

## SEXUAL HARASSMENT OF FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND THEIR PARENTS' REACTION: POLITICAL RIGHTS OF WOMEN, LAW, EDUCATION, AND GOOD CHARACTER CHALLENGES IN PAKISTAN

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### Abstract

*The current study explored the sexual harassment of female university students and their parents' reaction: Political rights of women, law, education, and good character challenges in Pakistan. A qualitative research design and inductive reasoning method were used. A convenient sampling technique was applied to approach the sample of twenty female volunteer participants studied in the different government and private universities of Lahore, Pakistan. Their age ranges varied from 19-25 years, and they enrolled in the first to eighth semesters in the social and management sciences departments. Demographic information sheets and in-depth semi-structured interview protocols were used to collect data. The findings of the content analysis indicated the seven following major themes (1) the experience of sexual harassment, (2) the coping strategies of the victims, (3) the reaction of the parents after disclosing the incidents of sexual harassment by their daughters, (4) reconciliation of parents to let the daughters complete their education (5) consequences of the sexual harassment (6) rehabilitation strategies (7) how to reduce the phenomena of sexual harassment from the campuses, victim perspectives. The study's implications will be discussed in the cultural context of Pakistan.*

**Keywords:** Sexual harassment, female university students, law, parents, challenges of good character

### INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexual harassment is any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favors, or other verbal or physical sexual conduct that interferes with work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment (Canoni, 1999). Individuals from government organizations, private businesses, nonprofits, and educational institutions can all experience sexual harassment (McKinney, 1990).

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) found that sexual harassment is a significant issue in educational institutions worldwide. The study revealed that up to 10% of students in Europe and North America reported experiencing sexual harassment from a staff member or teacher. At the same time, in Africa, the number was as high as 21% (Singh, 2010). World Health Organization (WHO) found that sexual harassment is prevalent in schools and universities in low- and middle-income countries. Up to 27% of female students in these countries reported experiencing sexual harassment, most commonly being sexual comments, jokes, and gestures (Mumford et al., 2020). Association of American Universities (AAU) in 2019 found that over half of female graduate students and nearly half of female undergraduates reported experiencing sexual harassment. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) found that up to 75% of women in higher education institutions had experienced sexual harassment (Cantor et al., 2019). Findings of UNESCO (2019) revealed that in higher education institutions across Asia, it is up to 25 percent. The



American University of Beirut found that up to 66% of female students reported experiencing sexual harassment (Kiwani, 2018).

Aurat Foundation (Khan, 2012), a women's rights organization in Pakistan, reported that up to 96% of female students in the country had experienced some form of sexual harassment during their time at school or university. The study also found that up to 84% of female students reported feeling unsafe on campus due to the prevalence of sexual harassment. The issue of sexual harassment in educational institutions in Pakistan is further compounded by a culture of victim-blaming and a lack of support for victims. According to a report by Human Rights Watch, victims of sexual harassment in Pakistan often face social stigma, retaliation, and a lack of access to justice (Abbas & Jabeen, 2023). It can discourage victims from reporting incidents of sexual harassment and can perpetuate a culture of silence around the issue.

A national survey by Steine et al. (2021) of 49,051 Norwegian students revealed a substantial positive correlation between sexual harassment, nightmares, and insomnia. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-4) and a survey conducted by Browne and Finkelhor (1986), university students have depression rates 12.9% higher than those of the general population. The survey included 14000 students from 19 universities across eight countries and 14000 university students. There were several causes, but sexual assault and sexual harassment were the main contributors. The results are poor academic performance and more excellent study dropout rates (Barnum & Perrone-McGovern, 2017). Hubble and Bolton (2021) reported that the percentage of students who dropped out rose by 21% during the previous four years. The results of a study on cyber-sexual violence and negative emotional states among women at a Canadian university were illustrated by Cripps and Stermac (2018). Regardless of the participants' disclosure experiences, they found a substantial positive connection between posttraumatic reactions and sadness, Anxiety, and stress symptoms. Among students at Northeastern University in the United States, there was evidence of a substantial positive link between sexual harassment, stress, depression, Anxiety, and sleep quality (DelGreco & Christensen, 2020).

Murnen and Smolak (2000) found that cross-gender sexual harassment is associated with insufficient self-esteem and body image for girls but not for boys and that girls in Grades 3 and Grade 6 are more fearful of it than boys. Anxiety, melancholy, posttraumatic stress disorder, decreased productivity, and poor academic achievement are all effects of sexual harassment. It can have a severe negative impact on a person's academic performance and mental health consequences; the prevalence of sexual harassment in educational institutions is alarming.

The Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, passed by the Pakistani government in 2010 (Khan & Ahmed, 2016), offers employees legal protection from sexual harassment at work, including at educational institutions. The Pakistani government also passed the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act in 2016, which offers additional protection against sexual harassment in all areas of life, including educational institutions (Thakur & Kumar, 2019). This act was passed in addition to the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act. These regulations mandate that educational institutions set up internal committees to accept and look into sexual harassment claims. The committees must include at least one female member and offer a secure, private setting in which victims of sexual harassment can come forward. The committees must also take the necessary actions to look into and address sexual harassment claims, including, if necessary, disciplinary action against the offender. Although these laws offer legal protection against sexual harassment, Wajahat et al. (2022) point out that they still face difficulties in implementation and enforcement. The social stigma, lack of access to justice, and retaliation from the parents and society that sexual harassment victims may experience make them particularly vulnerable, and educational institutions may not be well-prepared to address allegations of sexual harassment.

In Pakistan, laws and regulations are in place to safeguard people from sexual harassment at educational institutions. To ensure that these laws are correctly applied and enforced and to remove the social and cultural barriers that support sexual harassment in Pakistani society, further work must be done. A secure and inclusive learning environment for all students must be established by



educational institutions and the greater community in order to prevent sexual harassment (Ahmad, 2019).

Research (Pershing, 2003; Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Kirkner et al., 2022) reported that sexual harassment frequently occurs in all walks of life and especially in education settings, but female students are still reluctant to seek official support to decrease the adverse effects of these encounters, including low academic achievements, absenteeism, fear, humiliation, and guilt. The risk of social ostracism, revenge, victim blaming, and inaction may be a risk factor that discourages reporting it. Thus the current study explores the experience of sexual harassment of female university students and their parents' reaction: Political rights of women, law, education, and good character challenges in Pakistan (Jamshed & Kamal, 2021). This topic is very sensitive in the cultural framework of indigenous custom, where honor killing is practiced over family reputation and characters instead of women's lives. Positive parenting is barely known, and psychoeducation on family concerns is stigmatized. This study can play a positive role in developing in-depth insight into the phenomena resulting in reducing the Problem of sexual harassment in educational institutions.

### MATERIAL AND METHODS

The current study aimed to explore sexual harassment of female university students and their parents' reaction: Political rights of women, law, education, and good character challenges in Pakistan. Approval from the Institutional Ethical Review Board was taken, and the volunteer participants signed an informed consent letter. A qualitative research design and inductive reasoning method were used. A convenient sampling technique was utilized for the sample selection. Twenty female university students who experienced sexual harassment on the campuses and disclosed it to their parents were requested to participate voluntarily in the current study. They were all registered for the counseling session to overcome the trauma of sexual harassment and were approached after taking all ethical considerations according to the manual of APA 7<sup>th</sup> edition. Their age ranges varied from 19-25 years, taken from the different government and private universities of Lahore, Pakistan. They were students of social and management sciences and enrolled in semesters one to eight. Their parents were working and mostly lived in the joint family system.

The time and place of interviews were decided as per the convenience of the participants, and the protocol of in-depth- semi-structured interviews with a demographic information sheet was posted/mailed to the participant after their telephonic consent to participate in the study. A personal information sheet was used to cater to the demographic characteristics of the participants, and an in-depth-semi structured interview protocol consisting of twenty-five multiple open-ended questions with probing statements was used for the interview purpose. Sample items of the in-depth semi-structured interview schedule were (1) can you please share the incident of sexual harassment you experienced on campus? (2) what was your first reaction to this incident? (3) Can you please explain your physical condition, psychological state, and emotional reaction you experienced at that time (4) how did you disclose this incident to your parents, and what was their reaction? (5) and how to reduce sexual harassment from educational institutions? All interviews consisted of 40-50 minutes on average and were audio-taped with the consent of the participants. Software of SPSS version 24 and descriptive statistics were used to analyze demographic information, while content analysis was used to interpret the information from the semi-structured interviews. All the interviews were transcribed, initial themes were identified, and supportive and major themes were segregated after incorporating the field notes and reflexivity report. Line-by-line, line-to-paragraph, paragraph-to-whole case, and case-to-case analyses were done to draw significant and supportive themes to get the complete picture of the phenomena of sexual harassment.

### Results

The current study aimed to explore sexual harassment of female university students and their parents' reaction: Political rights of women, law, education, and good character challenges in Pakistan. The following tables reported descriptive statistical analysis and content analysis results.



**Table 1**  
*Personal Information of the Study Participants (N = 20)*

Variables		f	Variables		f
Age (M = 20.05, SD = 08.13)			Mother Profession	Working	12
Education	1-4 Semester	10		Non-Working	8
	5-8 Semester	10	Father Profession	Employee	14
Department	Social Sciences	10		Business	6
	Management Sciences	10	Family System	Joint	14
Marital Status	Single	20		Nuclear	6

Table one shows that twenty female university students who experienced sexual harassment on campuses and told their parents about it experienced negative consequences in the form of physical, psychological, emotional, educational, and social consequences. Their age ranges varied from 19 to 25 years, and they studied in the Department of Social and management sciences. Most of them were enrolled in one to eight semesters.

**Table 2** *Experience of Sexual Harassment on Female University Students and its Coping Strategies (N = 20)*

Major Themes	Supportive themes	% of Problem
Experience of Sexual Harassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shocked</li> <li>• Unexpected</li> <li>• Uncertainty</li> <li>• Unable to understand it</li> <li>• Unable to concentrate on anything</li> </ul>	100 %
Physical Reaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Numbness</li> <li>• Lack of sleep</li> <li>• Nightmares</li> <li>• Loss of appetite</li> <li>• Loss of energies</li> <li>• Lack of interest in daily routine activities,</li> <li>• Headache, shoulder pain, and nausea</li> </ul>	80-90 %
Psychological and Emotional Reaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anger and aggression</li> <li>• Sadness, tiredness, and low energies</li> <li>• Loss of self-confidence and self-esteem</li> <li>• PTSD, embarrassment, feelings of guilt, and shame</li> <li>• Try to undo the incidence</li> <li>• Feeling of revenge</li> <li>• Wish for self-harm/dying</li> <li>• Fear of being blamed and stigmatized</li> <li>• Mood swings/outbursts of anger and rage</li> </ul>	70-80 %



Social and Academic Consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Loneliness/social isolation</li> <li>Avoid social gatherings/co-curricular activities</li> <li>Increased absenteeism and decreased academic performance</li> <li>Loss of interest in academia and class</li> </ul>	
Coping Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strat regular prayers</li> <li>Seek help through Quran- Pak</li> <li>Feeling filthy</li> <li>The outburst of crying/sadness/helplessness</li> <li>Increased absenteeism/avoided social gatherings/increased social isolation</li> </ul>	50-70 %

The effects of sexual harassment on female university students are discussed in Table 2. Findings revealed the Victims' first response to the event and how it affected their physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, social, and academic activities and coping strategies.

**Table 3** *The Reaction of Female Victims' Parents upon Disclosure of Sexual Harassment (N = 20)*

Major Themes	Supportive Themes	% of Problem
Mother's Reaction upon Disclosure of sexual harassment by their daughters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Physical aggression/ physical abuse</li> <li>Verbal abuse/ yelling/screaming</li> <li>Insisting on keeping quiet and do not dare to disclose it to any male family member</li> <li>Doubted about her daughter's character/degrading</li> <li>Threatening/manipulating</li> <li>Criticizing/ judging</li> <li>They tried to discontinue their education by saying, "To qualify a good spouse, good character is more important than study."</li> <li>Worried about the family's honor</li> <li>Apprehensions about to disclose this incident to the family members/neighbors/ acquaintances</li> <li>Repentance to give birth to "such daughter."</li> </ul>	100 %
Father's Reaction upon Disclosure of sexual harassment by their Daughters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Anger/aggression/overreaction</li> <li>Threat to discontinue education as "family honor and good character is more important than education."</li> <li>Blamed the mother over giving birth to "such daughter" and for failing to build good character of the daughter</li> <li>Worried about the family honor and future of the daughter</li> <li>Remained doubtful and lost trust</li> </ul>	100 %
Parents' consensus after the reaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Permit to rejoin the university half-heartedly</li> <li>Unable to justify the abrupt discontinuation of daughter education in families</li> <li>Try to forget the incident/silent sufferer/helplessness</li> </ul>	70-80



Consequences of disclosure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intensified the physical, psychological, emotional, social, and academic problems</li> <li>• Lost confidence and trust in relationships</li> <li>• Tried to minimize the interaction</li> <li>• Showed tantrum/preferred silence</li> <li>• Mood swings</li> <li>• Sleep and appetite problems</li> <li>• The pain of being misunderstood/blamed by their parents</li> </ul>	100 %
Upon restoring the education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She constantly feared being chased/bullied again.</li> <li>• Fear of stigmatization/blame/loss of respect from peers and faculty members</li> <li>• Low self-confidence/self-esteem/low academic performance</li> <li>• Social isolation/avoid co-extracurricular activities/class participation</li> <li>• Lost interest in education</li> <li>• Increased self-blame/ self-harm tendencies/suicidal ideation</li> <li>• Involved in sensation-seeking behavior/substance use disorder to reduce the pain of rejection</li> <li>• Become a culprit instead of a victim to take revenge or cope with rage.</li> </ul>	70-80 %

Table three indicates parents' reactions upon disclosing sexual harassment by their daughters. Its consequences are parents' consensus upon restoring the daughter's education and victim experiences upon rejoining the educational institutions after this trauma.

**Table 4** *How to Reduce Sexual Harassment in Educational Institutions? Victims' Perspectives (N = 20)*

Major Themes	Supportive themes
Implementations of Law Enforcement Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There should be a strict implementation of the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act 2016 and the Protection Against Harassment of Women Workplace Act 2010.</li> <li>• Anti-Sexual Harassment Act 2016 should be included in the student handbooks and displayed on the university's websites.</li> <li>• There should be zero tolerance for the harassment act and the harasser in educational institutions.</li> <li>• Awareness programs related to harassment should be introduced at the micro and macro levels.</li> <li>• Standard Operating system (SOPS) regarding the sexual harassment act and how to react and report this act should be displayed on the notice board and the main places of educational institutions.</li> <li>• Training programs should be introduced to the victims, and counseling programs should be available to rehabilitate the victims and culprits.</li> </ul>
Positive Parenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive parenting training programs should be introduced to individuals before getting married.</li> <li>• Training workshops for parents should be introduced to become aware of the phenomena of harassment and how a parent should react to this incident to reduce the harmful effects of the trauma instead of intensifying it by threatening/abusing the victims.</li> <li>• It must be focused on the <i>Tarbiyat</i> of both (male &amp; female baby children), especially since there is a dire need to cultivate a true sense of morality in the male child.</li> </ul>



religious authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Religious authorities from local mosques can play a positive role in spreading awareness regarding this social issue.</li> <li>• Religious leaders can help the father and the sons to establish a working relationship with each other.</li> <li>• Religious leaders can help father how to psych-educate their sons on sexual education.</li> </ul>
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Table four indicates how to reduce sexual harassment in educational institutions and victims' perspectives. Participants highlighted the role of positive parenting, religious leads, and implementation of the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act 2016 and the Protection Against Harassment of Women Workplace Act 2010 to effectively deals with the Problem of sexual harassment in educational institutions.

### DISCUSSION

A qualitative study was conducted to understand the phenomena of sexual harassment of female university students and their parents' reactions: Political rights of women, law, education, and good character challenges in Pakistan. Seven following significant themes were extracted from the content analysis (1) the experience of sexual harassment, (2) the coping strategies of the victims, (3) the reaction of the parents after disclosing the incidents of sexual harassment by their daughters, (4) reconciliation of parents to let the daughters complete their education (5) consequences of the sexual harassment (6) rehabilitation strategies (7) how to reduce the phenomena of sexual harassment from the campuses, victim perspectives.

Results of the current study have remained aligned with the findings of a meta-analysis and comprehensive review of the literature on the prevalence of sexual harassment and its effects on university students' mental health, showing that 14% of students experience outcomes related to suicide, and 25% of students experience depression. Mulugeta et al. (1998) found that early detection of sexual assault and harassment improved prevention and reduced the risk of mental health issues among the victims. They surveyed 1401 Addis Ababa and Western Shoa, high school students. They discovered that 72 female students had been raped, 74 reported having experienced sexual harassment, and 12 had given birth. They attempted suicide and experienced social isolation, fear, phobia, helplessness, and hopelessness. According to McGinley et al. (2016), there is a connection between persistent sexual harassment, substance use disorder, depression, and Anxiety.

A study was carried out by Kammer-Kerwick et al. (2021) on a sample of 17,039 students chosen from eight university campuses in the southwest. They discovered a strong connection between disengagement, posttraumatic stress disorder, and sexual harassment. Gdin (2012) did a qualitative study with first-graders in northern Sweden elementary schools between the ages of 8 and 11. He discovered that sexual harassment is a covert phenomenon that must be addressed even in the early stages to lessen its severe, long-lasting impacts on individuals and societies. Similarly, Dahinten (2003) found that harassment was experienced by 32% of Western pupils and that 6% of those incidents occurred before third grade. Additionally, he said that compared to their male counterparts, female students experienced more significant sexual harassment.

Pakistani women's political rights, especially education and protection from sexual harassment in higher education, have been emphasized recently. Pakistan's Constitution ensures gender-equal rights and opportunities. Pakistani women confront many obstacles to education and political rights (Shaheed, 2010). These challenges may include societal and cultural norms that limit women's movement and education and violence and harassment against women who exercise their rights. Peers, instructors, and others in power may sexually harass Pakistani women in higher education (Bhattacharya, 2014). It can make women feel unwelcome and discourage them from studying or being politically active. Pakistan has passed rules to protect students from sexual harassment. The Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act and the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act safeguard against sexual harassment in all settings, including schools (Critelli, 2010). The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan also has sexual harassment norms for universities and other higher education institutions. These laws and policies create a safe and inclusive learning environment to



defend Pakistani women's political rights. However, more must be done to enforce these laws and address the societal and cultural practices perpetuating sexual harassment in Pakistan (Clancy et al., 2020).

Sexual harassment affects all aspects of individuals, including psychological, physical, emotional, academic, and social well-being. The combined effort of legislation, policymakers, university management, and parents is required to reduce the Problem of sexual harassment on campuses positively. Inclusively it is the prime duty of the parents to encourage secure attachment patterns at the family level in which children can disclose bad happening to their parents without a communication gap. However, Woods (2023) reported the contradicting findings of the qualitative research conducted on 40 Queer female participants who disclosed their experiences with sexual harassment to their families and encountered severe adverse reactions and consequences in contrast to supportive parenting. Unfortunately, the same consequences were faced by Pakistani female university students after disclosing sexual harassment incidents to their parents.

Since sexual harassment is a global problem, and it has a significant issue in educational institutions in Pakistan, with up to 96% of female students reporting that they have experienced harassment during their time at school or university (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). Educational institutions and the larger society must proactively prevent sexual harassment and support victims. By taking these steps, we can create a safer and more inclusive learning environment for all students in Pakistan (Jamil, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

Sexual harassment among university students can have wide-ranging and long-lasting consequences for individuals, their parents, and the university community. Legislation, universities, parents, and religious leaders must take proactive steps to prevent sexual harassment and to provide support and resources for students who have experienced harassment or assault. Addressing this issue can create a safer and more inclusive environment for all students.

### Practical Implication

At institutional levels, the following support system can be ensured (1) Providing education and awareness programs about healthy relationships, gender equality, and consent can help prevent sexual harassment (2) Counseling and therapy can help sexual harassers understand the root causes of their actions and develop strategies to prevent future misconduct (3) Holding sexual harassers accountable for their behavior through legal and other means can be an essential step in rehabilitation (4) Engaging communities and organizations in creating safe and respectful spaces can help create a social environment that does not tolerate sexual harassment (5) Providing support and resources for survivors of sexual harassment can help them heal and reduce the likelihood of harassment in the future (6). Positive parenting is an approach to raising children that emphasizes the importance of building strong and healthy relationships between parents and children. It involves creating a nurturing and supportive environment where children can grow and thrive while setting clear boundaries and expectations (7). Sexual harassment can also be a criminal offense in many countries. Depending on the severity of the harassment, it may be considered assault, harassment, or stalking (8). Victims of sexual harassment may have legal recourse to seek damages through civil lawsuits. It may involve filing a lawsuit against an individual perpetrator or an organization that allowed harassment.

At individual levels, (1) resilience can be increased through training workshops as resilient females can overcome obstacles and setbacks to achieve their goals. (2) Perseverance (the ability to continue working towards a goal despite obstacles or setbacks), (3) self-confidence (the belief in oneself and one's abilities), (4) empathy (the ability to understand and share the feelings of others), (5) courage (the ability to face fear and take action despite it) and (6) creativity (is the ability to think outside the box and come up with innovative solutions to problems can be cultivated in the students to effectively deals with these challenging situations.


Furthermore, university management and policymakers can reduce sexual harassment issues in educational institutions by implementing a clear sexual harassment policy, setting extensive training



programs on reporting it, and rehabilitating the offenders to reduce such unpleasant incidents. The student handbook and university website contain this information, so knowing whom to contact and what to report is crucial—extending training workshops magnitude to the parents on how to react and psycho-educate their children to effectively deals with such challenges. It is also advisable to arrange professional help and counseling for victims and their parents to cope with the emotional impacts of harassment.

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