perpetrator:

Most of the students face harassment from different harassers at different times. *It evoked many times. I faced harassment many times in different forms.* I came to know from the data that the harasser use different tricks to harass female students which include different kinds of threats, text messages and wrong calls. Some of the excerpts from transcriptions describe different kinds of threats that female students face.

He threatened me in many ways as I have already told you that I got a lot of threatening messages a lot of unknown calls and a lot of worst things happened against me to which I was not aware. Some other boys used to follow me and I knew that is all about of that single boy. When he said that he will

upload my pictures I terribly got afraid. He sent me messages that if I don't attend his call he will upload my number on internet with my picture. He said that it's not a big deal for me to kidnap you. I will kidnap you and I will kill you. No one will ever come to know that where are you gone.

Most of the respondents said that she faced threats on mobile phones.

I also got harassment on mobile phone. Actually his sister was my hostel fellow. I think he took my cell number from her and then started threatening me on mobile. He used to miscall for hours and when I change my mobile number he again took my number.

One of the respondents said,

"Everyday new person tried to tease me new, calls, new messages received I was afraid of him because he was destroying my reputation was not like before". Still another said that, "Whenever there was a threatening message on my mobile I replied and requested him to not to disturb me".

Most of the respondents were threatened via mobile phones and emails.

Witnesses of incidence

It appears from the transcriptions that most of the witnesses are the friends. As they are also girls they cannot do anything and just try to console their friends.

"My friends are witnesses of the incidents of harassment. And these were all girls so they also just tried to console me. Two of my friends were with me. When he asked me to go outside, my friends got furious. They console me a lot. He said that you will be responsible for your result. I got tensed and I was weeping at that time. My friends console me. They also got disturbed. After that whenever he tried to tease me I discussed that with those friends."

It appears when friends witness harassment they try to console in different ways. However other people remain silent

observers. *“Only his friends witness him and did nothing. One of my class fellows observed it for some time then he asked me that he wanted to help me. I harshly said that there is no problem and you not need to worry about me. That boy was good but I was so afraid of boys that I do not want another harasser to disturb me”.*

Reporting trends about sexual harassment

Many female students do not respond to sexual harassment. As one respondent said

I tried to avoid him, I never spoke anything because I was here to complete my studies I do not want anyone to destroy my life.

Another said, *I responded it in many ways. I told it to my parents, to my siblings and to my friends. I tried to avoid him, I never spoke anything because I was here to complete my studies I do not want anyone to destroy my life.*

Two of the respondent said that they complaint about the incident still with a lot of fears of complaining.

I did not complain to anyone because I thought if I would complain to anyone then the problem would worsen and it would ruin my life. Many students do not tell to their parents *I took my parents to the head of my department. I told to my mother. I have already told that my parents are very innocent people. We live in a village. If I have told them about the actual situation I cannot complete my studies here.*

Impacts of Sexual Harassment

It appears that sexual harassment affects student's physical, mental health and academic performance. In addition the students who face harassment become isolated from other people they lose their trust on people around them and become socially isolated. As most of the female students said that they don't tell at their home that's why they face a lot of confusion and stress. One student said,

1. Physical Impacts:

"It affected my physical health. Due to this tension I always become isolated from others". Harassment had also bad impacts on the respondents however it varied from individual to individual. Another student said, *"It was disturbing my health and my relations".*

2. Psychological Impacts:

One respondent was so disturbed psychologically that she said, *"I felt myself as psycho. It was affecting my mental health affected very much from this issue. I felt myself tensed all the time.* Some of the respondents said that the harassers threats them that they will upload their mobile number and pictures on internet. This gives them a lot of tension. As it appears in the following excerpt

"When he said that he will upload my pictures I terribly got afraid. I want to sleep but I can't sleep for many nights.

3. Impact on Academic Performance:

In addition to physical and mental tension, it appears that harassment badly affected academic performance of students. As one of the respondents said, *"Above all my academic performance affected. I got average GPA in my second semester and it affected my CGPA.*

Another respondent said, *I could not focus on my studies"* Another respondent said, *"There was always a threat for me. But above all my academic performance affected. It affected my CGPA. And my family also impacted because I couldn't take position in class and it was just because of that boy. That was wrong and I knew that boy is doing all of it. I heard it with a lot of pain. Every day he sent new boys to follow me and threatened me".*

Discussion

Findings of this study reveal that University female students face harassment from fellow students, administrative staff,

outsiders and teachers. Students indicated that teachers are least involved in harassing University female students but if teachers are involved in this act this is the worst type of harassment and this reaffirms Paludi (1991) view that "Harassment from teachers to students can be worst because it involves power-relations and research proves that mostly sexual harassment occurs where there are power relations". Text messages, indecent jokes, calling bad names, sending emails are the different ways of harassing the University female students. Barak (2005) has studied specific points of cyberspace and online culture and technology that reinforce the phenomenon.

Respondents indicated that that sexual harassment affected them in different ways including their academic performance, physical and psychological health as well. These findings match with Fitzgerald (1997) that the victims of sexual harassment face anxiety, depression and various other psychological disorders.

The response to harassment varies from one respondent to the other. Some students said that they report to their parents and others discussed with their friends, however, none of the respondents used proper channel to report to the committees formed by Higher Education Commission.

Reasons of not following the proper channel for grievance may be fear of publicity of the issue or worsening the situation as some respondents said that if they have had reported to someone then the situation may have become worse for them that's why they didn't reported to anyone.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to sensitize University female students about sexual harassment in academia. It helped in knowing about their personal experiences about sexual harassment, their response to the phenomenon and the types of

perpetrators in academia. It was explored out that University female students face sexual harassment in one way or the other; however, most of them do not response or not use the proper channel to combat the phenomenon. The reason of no response to sexual harassment may be cultural. Harassment does affect their physical, mental health as well as academic performance. Although Higher Education Commission have proper policy guidelines to control sexual harassment in academia and had formed committees on harassment but still harassment prevails in academia. The reason may be students don't report to anyone so it is suggested that the reporting process should be made easy by ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

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