Whispers in the Corridors: Sexual Harassment of Female Students in Higher Education and the Islamic Call for Dignity

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Abstract

Sexual harassment is not only a violation of human dignity but also a painful reality that deprives students of the safe and respectful learning environment they deserve. In Islam, such behaviour is strictly forbidden as it violates the principles of modesty, *haya*, honour, and respect for women. This study examines the experiences of female students at the University of the Punjab, Lahore, to understand how harassment impacts their academic and personal lives. Using a cross-sectional descriptive design, data were collected from 100 students in the

Gender Studies, Sociology, Chemistry, and English departments through questionnaires and analysed using SPSS 19.0. The results revealed that harassment was most common among undergraduate students 83%, single women 88%, and urban residents 83%, with Punjab recording the highest prevalence 92%. The forms of harassment ranged from sexist remarks and sexual jokes to whistling and unwanted advances, leaving many students distressed and vulnerable. The findings highlight that sexual harassment remains a widespread issue in Pakistani universities, undermining both the mission of higher education and the Islamic call to protect dignity, respect, and women's honour.

Keywords: Sexual Harassment, Female Students, Higher Education, Islamic Values, Pakistan

Introduction

Sexual harassment is one of the most pervasive forms of gender-based discrimination, undermining the dignity, security, and equal participation of women in society. Although the term "sexual harassment" only became widely recognised in the mid-1960s, the problem it refers to has existed throughout history in various forms. The concept gained formal recognition in the United States with the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination based on race, colour, religion, national origin, or sex. This legislation also created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission EEOC, which later became instrumental in handling cases of sexual harassment in workplaces and educational institutions Joseph, 2015. Since then, the term has gained global recognition as an important social, legal, and moral issue.

In the academic setting, sexual harassment is particularly damaging. Educational institutions are expected to be safe spaces for learning, intellectual exploration, and personal development. They are tasked with shaping future leaders,

professionals, and citizens, and therefore carry a responsibility to ensure that all students, regardless of gender, can pursue their studies without fear or intimidation. Yet research across the globe indicates that universities and colleges have increasingly become spaces where harassment and intimidation occur. Such experiences not only traumatise students but also undermine their academic performance, career trajectories, and psychological well-being.

Sexual harassment takes multiple forms. Gelfand et al. 1995 classify harassment into three broad categories: gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion. Gender harassment involves behaviours—both verbal and non-verbal—that are hostile, humiliating, or degrading toward an individual based on gender. Examples include sexist jokes, derogatory comments, and condescending attitudes. Unwanted sexual attention includes persistent behaviours such as repeated requests for dates, intrusive comments about appearance, or attempts to initiate sexual relationships without consent. Sexual coercion occurs when bribes, threats, or abuse of authority are used to obtain sexual favours in exchange for academic or professional benefits.

Although all forms are harmful, research consistently shows that gender harassment is the most common type experienced by women, followed by unwanted sexual attention, with sexual coercion being less frequent but more severe Matchen & Desouza, 2000. Typical behaviours may include leering, unnecessary touching, offensive remarks about clothing or body, persistent unsolicited advances, circulation of sexually explicit material, and threats relating to grades, recommendations, or academic progress.

Global Context of Sexual Harassment in Academia

The problem of sexual harassment in academic institutions is not confined to a single region; it is a global concern. Hill and Silva 2005 describe sexual

harassment in educational institutions as a "forgotten secret," noting that administrators often deny or downplay its existence. In the United States, surveys have shown that over 80% of female students reported experiencing harassment at some point during their schooling or higher education. Many first-year female college students reported being targets of sexual harassment during their initial months of study Hill & Silva, 2005.

Similarly, studies in African universities reveal alarming statistics. In Ethiopia, surveys conducted at Bahirdar, Addis Ababa, and Jimma universities revealed that between 35% and 83% of female students had experienced harassment Mersha et al., 2013; Demise et al., 2002. In many cases, the perpetrators were not only fellow students but also faculty members or staff, reflecting institutional power imbalances.
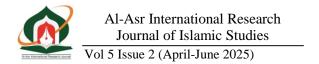
Sexual Harassment in the Pakistani Context

In Pakistan, sexual harassment is both widespread and underreported. Civil society representatives have estimated that between 70% and 90% of women face harassment in their everyday lives Naveed et al., 2010. However, cultural norms, stigma, and fear of retaliation discourage victims from reporting these experiences. For generations, harassment has been brushed aside as a "routine" part of women's lives, leading to silence and invisibility around the issue Sheikh et al., 2014.

In academic settings, this silence is particularly dangerous. Universities are expected to eliminate gender inequalities and promote inclusive learning environments. Yet many students, particularly women, face environments where harassment is normalised or ignored. This not only contradicts the mission of higher education but also undermines women's ability to achieve academic success and contribute equally to society.

Islamic Perspective on Sexual Harassment

From an Islamic perspective, sexual harassment is categorically prohibited. Islam places great emphasis on haya, modesty, respect, and the protection of dignity. The Qur'an commands both men and women to lower their gaze and maintain modesty:

> **"Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and guard their private parts; that are purer for them. Surely Allah is well aware of what they do. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their private parts…" Qur'an 24:30–31.**
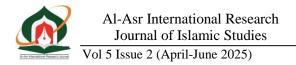
The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, emphasised that the best among people are those who treat women with respect and kindness. Exploiting women, whether through intimidation, coercion, or inappropriate advances, directly contradicts Islamic teachings of justice and dignity. Therefore, harassment within universities not only harms victims but also violates Islamic principles and the moral obligations of educational institutions in Muslim societies.

Impact of Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment impacts victims across multiple domains—academic, psychological, emotional, and social. Victims may alter their educational plans by dropping courses, changing majors, or avoiding certain faculty or peers Fitzgerald et al., 1997. Some withdraw entirely from higher education due to fear and trauma. Others suffer from diminished self-esteem, loss of confidence, anxiety, and depression Hotelling & Zuber, 1997. The psychological scars often remain long after the incidents themselves. Beyond individual harm, harassment undermines the broader educational environment. It creates climates of fear and inequality, discourages women's participation, and perpetuates gender imbalances. For institutions, ignoring harassment not only damages reputations

but also contradicts their duty to provide safe, inclusive, and productive spaces for learning.

In summary, sexual harassment at universities is not merely an individual problem but a systemic one. It undermines academic integrity, violates human rights, contradicts Islamic values, and obstructs national progress by limiting women's contribution to education and development.

Universities are ideally envisioned as spaces of knowledge, growth, and equal opportunity, where students can pursue education free from discrimination and fear. Yet, for many female students in Pakistan, this vision remains unrealised due to the persistent and often silenced issue of sexual harassment. Despite being a recognised global challenge in higher education Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Fitzgerald et al., 1997, harassment in Pakistani universities remains under-researched and underreported. Cultural and societal norms often discourage victims from speaking up, as they fear stigma, retaliation, or reputational damage Ali & Kramar, 2015; Noreen & Musarrat, 2018. Institutions, too, may avoid addressing the issue openly, fearing negative publicity or administrative complications McDonald, 2012.

This silence has serious consequences. Female students who face harassment often experience academic disruption, declining performance, psychological distress, and even withdrawal from education Tuncel & Aydemir, 2021; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012. In a country where women's participation in higher education is vital for social and economic development, neglecting their safety undermines not only individual potential but also national progress.

The problem becomes even more urgent in an Islamic context. Islam emphasises dignity, modesty, and justice in all human interactions. The Qur'an 24:30–31 instructs both men and women to uphold modesty, while the Prophet Muhammad,
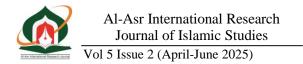
peace be upon him, strongly emphasised the protection of women's rights and honour. When universities fail to protect students from harassment, they not only fall short of their academic responsibilities but also contradict these fundamental Islamic values.

Recognising this, the present study seeks to give visibility to an issue often left in silence. Documenting the prevalence, forms, and impacts of sexual harassment among female students in Pakistani universities, it highlights the lived realities that are too often ignored. The findings will not only contribute to the limited academic literature on gender-based harassment in Pakistan but also serve as a guide for policymakers and administrators to develop effective prevention strategies, awareness campaigns, and support mechanisms. Importantly, by framing solutions within both international best practices and Islamic ethical principles, the study ensures that proposed reforms are both contextually relevant and morally grounded.

The main goal of this study is to examine how widespread sexual harassment is among female university students and to understand the different forms it takes—whether gender-based harassment, unwanted sexual attention, or coercion. It also seeks to uncover the socio-demographic factors, such as age, marital status, academic level, residence, and parental education that may shape students' vulnerability. Beyond documenting prevalence, the study explores the deeper impact of harassment on students' academic progress, self-esteem, mental health, and future career aspirations. Importantly, it aims to move beyond diagnosis by offering practical recommendations that combine international best practices with Islamic values of dignity, modesty, and justice. By doing so, the study highlights that tackling harassment is not only a policy necessity but also a moral responsibility, paving the way for universities to become safe, respectful, and

empowering spaces where women can pursue education with confidence and equality.

Literature Review

The concept of sexual harassment entered public discourse in the 1960s, though the phenomenon predates the terminology. Constance Jones traces its roots to the 1830s, when women in New England textile mills faced intimidation and exclusion by male co-workers, despite the absence of language to describe their experiences Okeke, 2011. Feminists in the 1960s coined the term "sexual harassment," reframing it as systemic discrimination rather than natural sexual attraction. Catherine MacKinnon and Susan Brownmiller emphasised that harassment is rooted in power and control, revealing the inadequacy of male-dominated legal systems to understand women's experiences Wyatt, 2007. Since then, legal and academic scholarship has increasingly treated sexual harassment as a serious social problem rather than a private or trivial matter.

Legal and psychological frameworks have categorised sexual harassment into overlapping forms. Legally, two primary types are recognised: **quid pro quo**, where sexual favours are demanded in exchange for professional or academic benefits, and **hostile environment harassment**, where persistent intimidation, ridicule, or sexualized behaviour creates unsafe learning or working conditions Gutek & Done, 2001; Okeke, 2011. Psychologically, harassment is defined as unreasonable or inappropriate conduct that undermines interpersonal boundaries. Earlier accounts often attributed harassment to individual pathology, whereas contemporary scholars emphasise structural power imbalances Browne, 1997; Okeke, 2011.

Quid pro quo harassment involves soliciting sexual compliance through promises of rewards or threats of punishment, such as grades or promotions, often

described as sexual bribery or coercion Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Brase & Miller, 2001. Hostile environments arise when unwelcome sexual conduct—verbal, non-verbal, visual, or psychological—creates an intimidating atmosphere that interferes with performance or well-being Marican, 1999; Brase & Miller, 2001. Perceptions of harassment vary across gender, culture, and context, making interpretation complex Azmi et al., 2012. From an **Islamic perspective**, sexual harassment is prohibited as it violates principles of modesty, *haya*, respect, and human dignity emphasised in the Qur'an and Sunnah Qur'an 24:30-31; 4:29. Harassment is viewed as both a social and moral violation, reflecting misuse of power and breach of ethical duties. Islamic jurisprudence classifies coercive sexual behaviour and intimidation as forms of *ghasb,* unjust harm, and *faahisha,* immoral acts, underscoring the responsibility of individuals and institutions to maintain safe, dignified environments Azmi et al., 2012. Integrating these ethical guidelines with modern legal and psychological frameworks enhances preventive measures and redress mechanisms in professional and academic settings.

Table 1: Theories Explaining Sexual Harassment

Theory	Key Idea	Main Proponents / References	Focus / Explanation
Organizational Theory	Harassment arises from power imbalances and workplace hierarchies.	Gruber 1992; Cleveland & Kerst 1993; Fitzgerald et al. 1997; Okeke 2011	Unequal authority, permissive climate, and gendered job roles create opportunities for harassment.
Socio-Cultural Theory	Harassment is rooted in patriarchy and cultural gender norms.	MacKinnon 1979; Tangri & Hayes 1997; Thomas & Kitzinger 1997	Used as a tool to maintain male dominance and reinforce occupational segregation.

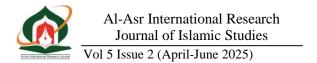| Theory	Key Idea	Main Proponents / References	Focus / Explanation
Natural / Biological Theory	Harassment is linked to biological urges and evolutionary drives.	Studd & Gattiker 1991; Browne 1997; Okeke 2011	Male sexual drive combined with power dynamics can manifest as coercion.
Sex Role Spillover Theory	Gender roles "spill over" into professional settings.	Gutek 1985; Gutek & Morasch 1982; Rosenberg et al. 1993; Malik 2011	Women are judged based on gender rather than role, leading men to use harassment to protect dominance.
Four-Factor Theory	Harassment occurs when four conditions align: motivation, lack of internal restraint, weak external controls, and ability to overcome resistance.	O'Hare & O'Donohue 1998; Pina et al. 2009; Malik 2011	Explains harassment as a mix of personal, organisational, and situational factors.

Legislation and Policies on Sexual Harassment in Higher Education

For decades, sexual harassment in higher education was largely ignored, but recent years have seen legislative efforts worldwide Joseph, 2015. In Pakistan, the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010 extended to 128 public sector higher education institutions HEIs by 2011, aiming to protect students from intimidation, coercion, and exploitative practices such as "sex-for-grades." However, enforcement lagged, with nearly 80% of universities non-compliant by 2013, prompting government threats to withhold funding Education Pakistan, 2011.

Globally, progress has been made through legislation. France criminalised harassment in 2012 with penalties up to three years in prison; Australia strengthened protections through the Sex and Age Discrimination Legislation
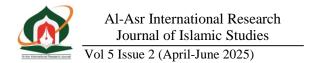
Amendment Act 2011, Australian Human Rights Commission, 2015; and the United States recognises harassment as a form of discrimination under Title IX, US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. South Korea and other nations have similarly reformed regulations following high-profile scandals. The Star/Asia News Network, 2014.

Despite laws, enforcement remains a challenge in Pakistan. Incidents at universities such as Peshawar, International Islamic University Islamabad, and Quaid-e-Azam University highlight gaps in accountability Ali, 2011; Dempsey, 2012; Junaidi, 2014. Research indicates that harassment is prevalent globally but worsens in contexts of weak educational systems, gender inequality, and economic vulnerability Leach, 2013; Beninger, 2013. Common forms include verbal abuse, intimidation, unwanted touching, and coercion for academic favours Sharma, 2013. Regional studies reveal:

- **Europe:** Widespread harassment across the Netherlands, Czech Republic, and the UK, often normalised by "lad culture" Rademakers et al., 2008; Borufka, 2010; Haidrani, 2013; Weale, 2014.

- **Middle East:** Rampant harassment in Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Libya, prompting initiatives like Cairo University's Anti-Harassment Unit Lynch, 2013; MENAFN – Daily News Egypt, 2015.

- **Africa:** Ghana, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and Ethiopia report harassment fueled by economic pressures and weak safeguards Norman et al., 2012; Dhlomo et al., 2012; Owoaje & Olusola-Taiwo, 2010; Mamaru et al., 2015.

- **Asia & Australia:** Cultural taboos conceal harassment in South Korea, India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, though surveys report high prevalence— 76% of Bangladeshi female students experienced harassment; in Australia,

10% of female students reported sexual violence The Daily Star, 2012; Mackintosh, 2011.
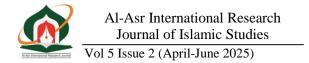
From an Islamic perspective, sexual harassment is prohibited, as it violates principles of modesty, *haya*, justice, and respect for human dignity Qur'an 7:26; 33:59; Sahih Bukhari, Book 78, Hadith 152; Sahih Muslim, Book 1, Hadith 93. Islam emphasises protection from exploitation and coercion, making institutions responsible for ensuring safe and ethical learning environments. Silence or tolerance of harassment contradicts Islamic ethics, which require accountability, moral conduct, and protection of vulnerable individuals. Integrating these values with legal frameworks can strengthen preventive measures and institutional accountability in higher education.

Effects of Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment profoundly impacts female students' education, well-being, and social lives. Victims often experience memory loss, guilt, lack of concentration, class avoidance, or withdrawal from courses Hill & Silva, 2005; Kheswa, 2014. Harassment is abusive, frightening, and overwhelming, leaving long-lasting psychological, educational, and emotional scars Campbell et al., 2009; Quaicoe-Duco, 2010. Academic performance declines, self-esteem diminishes, and some students abandon studies due to trauma, anxiety, or unplanned pregnancies Okeke, 2011; Schwartz, 2000; Hill & Silva, 2005. Psychologically, harassment can trigger deep trauma, including negative stereotypes of men, rumination, depression, anxiety, or dissociative behaviours Campbell et al., 2009; Comer, 2013; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2008. Survivors often develop phobias of men, mood swings, and social withdrawal Bennett et al., 2007; Ryckman, 2008. Socially, harassment isolates victims, exposing them to gossip,

rumours, and derogatory comments that intensify stress Quist-Arcton, 2003; George, 2001. Victims may also be publicly sexualized, reduced to objects of unwanted attention rather than respected students Franklin, 2006.

Emotionally, harassment induces anger, vulnerability, and distrust toward perpetrators or men in general Ryckman, 2008; Schultz & Schultz, 2013. Studies indicate that 68% of female students felt deeply upset, 55% embarrassed, and 32% fearful following harassment Balick, 2004. Distrust of universities and authority figures is common, especially when perpetrators are acquaintances or role models Dastile, 2004; Kheswa, 2014. Forced sexual encounters further expose victims to severe health risks, including HIV transmission, genital injury, infections, chronic pelvic pain, and urinary complications Wingood & DiClemente, 2013; Cohen & Roth, 2009; Kheswa, 2014. From an Islamic perspective, sexual harassment is strictly prohibited as it violates principles of modesty, haya, justice, and respect for human dignity Qur'an 7:26; 33:59; Sahih Bukhari, Book 78, Hadith 152; Sahih Muslim, Book 1, Hadith 93. Islam emphasises protection from exploitation, coercion, and harm, obliging institutions and society to safeguard students. Silence or tolerance of harassment contradicts Islamic ethics, which demand accountability, moral conduct, and the protection of vulnerable individuals. Integrating these ethical principles with institutional policies strengthens preventive measures and supports the creation of safe, dignified learning environments.

Sexual Harassment at University

Universities began implementing policies and training in the 1980s, yet complaints continue to rise Okeke, 2011; Riggs et al., 1993. In the U.S., 62% of college students—and 41% of first-years—report harassment; among female graduate students, 12.7% report being harassed, 21% avoid classes, and some

drop courses Hill & Silva, 2005; Katz, 2005. Globally, similar patterns emerge: 39% of women students in Mumbai report harassment, and Ethiopian students cite sexual violence and insecurity as common campus problems Das, 2015; Panos Institute, 2003.

Workplace-style surveys indicate harassment affects faculty, staff, and students. At one U.S. institution, 20% of faculty/staff/administrators reported harassment—90% women—with most incidents occurring once or twice, though some were repeated Whatley & Wasieleski, 2001. Common behaviours include sexist comments, unwanted sexual remarks, intrusive attention, propositions, and physical advances, triggering strong emotional reactions and avoidance Leonard et al., 1989. Gender and race shape experiences, with gender harassment being the most frequent subtype Kalof et al., 2001.

Regional studies report similar issues: Malaysia, 38% verbal harassment; Azmi et al., 2012, Nigeria, peer harassment underreported; Popoola, 2008, Zimbabwe, 32% acknowledged harassment; only 7% reported; Dhlomo et al., 2012. In Pakistan, 76% of women students reported harassment from classmates 20%, staff 30%, and strangers 50%, yet many feared stigma and retaliation Sheikh et al., 2014. From an Islamic perspective, sexual harassment is strictly prohibited, violating modesty, *haya*, justice, and human dignity Qur'an 7:26; 33:59; Sahih Bukhari, Book 78, Hadith 152; Sahih Muslim, Book 1, Hadith 93. Islam emphasises the protection of students and obliges institutions to create safe, ethical learning environments. Silence or tolerance contradicts Islamic ethics, which demand accountability and the safeguarding of the vulnerable. In sum, despite decades of policy work, harassment remains pervasive, underreported, and shaped by power and cultural norms Hill & Silva, 2005; Leonard et al., 1989; Whatley & Wasieleski, 2001; Azmi et al., 2012; Popoola, 2008; Dhlomo et al.,

2012; Sheikh et al., 2014. Effective responses require clear procedures, active enforcement, survivor-centred support, and institutional culture change to transform universities into safe, inclusive spaces for learning.

Research Methodology

Research methodology involves planning, executing, and investigating systematically to answer research questions, making findings understandable and credible. However, as Bechhofer 1974 noted, "the research process is not a clear-cut order of procedures but a messy interaction between the conceptual and empirical world, inference and induction happening simultaneously." Morgon 1983 observed that research is more problematic than textbooks suggest, and results may be less solid than presented. Pettigrew 1985 described the process as "mudding through, instrumentalism, and political process" rather than purely rational, goal-directed activity. Psychologist Colin 1993 categorised research as investigative, descriptive, or explanatory, depending on its objective. Exploratory research is suitable in early stages when the problem is less understood, helping to define the issue and formulate hypotheses Chisnall, 2001; Kinnear, 1996. Descriptive research, often cross-sectional, is used when the problem is structured and aims to describe characteristics of a population without establishing cause-and-effect relationships Ghauri, 2005. Causal research gathers empirical data to determine cause-and-effect relationships and functional links between variables Taylor, 1996. This study adopted a cross-sectional descriptive design, conducted in the Gender Studies, Sociology, English, and Chemical departments of Punjab University's New Campus, Lahore. The study population consisted of female students in these departments. A simple random sampling technique was used to select 100 students, with 25 from each department meeting the inclusion criterion of 1–4 years of experience. The lottery method ensured random selection from

eligible students. Data were collected using a semi-structured questionnaire, chosen for its suitability in addressing the sensitive nature of sexual harassment and ensuring respondent confidentiality. The researcher personally administered the questionnaires and recorded responses. Data were entered, cleaned, and analysed using SPSS version 19.0, with results presented in frequencies, percentages, tables, and figures. Ethical considerations included formal permission from university authorities, verbal consent from participants, and assurance of confidentiality.

Results Analysis and Discussion

This chapter presents the findings of the quantitative data collected in the study. It begins with an overview of the respondents' demographic profiles, followed by the inferential analysis related to experiences of sexual harassment.

Demographic Profile

The demographic characteristics of the 100 female respondents were analysed using SPSS cross-tabulation to calculate percentages for each variable. Table 2 summarises the distribution of respondents by department, age, education level, and parents' education and occupation, along with their reported experience of sexual harassment.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Students and Reported Experience of Sexual Harassment

Demographic Information	Experience of sexual harassment			
	Yes	N%	No	N%
Department				
English Department	16	21.33%	9	36%
Chemical Department	17	22.7%	8	32%
ISCS Department	21	28.0%	4	16%
Gender Department	21	28.0%	4	16%

Total	75	100%	25	100%
Age				
15--20 years	28	37.3%	10	40.0%
21—25 years	45	60.0%	15	60.0%
26—30 years	2	2.7%	0	0.00%
Total	75	100%	25	100%
Education level				
BA/BSHons	62	82.7%	20	80%
MA/MSc	13	17.3%	4	16%
MPhil/PhD	0	0.00%	1	4%
Total	75	100%	25	100%
Father Education				
Uneducated	4	5.3%	1	4.0%
Middle	8	10.7%	3	12.0%
Matric	11	14.7%	3	12.0%
Intermediate	8	10.7%	7	28.0%
Graduation	32	42.7%	6	24.0%
Post-Graduation	12	16.0%	5	20.0%
Total	75	100%	25	100%
Father's Occupation				
Unemployed	5	6.7%	4	16%
Skilled	38	50.7%	12	48%
Unskilled	1	1.3%	2	8%
Managerial	31	41.3%	7	28%
Total	75	100%	25	100%
Mother's Education				
Uneducated	7	9.3%	1	4.0%

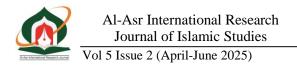| Middle	7	9.3%	5	20.0%
Matric	12	16%	6	24.0%
Intermediate	15	20%	7	28.0%
Graduation	27	36%	4	16.0%
Post-Graduation	7	9.3%	2	8.0%
total	75	100%	25	100%

The demographic analysis reveals patterns in the prevalence of sexual harassment across different departments, age groups, education levels, and parental backgrounds. These findings align closely with prior research highlighting the pervasive nature of harassment in higher education institutions globally and in Pakistan (Okeke, 2011; Hill & Silva, 2005; Sheikh et al., 2014).

Departmental Differences: The ISCS and Gender departments reported the highest incidences of harassment (28%), while the English and Chemical departments showed slightly lower rates (21–23%). This variation echoes findings from regional and international studies, which suggest that harassment prevalence may differ by departmental culture, gender composition, and exposure to social interactions on campus (Azmi et al., 2012; Popoola, 2008). Departments with higher female student density or more interaction with male peers and staff may experience more reported harassment, reflecting patterns of gendered power dynamics discussed in the literature (Kalof et al., 2001; Leonard et al., 1989).

Age and Vulnerability: Most respondents reporting harassment were aged 21–25 years (60%). This supports existing evidence that young adults, particularly undergraduate students, are more susceptible to harassment due to limited experience in navigating complex social and institutional hierarchies (Hill & Silva, 2005; Katz, 2005). Early exposure to harassment may negatively affect

academic engagement, as highlighted in the literature, with students avoiding classes or even dropping courses due to fear or stigma (Sheikh et al., 2014).

Educational Level: The majority of respondents were BA/BS (Hons) students (82%). This is consistent with findings in both Pakistani and international contexts showing that undergraduate populations often face more frequent harassment compared to graduate students, partly because of their larger numbers and more informal campus social structures (Leonard et al., 1989; Whatley & Wasieleski, 2001).

Parental Education and Occupation: The analysis indicates that students with highly educated or managerial fathers and graduate mothers were more likely to report harassment. This may reflect a higher awareness of what constitutes harassment and greater confidence in reporting incidents. It also highlights the interplay of socio-cultural factors, as noted in prior studies emphasising stigma, retaliation fears, and underreporting in Pakistan and other regions (Dhlomo et al., 2012; Sheikh et al., 2014).

Islamic Perspective: From an Islamic ethical framework, harassment contradicts principles of respect, modesty (ḥayā'), and justice enshrined in the Qur'an and Hadith. Islam emphasises protection of human dignity and moral conduct between genders (Qur'an 33:35; Hadith: Sahih Muslim 2320), reinforcing the need for preventive mechanisms and institutional accountability. The findings of high harassment prevalence underscore the urgent need for universities to implement policies that uphold these values, including survivor-centred support, strict enforcement, and cultural education promoting mutual respect and gender equality.

Integration with Literature: The data from this study confirm global and regional patterns of harassment as highlighted in the literature. The pervasive

nature of harassment, underreporting due to fear or stigma, and variations by gender, age, and departmental context align with previous studies (Okeke, 2011; Azmi et al., 2012; Popoola, 2008; Sheikh et al., 2014). Moreover, the results highlight the critical role of institutional culture, awareness, and socio-cultural norms in shaping both the experience and reporting of harassment.

Implications: These findings suggest that universities must adopt multi-layered strategies combining policy enforcement, awareness programs, and cultural change initiatives. An Islamic perspective further strengthens the moral imperative for creating safe and respectful learning environments. By addressing both structural and cultural factors, institutions can reduce harassment and promote inclusive educational spaces.

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics and Sexual Harassment Experience Among Female University Students

Characteristics	Yes	N%	No	N%
Mother's occupation				
Housewife	60	80%	22	88%
Skilled	12	16%	2	8%
Unskilled	0	0%	0	0%
Managerial	3	4%	1	4%
Total	75	100%	25	100%
Region				
Rural	13	7.3%	10	40%
Urban	62	82.7%	15	60%
Total	75	100%	25	100%
Work Experience				
yes	62	82.7%	20	80%

No	13	17.3%	5	20%
Total	75	100%	25	00%
Religion				
Islam	73	97.3%	24	96%
Christian	2	2.7%	0	0%
Hindu	0	0.0%	1	4.0%
Total	75	100%	25	100%
Province				
Punjab	69	92%	21	84%
Sindh	1	1.3%	0	0.0%
KPK	2	2.7%	2	8%
Baluchistan	3	4.0%	0	0%
Total	75	100%	25	100%
Marital status				
Single	66	88%	22	88%
Married	7	9.3%	2	8%
Divorced/Separated	2	2.7%	1	4%
Total	75	100%	25	100%

The total sample consisted of 100 female students. Table 3 presents the distribution of respondents by mother's occupation, region, work experience, religion, province, and marital status, alongside their reported experiences of sexual harassment.

Mother's Occupation: The majority of respondents' mothers are housewives (82%), followed by skilled (14%) and managerial (4%). Sexual harassment prevalence is highest among students whose mothers are housewives (80%), whereas students with skilled or managerial mothers report slightly lower

harassment. This suggests that maternal occupation may influence exposure risk or awareness of harassment and reporting mechanisms.

Region (Rural/Urban): Most respondents are from urban areas (77%), while 23% are from rural areas. Urban students report a higher prevalence of sexual harassment (82.7%) compared to rural students (7.3%), which could reflect higher exposure to larger campus environments or differences in reporting behaviour.

Work Experience: Students with work experience (82%) report a higher incidence of sexual harassment than those without (18%). Increased social exposure in workplaces or internships may increase vulnerability, consistent with prior literature linking environmental factors to harassment risk (Okeke, 2011).

Religion: The majority of respondents are Muslim (97%), with minor representation from Christian (2%) and Hindu (1%) students. Sexual harassment reports are highest among Muslim students (97%), which largely mirror the sample composition rather than indicating religious predisposition.

Province: Most respondents are from Punjab (90%), followed by KPK (4%), Baluchistan (3%), and Sindh (1%). Harassment is most frequently reported among students from Punjab (92%), likely reflecting the higher number of respondents from this province.

Marital Status: Single students constitute the largest group (88%) and also report the highest harassment (88%). Married (9%) and divorced/separated students (3%) report a lower incidence, possibly due to variations in campus attendance or social interactions.

Age and Departmental Distribution: Students aged 15–20 reported 37% harassment, while the 26–30 age groups reported 2.7%. Department-wise, 28% of ISCS students experienced harassment compared to 21% in the English department. These findings indicate that younger and department-specific

populations may be more vulnerable, aligning with literature emphasizing institutional responsibility for safe learning environments (Okeke, 2011).

Parental Education: Students whose fathers are graduates report higher harassment (43%) compared to those whose fathers are uneducated (5%). Similarly, 36% of students whose mothers are graduates report harassment. This may reflect greater awareness and willingness to report harassment among students from educated families.

Urban vs Rural Context: Urban students report higher harassment (83%) compared to rural students (8.3%). The higher urban prevalence may be due to environmental factors, including campus size, population density, and exposure to social interactions where harassment is more likely to occur.

Work Experience: 82% of students with work experience reported harassment, while 18% without work experience did not. This aligns with findings that exposure to social or professional environments can increase vulnerability (Okeke, 2011).

Table 4: Association between Education Level and Experience of Sexual Harassment

Level of education	Experience of sexual harassment			
	Yes	N %	NO	N %
BA/BSHons	62	82.7%	20	80%
MA/MSc	13	17.3%	4	16%
Mphil/PhD	0	0.00%	1	4%
Total		100%		100%

The findings in **Table 4** reveal that the majority of harassment cases were reported by undergraduate students (BA/BS Hons), who accounted for 82.7% of the "Yes" responses. This suggests that students in the early years of higher

education may be more vulnerable due to limited exposure to institutional culture, lack of awareness of reporting mechanisms, and greater dependency on faculty and administrative authorities. In contrast, harassment reports declined at the postgraduate (MA/MSc) level (17.3%) and disappeared altogether at the MPhil/PhD level.

This outcome aligns with existing literature emphasizing that younger students, particularly those at the start of their academic journey, are at greater risk of exploitation and harassment due to power dynamics and social hierarchies within universities (Okeke, 2011; Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). From an Islamic perspective, these findings underscore the ethical responsibility of institutions to safeguard those who are most vulnerable, reflecting the Qur'anic injunction to protect the weak and uphold justice (Qur'an 33:59; Qur'an 4:135). Moreover, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) emphasized that true believers do not cause harm to others (Sunan Ibn Majah, Hadith 2340), which reinforces the principle that harassment at any level of education contradicts Islamic ethics.

Therefore, policies and preventive strategies in higher education institutions must prioritize awareness campaigns, gender-sensitivity training, and safe reporting channels particularly aimed at **undergraduate cohorts**, who statistically experience the highest levels of harassment.

Conclusion

Educational institutions are meant to be safe spaces for learning, yet this study reveals that sexual harassment persists in universities, creating fear, stress, and disruptions in academic progress. The findings show that harassment is most prevalent among younger female students (15–20 years), unmarried students, and those enrolled in undergraduate programs. Students with educated parents also reported higher harassment, suggesting that awareness and social mobility may

make experiences more visible rather than less frequent. Harassment was reported across departments, with higher exposure in English and ISCS. Regional and religious data indicate that the issue is widespread, though more visible in Punjab. The patterns reflect that harassment is not confined to any one group but is a systemic problem. These findings are consistent with prior studies, which show that silence, cultural taboos, and weak institutional mechanisms allow harassment to persist.

From an Islamic perspective, sexual harassment violates the principles of modesty (ḥayā'), justice, and respect for dignity (Qur'an 24:30–31; 4:29; Sahih Muslim, Book 32, Hadith 6266). Tolerating such behaviour contradicts the ethical duty of institutions to ensure accountability and protection for the vulnerable. Integrating these values with effective legal frameworks can help create safer campuses and reduce underreporting. In conclusion, sexual harassment remains a significant challenge in higher education in Pakistan. The reluctance of administrators to acknowledge and address this problem perpetuates harm and hinders educational equity. Addressing it requires a combined approach of policy enforcement, cultural change, and ethical responsibility.

Health and awareness programs should be introduced to educate students and staff about sexual harassment as a psychological, ethical, and legal issue. University management must establish and strictly enforce anti-harassment policies, ensuring fair investigations and disciplinary action against offenders. Encouragement of reporting: Female students should be supported and protected from retaliation when reporting incidents. Cultural shift: Promote an environment of mutual respect and modesty, in line with Islamic teachings on dignity and justice. Role of NGOs and media: Collaborate with civil society and media to raise awareness and break the culture of silence. Government legislation: Strengthen and implement

national laws against harassment in higher education, ensuring compliance at the institutional levels.

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