

Workplace Sexual Harassment and its Underreporting in Pakistan

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Abstract

Sexual harassment in workplace is a reflection of unequal power relationship among genders and should not be seen as isolated cases emanating from psychological or criminal roots. The practice of sexual harassment in the workplace occurs in occupations and industries which turns working environment for women into stressful, damaging, and hostile and make it difficult for them to achieve their rightful place in employment. Sexual harassment in the workplace is the most frequent form of gender-based violence occurring in Pakistani society characterized by patriarchy and gender segregation. When women attempt to join workforce and take economic responsibilities of family in opposite to predominating social norms, they have to suffer from sexual harassment. This speaks not just to the structure of the work place, but the entrenched culture of female objectification, which quite often paints women as mere recipients for male desire – views that are reproduced and perpetuated in a work place. This study is an endeavor to spot the causes of sexual harassment in the workplace in Pakistan; and what are the underlying factors which lead to under-reporting of the incidences of sexual harassment in the workplace. This study asserts that the patriarchal values prevailing in Pakistani society breed sexual harassment in the workplace also preclude victims to report the incidence by not giving them appropriate moral, cultural and legal support. This study argues that in an environment like Pakistan where rule of law is not prevalent in entire society so just having policies and awareness regarding these policies could not be a valid and significant element for lowering the sexual harassment experience in the workplace. Sexual Harassment in the workplace reflects the unequal power relationships between genders in patriarchy society of Pakistan and cannot be combated until patriarchal mindsets are changed which can be achieved only by transforming the existing patriarchal society itself that is producing such mindsets.

Keywords: Patriarchy; Sexual Harassment; workplace sexual harassment, Pakistan, Turkey

Introduction

Sexual harassment is a form of gender-based violence. Men may be subjected to sexual harassment but majority of the victims are women. Violence on the basis of gender is a reflection of unequal power relationship among genders and should not be seen as isolated cases emanating from psychological or criminal roots. The subject matter that runs through the literature on gender based violence is women's unequal power in patriarchal society. Sexual harassment is a form of gender discrimination that like many other crimes lies in all about, control and domination. It reflects the unequal power between genders in patriarchal society. The practice of sexual harassment in the workplace is the part and parcel of all occupations and industries. The United States' Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) defines sexual harassment as "unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature" that interferes with one's employment or work performance or creates a "hostile or offensive work environment". According to ILO, Sexual harassment as "Any physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature and other conduct based on sex affecting the dignity of women and men, which is unwelcome, unreasonable and offensive to the recipient. Where a person's rejection of, or submission to, such conduct is used explicitly or implicitly as a basis for a decision which affects that person's job; Conduct that creates an intimidating, hostile or humiliating working environment for the recipient." Hence, it may be described as a social control exerted by men to keep women in private sphere.

Sexual harassment in the workplace is one of the most prevalent forms of violence against women which turns working environment for women into stressful, damaging, and hostile and make it difficult for them to achieve their rightful place in

employment. EEOC classifies sexual harassment under two broad categories, namely hostile environment, and quid pro quo harassment. The most commonly recognized type of sexual harassment, "quid pro quo", comes from a Latin terminology which literally means "this for that". When a person submits to or refuses the immoral requests of the harasser and such requests are made for the employment decisions affecting the harassed individual, this is termed as a quid pro quo harassment. Failure to comply with harasser's requests or offers causes an adverse impact on employment procedures such as promotion, compensation and benefits, performance appraisals, and other conditions. In quid pro quo, harassers use threats or rewards of employment decisions to coerce sexual favors.

A hostile environment involves unwelcome sexual behavior or actions at work that yield a hostile, intimidating, or offensive workplace (Valente, et al., 2004). That's why it has been framed as the violation of basic human rights of women in that victims experience extremely stressful and damaging physical and psychological effects, which prevent these individuals from achieving their rightful place in employment and educational settings. Sexual harassment also was described as a form of social control exerted by men to "keep women in their place" (Sigal, 2006). Feminists argue that sexual harassment reinforces the concept that women have a subordinate role and treats women as objects and victims.

The sexual harassment in the workplace occurs in both developed and developing countries. It is asserted that between 30 to 50 percent of women in European Union, 50 percent in the United Kingdom (UK), 25 percent in US endure sexual harassment in the workplaces (Renate van Oosten, 2013). International Trade Union Confederation in 2008 put estimation that 30 to 40 percent of working women reported some form of harassment. Experts assert that with the increase in women paid labor force in recent years, now the percentage of women experiencing sexual harassment is much higher. In Nepal, 53.8 percent of women workers reported that they experienced sexual harassment in the workplace (ILO, 2004). Sexual harassment in the workplace in Pakistan is the most frequent forms of gender based violence in both formal and informal sectors. When women attempts to join workforce and take economic responsibilities of family in opposite to predominating social norms, she has to suffer from sexual harassment. This speaks not just to the structure of the work place, but the entrenched culture of female objectification, which quite often paints women as mere recipients for male desire – views that are reproduced and perpetuated in a work place. This study is an endeavor to find out the causes of sexual harassment at workplace in Pakistan, and what are the factors which preclude the reporting of sexual harassment in the workplace.

Sexual Harassment in the Workplace in Pakistan

Pakistani patriarchal society embraces cultural and religious norms that breed discrimination and gender-based violence on a daily basis creating situation that transgress the human rights of women and put constraints on their ability to get benefits from their basic human rights. Pakistani society is characterized by patriarchy and gender segregation. Gender is one of the important organizing aspects of Pakistani society and traditional gender roles still predominate. Gender relations are a social construct. Women, through the centuries have been perceived to be, and therefore are socially conditioned from an early age to be, subordinate to men. Society views that women are subordinate to men, and honor of man and family rest upon/lie in the actions and conduct of the woman of his family. The general consensus in the society holds men as the dominant, powerful and superior beings, whereas, women are often considered as weak and powerless in the society. As a result, society limits the mobility of women, put restriction on their behavior and activities and allow them only limited contact with opposite sex.

In the past few decades, the role of women in Pakistani society has been gradually started to change. Earlier women were restricted to their home and their primary role was to take care of household chores. With time, due to increase in economic pressures on families and access to knowledge and information, this restriction has been released. The tradition which seclude women and confine them to traditional gender roles to keep male contact to minimum have also been changed to some extent; now women in many families are permitted to attain higher education and do paid jobs, but under some restrictions; They work along with men in different formal and informal sectors and can choose varieties of jobs and occupation previously regarded only for men. Women do paid-work in fields including but not limited to, journalism, law, sales and marketing, information technology, and police; however, their representation in these fields is still very small. With these changes, men are still regarded primary bread earner of family but no longer regarded as the only bread earner of the family since many women are also financially supporting their families.

The entry of women into paid labor force has not liberated them from housekeeping which is considered the main activity of married women. They have to manage double burden both at office and house. Women have to manage the work place and also have to run a house as well which demands a full attention to her husband, kids, and in-laws. When married

women return home after the all-day tiring work of office, they have to do domestic chores, no matter how much tired they are.

Although the average annual growth rate of women works participation is rising slightly in Pakistan, which was 13.2 percent in 1990 and has gone up to 22.4 percent in 2017. But still women work participation is very low as compared to the south Asian countries. Women in Pakistan are half of the population, yet they constitute nearly one-fourth of the total labor-force. This mean that massive human resources are presently untapped, neither contributing to economic development of the nation, nor to enhance their own status in society. There are two major factors that preclude women to enter into paid labor force; they are socio-culture norms and sexual harassment. Firstly, Cultural values and gender norms regard the role of women is within the boundary of house. Living off the livelihood of a wife or daughter is regarded as shameful and embarrassing act. Besides that, there is stigma associated with women's work. Women who work outside the home are not viewed "respectable" in many social contexts. Since this stigma affects the whole family, other decision makers in the family—such as the woman's husband or in-laws— may restrict a woman's decision of whether to work outside the home. Secondly, the common occurrence of sexual harassment precludes women to join paid workforce. Sexual Harassment at work place discourages women in taking active part in economic and social development of society. The life of the women becomes miserable when she attempts to work and take financial responsibilities of family against societal norms. Hence, social constraints and hostile work environment deter women to join paid workforce.

Women render their services to shoulder the economic responsibility of the family for raising their living standard; however, environment associated with paid work in Pakistani patriarchal society is often filled with gender and sexual harassment. Sexual harassment at workplace is the leading form of gender based violence which working women are facing today in Pakistan. Large number of women faces Sexual harassment at workplace (AASHA 2002). It is almost impossible to obtain accurate figures on the incidence of sexual harassment in Pakistan where the topic is not publicly discussed. AASHA (Alliance against Sexual Harassment) (2002) demonstrated in its report that nearly 80 percent of working women including formal and informal sector in the country experienced sexual harassment at workplaces. Furthermore, this report revealed that compared with informal sector, the occurrence of sexual harassment in formal sector was higher reaching at 93 percent. Another study carried out by UNISON (2008) found that more than 50 percent of working women are sexually harassed in Pakistan; Truth is that most incidences of sexual harassment go unreported. As a result, the reported cases of violence on the basis of gender do not truly represent the occurrence of sexual harassment at workplaces. Parveen (2010), stated that during 2008 to 2010 only 520 incidences of sexual harassment in the workplaces were reported indicating that the incidences of sexual harassment often go unreported. Pakistani civil society vocal people have asserted that 70 percent of women experience sexual harassment at workplace; whereas other reports demonstrate the incidences up to 90 percent which show that the work place in Pakistan is not safe for women.

In Pakistani patriarchal society, in general, the working environment for women in paid labor force, is difficult and do not support women employees (AASHA 2002); women are perceived as an 'object' rather than a 'subject' and are given low and subordinate status in society. The occurrence of sexual harassment in the workplace speaks not just to the structure of the work place, but the entrenched culture of female objectification, which quite often paints women as mere recipients for male desire – views that are reproduced and perpetuated in a work place. Even increased access to education and information has often not succeeded in uprooting the deeply ingrained attitudes and concepts resulting in the widespread occurrence of sexual harassment in the workplace.

A significant number of people put blame on women for being sexually harassed. Even many women think that sexual harassment depends upon how women make their own environment; if they keep their personal boundaries, no one will dare to cross the boundaries and tease them. Indeed women should be strong enough that one should not dare to tease and sexually harass them but solely focus on how women make her environment which can either deter or motivate harasser is injustice. This implies that women can stop sexual harassment by bringing changes in their conduct and behavior. However, this denies the role of patriarchal structure which breeds sexual harassment in the workplace because of entrenched culture of women objectification.

The patriarchal values prevailing in Pakistani society breed sexual harassment in the workplace also preclude victims to report the incidence by not giving them appropriate moral, cultural and legal support. Given that sex – and anything related to the subject – is taboo in Pakistan, it comes as no surprise that sexual harassment is such a hush-hush affair. For the harasser, it is a harmless fun they could enjoy on a daily basis, however victims, endure the impairing and injurious physical, emotional, and psychological effects of sexual harassment and often feel compelled to remain silent.

Patriarchy Breeds Sexual Harassment

Individuals don't behave in a vacuum—everything about us takes shape in relation to social contexts larger than ourselves. As such, our perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and behavior are neither self-contained nor simply “out there” in society. Rather, they emerge through and reflect our participation in patriarchal society. Patriarchy originally means “the rule of father.” Its meaning extended to describe a more general system where the power is secured in the hands of men. Patriarchy, is both ideological (the beliefs, norms, and values about the status and roles of women in a society) and structural (women's access to and positions within social institutions) (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Patriarchy is based on a system of power relations which are hierarchical and unequal where men control women's production, reproduction and sexuality and this system imposes masculinity and femininity character stereotypes. This control has developed historically and is institutionalized and legitimized by several ideologies, social practices and institutions such as family, religion, caste, education, media, law, state and society.

Patriarchy promotes male privilege by being male dominated, male identified, and male centered. In patriarchal system women are perceived as an ‘object’ rather than a ‘subject’ and are not only treated as subordinate to men but are also subject to discriminations, humiliations, exploitations, oppressions, control and violence. Sylvia Walby in “Theorising Patriarchy” calls it “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (Walby, 1990). Men use coercion to achieve what conditioning fails to achieve (Millet 1970:8). Violence is one of the mechanisms used by men to control and subjugate women; and is a manifestation of unequal power relationship sustained by patriarchy. Patriarchy makes violence necessary for the sake of its existence. Walby (1990) have identified violence as a mechanism to keep women subservient to men; Reiser (1999); Meltzer (2002); Xie et al. (2011) argue that men are losing power, and that some men employ violence to assert their authority and other men exercise violence to reassert their declining authority, power and status. Sexual harassment is used as a tool to control women. In sum, Women employ face backlash because they have taken new roles which belong to men domains within patriarchy and sexual harassment in workplace is all about the manifestation of unequal power relationships between genders and is exercised to perpetuate patriarchal relations. It is used to remind working women of their subjugated and vulnerable status and force women's conformity to gendered roles. Patriarchal society is a direct cause of sexual harassment and the values and attitudes of both men and women emanating from the society are posing great challenge in the prevention and stoppage of sexual harassment.

Why Cases of Sexual Harassment are Under-reported?

Patriarchal structure and rigid culture not only breed sexual harassment but also deter women to step forward and speak up about sexual harassment. Most often victims feel compelled to remain silent fearing that their complaint against sexual harassment may get them into trouble in patriarchal society where in these incidences character of woman is brought into question rather than harasser and with it, the sanctity of her chastity and her eligibility for marriage or to stay in a marriage. Victim first experience the trauma of sexual harassment and then trauma of social harassment which is even more humiliating and disturbing. In Patriarchal society of Pakistan, victims are advised to ignore sexual harassment; on top of that this advice comes from women. Women enduring sexual harassment at workplace in Pakistan often tend to confront with harassment in different ways, ranging from ignoring harassers to get legal redress. Following are the three main factors that hinder victims to report incidences of sexual harassment.

(1) Feeling of Judgment, embarrassment or shame:

In a patriarchal society of Pakistan, prevailing dominant ideology links family honor to female virtue. women are scared, afraid and reluctant to discuss and report sexual harassment fearing that their own reputation and that of their families would be damaged/ruined; Even victim may not get support from her own family and be told that this was bound to happen; Better is that she ought to have stayed at home. Thus, many of our women themselves stay quiet over this harassment because they don't want to embarrass their families or become the talk of the town.

Women enduring sexual harassment are often labeled and stigmatized as either “troublemakers” or “loose” women looking for attention. Thus, the victim often becomes the accused with their appearance, private life, and character likely to fall under intrusive scrutiny deterring women to report the incidences.

(2) Fear of reprisal/retaliation:

Victims can be scared of the repercussions. Women are often deterred to report sexual harassment since they fear that

reporting a colleague especially a supervisor or boss may result in the abrupt loss of her job. Moreover, they fear that their harasser-employer may retaliate by blacklisting them and providing unfavorable reference information which can make it harder for them to find new gainful employment elsewhere. Women not only fear the losing jobs and career being threatened, they also fear that harassers may harm them in actual lives since harassers in most incidences retain higher positions. Therefore, women feel compelled to both resign from the job and search for new job; or victims may chose silence fearing the consequences of losing job and accept the abuse in the belief that nothing could be done about it.

(3) Gender-Biased Institutions and Weak Judicial System:

Most organizations in Pakistan have zero tolerance policy against sexual harassment but often without implementation. Rather than taking action against the offenders, senior management often suppresses the incidences and do not allow to be reported in order to secure the image of organization. This led woman to think that complaint about sexual harassment brings no results; this usually encourages the offenders to continue the offensive behavior. As a result, sexual harassment at workplace is a common phenomenon without being reported in Pakistan.

The burden of proof lies with the victim. If the harassment is verbal, which is often the case, then it cannot be proved and the man gets away with it. In addition, Women may find it difficult to prove sexual harassment in gender bias institutions and weak judicial system. On the reporting of sexual harassment in the workplace, Ali has rightly depicted the true picture of Pakistani society which deter sexually harassed victim to speak out. Ali stated that "Pakistani women generally go through three different levels of issues within SH (sexual harassment) process. Firstly, women endeavor to hide SH due to Islamic modesty and cultural traditions. Secondly, once they decide to take action there is a lack of redress at organizational and government level. Finally, once they report the issue they face victimization."

Conclusion

Pakistani society is characterized by patriarchy and gender segregation. Society views that women are subordinate to men, and honor of man and family rest upon/lie in the actions and conduct of the woman of his family. Pakistani patriarchal society embraces cultural and religious norms that breed discrimination and gender-based violence on a daily basis creating situation that transgress the human rights of women and put constraints on their ability to get benefits from their basic human rights. Sexual harassment in the workplace in Pakistan is the most frequent forms of gender based violence in both formal and informal sectors. When women attempts to join workforce and take economic responsibilities of family in opposite to predominating social norms, they have to suffer from sexual harassment. This speaks not just to the structure of the work place, but the entrenched culture of female objectification, which quite often paints women as mere recipients for male desire – views that are reproduced and perpetuated in a work place. For the harasser, it is a harmless fun they could enjoy on a daily basis, however victims, endure the impairing and injurious physical, emotional, and psychological effects of sexual harassment.

With the rise in influx of women to the workforce of Pakistan, phenomenon of sexual harassment has come to the limelight and thus gained attention of government of Pakistan which passed the Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Bill in 2010 in order to provide safe and sound environment to the working women. Turning the bill into a law was a big step but unfortunately, the law served as a piece of paper. Pakistan is also signatory to few International documents to advocate women rights at every platform such as UN Declaration on Violence against Women, where Article 2 specifically mentions sexual harassment and intimidation at workplace, but the element of practical implementation of rights are missing.

The patriarchal values prevailing in Pakistani society breed sexual harassment in the workplace and also preclude victims to report the incidence by not giving them appropriate moral, cultural and legal support. In such society where rule of law is not prevalent in entire society so just having policies and awareness regarding these policies could not be a valid and significant element for lowering the sexual harassment experience in the workplace. Violence against women is a human right issue and by taking the human rights approach, the mechanism of state and state actors can be made responsible for such violation of rights (Hadi, 2017). The serious and firm actions of status apparatus and state actors can reduce somehow the occurrence of violence against women. However, In order to eliminate sexual harassment, patriarchal system has to be changed which can be achieved by strengthening the social, political and economic position of women.

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