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A Qualitative Study of Women's Harassment at Public Transport and Workplaces in Quetta, Balochistan

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Abstract

Women around the world are subjected to many types of abuse in both public and private spaces, including verbal, physical and emotional harassment, and harassment in the workplace and in educational institutions (Henning et al., 2017). This is a widespread issue that negatively impacts on women's mental health, career development, and lives. Despite greater awareness, harassment is still underreported, with many women afraid of social stigma and retaliation (Sojo et al., 2016). Harassment is equally prevalent in Pakistan, where women suffer in various environments such as public transport, workplaces and learning facilities. Cultural norms and the absence of adequate legal frameworks often dissuade women from reporting, putting them at risk of continued abuse. These societal pressures do not allow them to ask for help or take action against harassment. The study sought to understand the nature, extent and effects of harassment of women in various public spaces, as well as workplaces and educational institutions in Quetta, Balochistan. A purposive sampling approach was used to select 18 women from multiple groups, including women using public transportation, working women, and university attendees for a qualitative study. It is worth mentioning that the results showed that all participants faced verbal and non-verbal harassment in these circumstances. Societal pressure and fear of reputational damage meant that, according to the study, many women did not report these incidents. The impact of the harassment resulted in severe psychological, emotional, and physical consequences for the participants which hindered their work, mental well-being, and career advancements.

Keyword: Women Harassment, Public Transport, Workplace, Universities, Balochistan.

Introduction

Harassment is a common phenomenon that women face every day, whether at work, university, or government and public spaces, and in the street or public transport. It is an all-pervasive problem that exists in different domains right from workplaces to public transport, and affects women's health, safety and well-being in a big way. Women are subject to levels of sexual and moral harassment in professional settings that have deep psychological and physical impact. While policies to prevent them have long existed, violations for not implementing them and the lack of awareness of the policies lead them to persist (Oliveira et al., 2024). The legal system for dealing with workplace sexual harassment in many countries is inadequate, lacking detail and effectiveness, which calls for stronger legal safeguards towards gender equality (Gui, 2024).

Sexual harassment in public transport is an everyday reality in many countries, with incidents of unwanted physical contact and verbal abuse just as routine. These incidents don't happen in isolation; they add up to create an unwelcome and unsafe climate, which is generating growing concern over sexual harassment in urban spaces amid a gradual rise in the education and employment of women (Awan, 2020). Sexual harassment occurs on a spectrum, and people view it differently. What one person sees as harassment another will take as a joke, bullying, flirting, friendly banter, and the like (Aman et al, 2016). Many young girls like students and working women who travel by public transport on a regular basis face all kinds of harassment ranging from whistling to slang to touch to eye. While these incidents are unlawful, they are typically not documented and reported due to cultural norms and values and terror of an apprehension of social alienation in different parts of the world (Tabassum & Suhail, 2022).

Gendered tools and strategies, including inclusive policies, training programs, and strong reporting mechanisms, have been found to be effective in dealing with workplace harassment, emphasizing the necessity of taking a gender-specific approach (Caballero, 2024). Harassment goes beyond workplaces as well as public transports where studies suggest that large number of women experience verbal and physical harassment and is underreported (Sushmitha et al., 2024; Useche et al., 2024). In a systematic review of psychosocial factors related to harassment in public transport contexts, the authors remarked that current interventions are insufficient and stressed the importance of involving women in

decision-making processes to create better preventive mechanisms. In all conscience, these findings are a wake-up call on how important it is to have thorough and inclusive strategies in place to combat harassment of women in multiple contexts, so they have the right to safe and equal access in their respective societies (Useche et al., 2024).

The phenomenon of harassment is associated with higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression which have a negative impact on women's physical and mental health (Alrawadieh et al., 2023; Hutagalung & Ishak, 2012). Harassment also leads to lower job satisfaction and hinder career progression for women, and even suicidal tendencies in extreme cases (Shahid & Farooq, 2020). Sexual harassment in educational institutions is also reported as a pervasive problem. Harassment in schools and universities is prevalent, especially in low- and middle-income countries; UNESCO and WHO reports show that majorities of female students experience harassment in their schools including sexual comments, jokes, and gestures (Mumford et al., 2020).

In the same way, many countries, including Pakistan, have rigid cultural norms that restrain women from participating in the work environment, which serves as an extra obstacle for women in fighting back against harassment at work. Along with the lack of proper punishment for harassers in both public and workplace spaces, these norms create barriers for women (Ali & Kramar, 2014). Pakistan sees sexual harassment as the most frequent gender-based violence, and coupled with patriarchy and gender segregation, it often ends up being quite difficult for women to attain their rightful place in the workforce (Hadi, 2022).

In continuation, women harassment is a greater issue in Pakistan where a large number of people speak about the situation at national level. In Pakistani universities, the incidence of sexual harassment is very high with reported figures of female students being harassed being as high as 96% (Khan et al., 2012). Due to social stigma, retaliation, and absence of justice, the victims are usually discouraged to report the incident. Consequently, harassment on public transport is something women face on a regular basis, ranging from physical harassment to verbal abuse and sexual touching (Anjum et al., 2023). Women in Pakistan are suffering mentally and suffering professionally and socially because they have to deal with the pressures of how to navigate through public spaces and commute with the absence of safety. The Women, Peace and Security Index 2017–18 indicated that 49% of women in Pakistan do not feel safe in their communities (Begum, 2025).

In this regard, harassment in the workplace has received little attention, sexual harassment of women in public transports, workplaces, universities, and colleges remains understudied which includes harassment cases in public transport and educational institutions in Pakistan. The study has been carried out to explore the prevalence and effects of harassment in public places, workplaces and educational institutions on women in Quetta, Balochistan while also identifying the coping methods and socialization factors affecting their experiences.

Material and Methods

The study was qualitative to uncover the adult women's experiences of 20–40 years, facing harassment in Quetta, Balochistan public institutions. The study was conducted among women who worked in different public sectors such as colleges, universities, government, and among university students. Sixteen women were interviewed to obtain in-depth perspectives on their experiences of harassment in these settings. Preliminary purposive sampling was used to identify individuals that may have insight to and information regarding harassment in their workplace and educational environment. The women who cooperated in the study were students and workers in public institutions and therefore, the sampling technique allowed them to take on a range of functions thus situating the understanding of the issue in a plethora of contexts. We conducted in-depth interviews with each participant to understand their personal experience, barriers and dynamics of sexual harassment. The interviews were semi-structured, providing the flexibility in the interview process while covering important topics related to the research questions. The interview guide consisted of semi-structured open-ended questions to elicit participants' experience in their own language and also to enable the themes relevant for the women themselves to emerge. The study context and it was based in Quetta, Balochistan, this specific detail is relevant to better understand the phenomenon of Harassment in the public places and institutions in Pakistan.

Results and Discussions

The present study was conducted to explore the harassment faced by working women, women university students and other women who use public places and transportation in Quetta, Pakistan. Most of the women who participated in the study indicated harassment predominantly occurred in public buildings and transportation, and the vast majority consisted of working women, students, and other women who travel to work or school daily. Women reported facing a range of verbal, non-verbal, and physical abuse, which had a deleterious impact on them.

Most of them said they were afraid to go outside because of these frequent episodes of harassment. The study emphasizes the serious nature of public safety in relation to women, particularly those in academia and career fields in Quetta. Due to the sensitive nature of this issue within a patriarchal sociocultural environment, and also based on a lack of research with respect to this topic, the aim of the study is to describe the perceptions and coping strategies of women travelling on public transport in Quetta.

Women Physical and Psychological Harassment

Around the world, the harassment of women in public spaces and on public transport is on the rise. In the same way, women in Quetta, Balochistan experience multiple types of harassment when they use public spaces and public transportation, which causes them physical and psychological distress. 89% of the women travelers said that they have faced harassment during their travel. Most of the respondents defined actions as harassment, such as: 'staring'; 'unwelcome touching'; 'cat-calling'; 'teasing'; 'inappropriate gestures'; 'rubbing'; 'blackmailing'; 'bullying'; As acts of harassment, four respondents mentioned 'cyber-crime; and 'acid throwing'. These responses represent various actions and gestures, which in turn create harassment.

Other participants offered broader definitions of harassment, noting its pervasive nature but also suggesting its absence from public debate. It is well known that incidents like these inflict physical and psychological trauma on their victims, yet they rarely see justice with conviction rates for such cases extremely low. During the study, many participants mentioned they are often victims of harassment in public places and transportation. They stated to be deeply mentally and physically disturbed by these experiences, leading them to struggle with day-to-day activities. These findings illustrate the dire impact of harassment on women's lives in Quetta, and highlight the urgent need for intervention to address this problem. One of the participants described her experiences as follows:

“At night I was traveling with my aunt and cousin in a rickshaw/chingchi, driver was sitting in the front, I was sitting at the seat behind him. The whole time we were driving he was touching me from behind. I was very frightened because we were only women in the rickshaw, it was time and I couldn't say anything. This incident was imprinted on my mind; it mentally disturbed me. Now, whenever I step outside, I am afraid such an incident will happen again.’

Another participant of the study added:

"I was at the market with my mother, there was a man following me. I don't know for how long he was following me, but I was really scared, and he wouldn't leave me alone. After I went close to him, scolded him, then he left. Even after I scolded him, I was scared that he might take revenge because I often hear that men take revenge of their humiliation."

Women described different kinds of physical harassment they encountered. Participants recounted being inappropriately touched in public places and also while traveling. Some said they were followed or blocked by harassers and felt unsafe. Others said they felt trapped, powerless to speak up or risk retaliation. These testimonies illuminate how pervasive and traumatic physical harassment is for women in everyday life. One of the participants shared:

"I would go outside to the market and buy things. When I bent down, someone touched me from behind in a very strange way, and I yelled. No any person helped me or uttered a word to the person for this inhuman behavior. I came to know that all men were on one page in their desire to harass women."

Women Verbal and Non-Verbal Harassment

Verbal harassment is when someone uses words to criticize, insult, or belittle a person. This form of harassment can be very emotional/mental stress. Verbal harassment includes staring, hooting (gateway to kissing) and sexual comments and comments. In-depth interviews revealed that participants experience verbal harassment regularly in public spaces and on public transportation. This type of harassment occurs all over the world and Quetta, Pakistan, is no exception, with women facing the same issues. These verbal abuses impact their feelings of safety and mental health, with participants exchanging examples of shared experiences signifying how prevalent and impactful such abuse can be to their quotidian lives. One participant of study revealed:

"I was on a ride with my sisters in a rickshaw, and after we dropped out of the rickshaw, there were two boys with us. They said, 'The elder sister is more attractive than the younger ones.'"

Another participant disclosed:

"As I was crossing the road, a boy commented behind me, 'MashaAllah, Ufff, how sexy you look. MashaAllah, what beautiful lovely eyes.'"

Many women have to deal with non-verbal harassment which is as dangerous as verbal harassment. In interviews, participants spoke of being treated to unwanted

stares, gestures and body language. One participant indicated feeling "not safe" in public spaces due to men who constantly stare at her. There was another participant who also expressed that there were men who would make suggestive hand gestures or gestures of approval and that made her feel humiliated. Their silence was even louder and a testament to the harassment women face. Participants noted that such behavior had a considerable impact on their confidence and peace of mind, and chose to avoid certain public places.

Women Legal Protection and Trust on Public Transportation

These included accounts detailing harassment from multiple types of women participants in in-depth interviews and provide insight notable incidents of harassment from public places and transport. One participant shared when asked about their experiences and whether they trusted public transportation:

"I was on the bus to university, and the bus driver and the fare collector were both looking back at me repeatedly. It made me feel very unsafe."

It just goes to show how something as casual as getting on a bus can become something a lot more uncomfortable, and distressing, if you have someone like a bus driver or fare collector who feels they have the power to do something inappropriate. There was glaring at her, and it left her not only feeling unsafe but also invading her comfort zone as it is something every woman experiences while travelling in a public transport. In the same way, another participant described her experience:

"I had just gotten off work and was going home in a rickshaw, and the rickshaw driver was talking inappropriately to me. When I didn't want to, he kept watching me in the rearview mirror."

This experience shows that harassment is more than what some people do to you, it can be anything from unwanted conversations to constant attention. When he did start speaking, the way he lasered in on her face made it clear he was, like, super peeking at her bod and she was clear as day to him -- and vice versa, and he didn't even let her out of his eye line because he strategically pulled the rearview mirror angled to him for a sufficient verbal retort, but really also made sure to keep holding her in his view as she so clearly wasn't interested in engaging. Here, as in so many cases, women cannot simply leave the situation, but must deal instead with continual harassment from men they must rely on for transportation.

Some Participants told me about how they were followed around the university campus by groups of boys who either pressured them into relationships or harassed them. So the boys would come frequently and they would keep

harassing the girls even to the point of blackmailing the girls if they do not do anything for them. For girls, such harassment presents an emotional group of ways to make them feel trapped or helpless. Because of the relentless pressure, it was almost impossible for them to get away from these moments. These women-centric attacks illustrate not only an attack on their personal space but an unsafe atmosphere in an academic environment for women.

These responses from the participants underscore that harassment in public spaces and on public transport are an ingrained part of life. Through the interviews it was revealed that most women don't feel safe in these situations, with the constant fear of harassment hanging over them. There is an urgent need to ensure women's and girls' right to safety and an unhindered, unrepentant presence in public space.

In a patriarchal society, women struggle to deal with harassment due to the fear as they are not taught to question such behaviour. Societal and familial support is also often absent, which further discourages them from confronting harassers. In the course of the interviews, participants were asked their thoughts on how to stop harassment in society. Women's responses included calls for effective laws and better enforcement of existing ones to hold offenders accountable. Others stressed the need for educational and awareness programs to address cultural attitudes, offering women the choice to fight back against sexual violence. Participants said that it would help to create safe spaces for women to report harassment without fear of judgment or retaliation. Many thought that promoting gender equality in all walks of life could take a lot of harassment away.

The sociocultural stigma, complex legislation and insensitive inquiry procedures that come in the way of women commuters reporting cases of harassment, but most importantly, ignorance of the law, is also an often-overlooked factor. One individual interviewed as part of this in-depth interview stated that even individuals with knowledge of such laws often do not expect to find justice:

"I avoid discussing the law. These days, the law does not dispense justice. And when I seek help from the legal system have to wait a long time for justice to arrive."

During the interview, some women said they had no idea of the legal protections available to them against harassment. Others knew of such laws but were convinced that seeking help would yield no social support, leaving their

abusers with the upper hand. They believed that they would not find justice or support within their community if they took action.

Conclusions

The conclusion of this study reflect that the extent of harassment in public places, transport and educational institutes among women in Quetta, Balochistan is very high. Interviews with 16 women confirmed that harassment assumes various forms and is a widespread occurrence; verbal, non-verbal and physical abuse all considered harassment. We heard many stories of harassment—from unwanted comments to leering, unwanted touching, or being stalked. The incidents greatly affected women’s mental and physical health, and often, women reported feeling unsafe and disturbed in their day to day activities. The research also revealed the difficulties women encounter reporting harassment, especially in a patriarchal society that deters them from coming forward. Some of the women that were interviewed were completely unaware of the legal rights that were granted to them, while other women were aware of laws, but believed that the legal system would fail to serve them justice or protect them. This distrust of the way the legal system functions, as well as societal stigma and insensitive questioning protocols, avoids many women proceeding against harassers. The results further imply that harassment represents a sociocultural problem for the people in Quetta, which calls for raising awareness about it, enhancing regulatory mechanisms, and establishing a supporting environment for women. It is recommended to launch awareness campaigns for women to know their legal rights and safeguards against harassment. They also need to work to encourage social support and reduce the stigma associated with reporting harassment, so that women feel able to seek justice without fear of repercussions.

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