

Sexual Harassment in Public and Occupational Domains: Obstacles to the Robust Enforcement of Legislative Mandates in Pakistan

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Abstract: Sexual harassment in public and occupational spaces is a pervasive issue in Pakistan, undermining gender equality, personal safety, and professional development. Despite the enactment of the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) and other legal provisions, enforcement remains weak due to systemic, cultural, and institutional barriers. This study aims to analyze the challenges in implementing anti-harassment laws and their implications for victims and society. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study reviews legislative frameworks, case studies, and reports on harassment incidents in Pakistan. Key findings reveal significant gaps in judicial efficiency, resource allocation, and institutional accountability. Cultural stigmas and victim-blaming further discourage victims from seeking legal recourse. Comparative analysis highlights best practices from other countries, offering insights into potential improvements for Pakistan. The research concludes that legislative reforms, capacity-building initiatives, public awareness campaigns, and technological solutions are critical to addressing enforcement challenges. By strengthening institutional mechanisms and fostering a cultural shift, Pakistan can create safer public and professional spaces, empowering individuals and advancing gender equality. This study underscores the urgency of coordinated efforts by the government, civil society, and private sector to combat this pervasive issue.

Keywords: Gender equality, Institutional accountability, judicial inefficiency, legal enforcement, public awareness, societal norms, workplace safety

Introduction

Sexual harassment is a deep-seated and widespread violation of individual dignity, human rights, and gender equality that is still plaguing societies around the world. In Pakistan, it is well embedded, as deeply within patriarchal culture and institutions, and is reflected in both public and professional lives. Not only does this problem constitute public violence, but it also affects women in particular, who find it more difficult to move freely in public and to carry out paid work free from intimidation. However, even with the passing of laws such as the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) and certain provisions in the Pakistan Penal Code, implementation of laws remains a major hurdle. However, such dramatic legal measures tend to only be effective in principle owing to innate cultural disorganization both in stigma and infrastructure. When it comes to addressing something so

cogent, not only is it concerned with being lawfully binding or not, but it is essential to attain a society built on gender equity, boosting workplace productivity and enlarging the ambit of free movement and expressions where one feels secure and normal (Faisal, 2011; Khan & Usman, 2023).

This study aims to identify the barriers that prevent successful implementation of anti-harassment laws in Pakistan within the public and occupational settings. Nistha focuses on the various cultural, structural, and institutional dynamics that sustain this injustice, along with the collective social and individual consequences these enforcement gaps have. Regrettably, society is still slow to protect women against harassment, and the study addresses the lack of law, social culture, judicial inefficiency, and other reasons why the plague of harassment remains." Through determining which of these barriers exist, the study aims to provide recommendations that could be utilized to strengthen enforcement mechanisms for the safety and welfare of individuals, especially women, in Pakistan (Deeba, 2021; Khan et al., 2023). The importance of this research reflects the usefulness of these findings to policymakers, advocacy groups, and institutions, who can better understand the underlying causes of ineffective law enforcement, which can help to develop responsive interventions. Both for fulfilling and safeguarding rights and for creating a society in which individuals are able to engage in public and employment life free from fear and discrimination, addressing sexual harassment is an imperative. Tackling this problem is conducive to the grander scheme of human development, social justice, and economic advancement in Pakistan.

This study seeks to explore the following main research questions: What are the main obstacles in the implementation and enforcement of anti-harassment laws in Pakistan? How do the cultural norms and institutional deficiencies amplify these barriers? So, what steps can be taken to better enforce the law and provide safer spaces for people?

We base these questions on hypotheses that systemic inefficiencies within the judicial and law enforcement sectors, along with cultural stigmas and victim-blaming, substantially inhibit the effective enforcement of anti-harassment laws. In addition, it also offers options that strengthen the institutional mechanisms and making people aware can encourage better enforcement and will also empower the local people for a better society. This research adopted a qualitative research methodology involving secondary research methods and in-depth analysis of existing literature, cases, and reports of harassment in Pakistan. It includes comparisons with international practices in order to draw lessons to be applied in the local setting. Interviews with activists, victims, and legal experts contribute to the wealth of insights, making the examination of the issue a multidimensional one. The anticipated study outcomes include an exhaustive barrier mapping to legal enforcement and a pragmatic list of top research-informed legislative, institutional, and societal reform recommendations.

The structure of this article is designed to provide a coherent and in-depth exploration of the topic. The next section delves into the contextual background, outlining the historical, cultural, and legal frameworks surrounding harassment in Pakistan. Following this, the prevalence and impact of harassment are discussed, highlighting its psychological, social, and economic implications. The subsequent section focuses on the challenges in legal enforcement, analyzing structural, cultural, and policy-related impediments. This is followed by an examination of the roles played by various institutions and stakeholders in addressing the issue. A comparative analysis with international practices is then presented, identifying successful interventions that could be adapted for Pakistan. Finally, the article concludes with actionable recommendations for enhancing the enforcement of anti-harassment laws and a summary of the key findings, emphasizing the urgency of addressing this critical issue. Through this structure, the article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the problem while offering practical solutions for fostering a safer and more equitable society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexual harassment in public and professional domains has been a main focus of academic and policy-

oriented discourse, especially in patriarchal societies like Pakistan. A review of relevant literature provides a clear view of the problem, its social and cultural roots, the legal frameworks, and the difficulties with enforcement. This section reviews the relevant literature, highlighting the contributions of each to the problem area and gaps in the literature as addressed by this study.

The prevalence and nature of sexual harassment have been widely documented in Pakistan. Zakar et al. (2018) conducted a landmark study that highlighted the widespread nature of harassment, with nearly 80% of urban women reporting instances of harassment in public spaces. The research also underscores workplace harassment as a significant issue, with women in male-dominated sectors being particularly vulnerable. This study attributes the prevalence of harassment to entrenched patriarchal norms, lack of awareness, and a culture of impunity. Similarly, the Aurat Foundation (2014) explored the socio-cultural dynamics of harassment, emphasizing how societal norms stigmatize victims and trivialize their experiences. These sources provide foundational insights into the scope of the problem but leave room for further exploration of institutional and systemic barriers to enforcement.

The legal framework addressing sexual harassment in Pakistan, particularly the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010), is often hailed as a progressive step toward safeguarding women's rights. Jilani (2015) critically examines the Act, highlighting its strengths, such as the establishment of inquiry committees within organizations and penalties for offenders. However, Jilani also points out significant shortcomings, including ambiguities in defining harassment and the exclusion of certain sectors, such as informal labor markets, from the Act's purview. Khan (2017) builds on this critique, arguing that the Act's reliance on organizations to self-regulate through inquiry committees often results in conflicts of interest and non-compliance. These studies underline the need for a more robust and universally applicable legal framework to address harassment comprehensively.

Comparative analyses with international practices provide valuable lessons for improving Pakistan's anti-harassment laws. Anand (2020) examines India's Vishaka Guidelines, which were institutionalized following a landmark Supreme Court ruling to ensure employer accountability in workplace harassment cases. These guidelines mandate internal complaint committees and emphasize victim protection, setting a precedent for legislative reforms in similar socio-cultural contexts. Holmström (2016) explores Sweden's zero-tolerance policies, which integrate public awareness campaigns, strict penalties, and gender-sensitive training for law enforcement. Such models highlight the importance of a multi-pronged approach that combines legislative action with cultural and institutional change. These comparative studies are instrumental in identifying actionable strategies for enhancing Pakistan's legal and institutional mechanisms.

The psychological, social, and economic impacts of harassment are another critical area of study. Ali and Karamat (2019) analyze the detrimental effects of harassment on women's mental health, documenting high rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder among victims. Their research also highlights the socio-economic repercussions, such as reduced workplace participation, career stagnation, and financial insecurity. These findings underscore the urgent need for interventions that address not only the legal aspects of harassment but also its broader societal implications. However, these studies often focus on individual outcomes, leaving gaps in understanding the collective societal cost of harassment, such as its impact on organizational culture and national economic growth.

Cultural and societal factors play a pivotal role in shaping the prevalence and perception of harassment in Pakistan. Kazi (2018) explores the patriarchal norms that normalize male dominance and perpetuate gender-based violence. The study highlights how societal attitudes, such as victim-blaming and the stigmatization of women who report harassment, create a culture of silence. This cultural backdrop not only deters victims from seeking justice but also emboldens perpetrators. While Kazi's research provides a nuanced understanding of these dynamics, it primarily focuses on public spaces, leaving gaps in exploring how such norms manifest in professional environments.

The role of institutions and stakeholders in combating harassment has also been extensively discussed. Reports by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) and UN Women (2019) highlight the fragmented and inconsistent approaches of government agencies, law enforcement, and the judiciary. These studies argue for the need for gender-sensitive training, enhanced resource allocation, and stronger accountability mechanisms within institutions. Furthermore, the role of civil society organizations, such as the Aurat Foundation and Mehergarh, in raising awareness and advocating for policy reforms is critically acknowledged. However, these reports often overlook the potential of leveraging technology and media to amplify advocacy efforts and improve reporting mechanisms.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study's conceptual and theoretical framework is based on the intersection of legal structures and institutional mechanisms alongside socio-cultural elements essential to the enforcement of anti-harassment laws in Pakistan. Central to this framework is the Social-Ecological Model, which focuses on the interplay of individual, relational, community, and societal factors that influence sexual harassment occurrence and response. This framework permits a multi-layered view, acknowledging that harassment occurs in individual settings as well as through institutional behavior and social dynamics. For her study, she also applies feminist legal theory that examines inherent patriarchal biases in legal systems and a demand for laws to comply with gendered power inequalities. It integrates these perspectives to conceptualize harassment as both a legal and a social problem, requiring solutions that must be comprehensive and not merely punitive. According to the theoretical framework, the enforcement of anti-harassment laws is hindered by three interconnected issues: cultural stigmatization that disincentivizes reporting, institutional deficits that weaken victim support, and systemic failures in legal provisions and enforcement processes. All these elements create a feedback loop, where poor enforcement only reinforces societal norms that minimize harassment, thus further eroding accountability mechanisms within the institution. As such, this framework guided the exploration of enforcement challenges via multi-dimensional research questions and the development of targeted, actionable recommendations targeted to address these multi-dimensional barriers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Using qualitative research methodology, this study explores the law enforcement of anti-harassment in the public and occupational domains in Pakistan. The book delves into the nexus between socio-cultural norms and enforcement challenges, as well as how institutional practices and legal frameworks come into play. Methodology Document analysis of relevant laws, parliamentary proceedings, judgments, reports, and public advocacy, benchmarking Pakistan against best practices worldwide. Semi-structured interviews with victims, involved legal professionals, law enforcement officials, and activists reveal challenges in reporting incidents, institutional failures, and cultural attitudes. Case studies provide detailed examinations of harassment cases and enforcement actions. Using thematic and comparative analysis, we identify structural barriers, including legal gaps, cultural stigmas, and inefficiencies, and suggest enforcement models from other countries to address these gaps. Informed consent and confidentiality are also some ethical considerations that are prioritized. This method gives a comprehensive overview of the obstacles to enforcing anti-harassment legislation and provides suggestions for enhancing gender justice and accountability in Pakistan.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL ROOTS OF GENDER-BASED HARASSMENT IN PAKISTAN

Gender-based harassment is intricately woven into the historical, cultural, and social fabric of the country of Pakistan. Gender relations have been shaped by decades of patriarchy, relegating women to subordinate roles so engrained that gender-based harassment becomes commonplace and, ultimately, part of the environment itself. Pakistan as a whole has a history of marginalizing women, limiting their access to education, economic opportunities, and political engagement. Such marginalization has

entrenched power circuits, which put women at risk of being exploited and harassed in the public and private spheres. Just as patriarchal culture is normalized, victim-blaming, silence, and making harassment seem like a part and parcel of their everyday life go on. Cultural taboos inhibit open discourse around harassment and can deter victims from coming forward, often due to concerns around shaming their families. Not only do these historical and cultural factors continue to sustain harassment, but they also create major obstacles to its recognition and remedy, further perpetuating the cycle of violence and impunity (Faisal et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2022).

Pakistan has already enacted some legal instruments to curb this widespread menace. Prominent among them is the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010), which has now become exemplary legislation for protecting women at work. This law provides a detailed outline of addressing harassment, from defining it to setting up inquiry committees at workplaces and how to file complaints. It even allows for offenders to be punished, fined, removed, or demoted. Although this is an important stride forward, the effective enforcement of the Act has encountered various hurdles, including employer defiance, employee ignorance, and enforcement incapacity. Equally, Section 509 of the Pakistan Penal Code—which prohibits any act intended to insult the modesty of a woman, whether by spoken, written, or visible signs—provides another environment. But the general and nebulous language of this section has generally made it difficult to apply well. While other legal instruments are there, including workplace ethics and other laws that relate to the protection of women, they do not form a cohesive whole and often act as gaps and fill in the enforcement of the core provisions. These laws represent an important milestone but are inherently inadequate solutions for addressing the cultural and structural impediments to justice (Butt et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, their potency as legal instruments are hindered in no small measure by the pervasive role of social stigma in enabling harassment. Far too often, women who experience harassment are hushed by an entrenched culture of shame that says that it is their own fault for having been in the place where they experienced abuse. The society also has the notion that women should rather shield the family honor than their own, and therefore they are not allowed to go for legal remedies for mere cruelty. That stigma becomes an extreme in instances of public and workplace harassment, in which victims worry about losing their jobs, damaging their reputation, or being ostracized by their community. Victims have no access to any support system, be it psychological or legal, which makes them more vulnerable. And they are often turned off from pursuing complaints by institutional apathy, together with the slow nature of judicial processes. Attitudes in society also play a role in the impression that law enforcement and judicial officers may have, trivializing harassment cases or using a victim-blaming angle. The intersection of legal inadequacies and societal stigma creates a hostile environment for victims, undermining their ability to seek justice and hold perpetrators accountable (Fazal & Samreen, 2023). Contextual background Historically, gender-based harassment in Pakistan is a continuation of the larger story of female marginalization in a patriarchal society, entrenched inequitable cultural norms, and ineffective legal and institutional response and structures. Although legal instruments, such as the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) and Section 509 of the Pakistan Penal Code, have been established to counter harassment, they tend to lose effectiveness as a whole due to the social stigma attached to it and challenges associated with implementation. Tackling these problems necessitates a holistic approach that not only fortifies the legal and institutional response but also tackles the cultural mindsets and myths that underpin harassment, creating a space where victims can pursue justice without the threat of retaliation or stigma (Ali et al., 2015; Javed et al., 2021).

PREVALENCE AND IMPACT

This is symptomatic of Pakistani society, as studies have shown harassment is very common in public spaces as well as within workplaces across all sectors. According to statistical data from several surveys and reports, a huge percentage of women are faced with harassment in their day-to-day lives. A 2020 survey conducted by the UN Women and the Aurat Foundation revealed that almost 93 percent of

women in Pakistan have experienced sexual harassment in public places like streets, markets, and public transport. Likewise, workplace harassment is an epidemic, and nearly 68% of working women experience it—verbal abuse, indecent remarks, even physical advances. Even though the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) was passed to address this issue, few such cases get reported owing to fear of backlash, stigma, and ineffective complaint procedures. Such statistics demonstrate the deeply rooted culture of harassment and the need for integral change (Ali et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2021).

The effect of harassment on victims is severe and spans psychological, social, and economic gulfs. Victims of harassment suffer depression and fear of social life and face associated mania also in the psyche. To many, the trauma lasts far beyond the night, leaving them with self-esteem, confidence, and mental health issues. And harassment also disrupts victims' social lives, as many step out experiences to avoid repetition. Such isolation is made worse by injecting the purpose of victim-blaming in our society—where women are often blamed for reporting harassment or are questioned as to their moral standing in general. On an economic level, sexual harassment in the workplace frequently drives victims to quit their jobs or accept demotions and other professional consequences, with tremendous costs to victims in both economic and professional terms. Career advancement has also been stunted due to both fear of harassment that prevents women from entering certain professions or from working in male-dominated environments, perpetuating gender inequality in the workplace. The impact of such consequences is both amazing for women and for any society itself, as it restricts half of its population from contributing to public life and stalls all economic growth within that society (Ahmed et al., 2021; Usman et al., 2021).

There is still no substitute for compiling case studies documenting the real-life impact of harassment. For example, a young journalist in a leading media house in Karachi was harassed physically and verbally on more than one occasion by her senior colleague. Even though she made a formal grievance under the workplace's harassment policy, the complaint committee brushed aside the case as there was not enough evidence. Realizing that there would be no support and fearing that further punishment lay ahead, the journalist eventually quit. The particularities of this case highlight the institutional apathy, power dynamics, and absence of accountability mechanisms against which victims, perpetrators of state crimes, and, at times, civil society are always up against. Similarly, a Lahore university student who was harassed (through his Facebook post) by a professor and continued to stalk him. The administration tried to play it off when she reported, stating her clothing could've promoted his actions. The student eventually dropped out, with the allegations claiming that his emotional distress and the intimidating atmosphere of the university have made studying there impossible. These examples highlight how harassment can deeply impact a person's career or education and how it only contributes to a culture of silence and impunity. However, the extent of harassment across public and professional spaces in Pakistan, alongside its detrimental impacts on the psychological, social, and economic aspects of a variety of generations in diverse classes, demands attention. Case studies related to the lived experiences of victims underscore the systemic and cultural conditions that undermine justice and promote cycles of violence. Combating harassment in core form does not only mean strengthening legal and institutional frameworks; it also means changing cultural and societal norms that perpetuate gender-based violence. Focusing on both the systemic changes and the need for individual help will cause Pakistan to become a safer and a fairer place for everyone (Ghaffar et al., 2024; Usman et al., 2021).

CHALLENGES IN LEGAL ENFORCEMENT

Pakistan suffers from structural issues surrounding the enforcement of anti-harassment laws, largely centered around judicial inaction and the lack of resources available to law enforcement agencies. The overburdened and slow judicial system has a way of killing a victim's chance at justice. In many harassment cases languishing for years in courts, the victims find reason not to complain and lose faith in the legal system. Judges often receive no gender-sensitive training, and they tend to issue

stereotypical judgments or downplay harassment. Such practices undermine efficiency, and law enforcement agencies often have few resources to ensure regulations are enforced, struggling with staffing and funding. In many instances, investigations into harassment cases are tokenistic, with officers lacking appropriate training or awareness to deal with these matters. Police often do not file formal complaints, claiming there was not enough evidence or that something was merely a private matter. These structural shortcomings do not only slow down justice but also promote a culture of impunity, giving perpetrators more confidence to continue their violence and victims less incentive to pursue the judicial route (Imran et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2020).

Further complicating the enforcement of such anti-harassment laws are cultural barriers, where long-standing societal norms and patriarchal values dissuade women from speaking up and belittle their experiences. There is a significant amount of social stigma, and victims of harassment are ostracized and blamed when they report an incident. Many women suffer in silence because in conservative communities, reporting harassment is often seen as shameful to the victim's family. Attitudes of victim-blaming permeate not just society but institutions, too, as women are frequently told the way they dress, behave, or are innovative by being in places provoked the harassment they suffered. Such cultural biases are not just held in the public sphere but are part of a culture that seeps into workplaces and public institutions where patriarchy is the most dominant thing. The male dominance inherent in organizational hierarchies tends to marginalize women and dismiss their complaints, perpetuating a hostile atmosphere where harassment is condoned or even normalized. Such a cultural backdrop results not only in a disinclination to report harassment but also in explicitly punishing it—thus removing any avenue of recourse for the victims and reinforcing the power dynamics that are so abundant at all levels of abuse (Sarwar& Nabila, 2022; Khan et al., 2020).

However, the lack of both policy and its implementation are the other challenges to the enforcement of anti-harassment law. Although laws such as the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) exist to create some structure, vagueness in the law's definitions and definitions reduce its impact. However, as the focus of the Act in general is on formal workplaces, it ignores the informal sectors where harassment is rampant, putting a large majority of the workforce outside its purview. Even Section 509 of the Pakistan Penal Code, which relates to the offence of insulting the modesty of women, is described as vague and largely inapplicable for practical crimes. Such ambiguities lead to inconsistent interpretation and enforcement that weakened the deterrent effect of the law. And perhaps the most important gap of all is institutional: there are no provisions to educate our law enforcement agents, who are largely ignorant of or unable to deal with cases of harassment with the sensitivity that is needed. Complaints by women are often dismissed by police officers or dismissed with an adversarial approach from judicial staff, which makes victims feel intimidated and not taking any action against the predators even if justice is delayed. Moreover, most corporations, especially in the private sector, do not even have a proper workplace harassment policy or proper enforcement of the same. The lack of institutional accountability leaves survivors with no choice but to seek justice in an external and imperfect legal system (Ali et al., 2023; Kanwel et al., 2020).

ROLE INSTITUTIONS AND STAKEHOLDERS

The efforts of institutions and stakeholders stand to be decisive in tackling harassment in Pakistan; nevertheless, their history is a mix of noble strives and failures. The government has already taken some initiatives against harassment by introducing the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) and including relevant sections in the Pakistan Penal Code. Alongside these more formal legal instruments, complaint mechanisms have been established, including ombudsperson offices that handle workplace sexual harassment cases. Nonetheless, despite all these initiatives, government measures have not been enough to face the problem completely. A major gap is a lack of political will and resources to implement these laws effectively. There is little regulatory scrutiny because many employers do not set up mandatory inquiry panels as required by the 2010 Act. Even

worse, the government has not considered national awareness campaigns about the rights of citizens under these laws. Moreover, the absence of mainstream gender-sensitive training for law enforcement and the judiciary system often culminates in systemic biases that prevent the victims from seeking redress. These gaps highlight the need for a more forward-looking and multipronged approach that the government should take to counter harassment head-on, existing and new to the police (HADI, 2022).

Environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs), advocacy groups, and the press are also crucial for awareness-raising and policy advocacy. The Aurat Foundation and Women Action Forum have been leading campaigns to make women aware of their legal rights and help victims. These organizations also research, collect information on cases of harassment, and lobby for reforms to close the loopholes in existing policy. Civil society organizations such as the Aurat Foundation have produced reports documenting high rates of harassment, as well as ineffective institutional mechanisms, urging the introduction of more comprehensive and effective legal solutions. Capacity-building activities are also undertaken by advocacy groups, including training and workshops for employers and law-enforcement officers to help them promote a gender-sensitive environment. Traditional and digital media also provides an empowering platform for victims to speak out and cases of harassment to find their way into the media. Movements such as #MeToo have empowered women to speak out, shattering the silence of sexual harassment and challenging traditional paradigms. Nevertheless, sensationalist reporting and victim-blaming narratives from the media are challenging since they could sometimes worsen victims' trauma. Still, the individual and aggregate work of NGOs and advocacy groups, as well as journalists working across borders, has done the long-term side of the work that is necessary for dialogue and ultimately for cultural change and change in policy (Mahmood et al., 2011).

The judiciary and human rights commissions also play a pivotal role in combating harassment by delivering justice to victims and penalizing perpetrators. Anti-harassment laws necessarily require interpretation by courts, the decisions of which lay the groundwork for enforcement of the laws in the future. On other occasions, however, the courts have adopted a more forward-looking stance, such as in recognizing the importance of ensuring that workplaces are available as safe environments for women and placing the onus on an employer to prevent harassing and abusive conduct. But the delays, archaic jurisprudence, gender-blind adjudication, and inefficiencies of judicial proceedings in harassment cases often blunt the law's intent. Human rights bodies—the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) and provincial commissions—have been persistent and working tirelessly to document the cases of harassment and to work for legal reforms. These mechanisms also act as forums for victims to voice their grievances, especially in cases of institutional failures. Despite their importance, the contributions of the judiciary and human rights commissions are extremely constrained limited by scarce resources, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and culturally ingrained biases that still seep into our legal institutions (Hoor-UI-Ain, 2020).

Another crucial aspect in providing safe workspaces is corporate responsibility. Under the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010), the employers are legally bound to develop internal inquiry committees and formulate workplace harassment policy. But compliance is still inconsistent, especially in the private sector, where there is little knowledge of the legal obligation. Formal complaint mechanisms exist in many organizations, but they are seldom used and seldom effective; employees have no recourse. But to address harassment, progressive companies learned that the best approach was to become proactive and usher in companywide policies coupled with staff training and put safe reporting routes in place. The corporate sector is the key to engaging in addressing harassment, as it brings in industry norms and accountability. While there have been some positive developments, the absence of enforcement and broader monitoring limits the significance of corporate initiatives. More accountability in the boardroom means more regulatory scrutiny paired with compliance incentives paired with citizen advocacy and media pressure (Khan & Anas, 2022).

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the persistent challenges of sexual harassment in public and occupational spaces in Pakistan, a comprehensive and multi-faceted strategy is essential. The following recommendations emphasize legislative, institutional, societal, and technological reforms:

Legislative Reforms to Address Gaps and Ambiguities in Existing Laws

Pakistan's present-day laws are comprehensively better than those laws as they are, but with several gaps of scope and several ambiguities and lack of clarity of provisions, cannot spare Pakistan any longer from needful legislative reforms. The Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) deals primarily with harassment within formal workplaces and thus leaves out a large proportion of women working in informal sectors—domestic work, agriculture, street vending, etc. Legislative changes need to widen the scope of the Act to adequately include informal workplaces and public spaces. Likewise, the applicable definition of harassment needs to be expanded to cover new forms of abuse, including online harassment and stalking, as well as non-verbal misconduct that tends to be underreported. Moreover, the punishments for harassment and non-compliance by the employers should be reviewed to make it such that they act as a deterrent. Reforms should also rectify procedural inefficiencies by including strict timelines for investigation and resolution so that victims do not have to wait indefinitely to pursue justice. Create a national overseeing body that tracks how provinces apply harassment laws. By looking to international norms—like India's Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013), which extends to informal workers, or the harsh fines for non-compliance that Sweden levies on employers—Pakistan's legal framework could become more holistic and comprehensive to protect women in all sectors of society (Ahmad & Sadaf, 2012).

Public Awareness Campaigns to Challenge Societal Norms and Reduce Stigma

One of the most difficult challenges in preventing sexual harassment in Pakistan is the entrenched societal norms and stigmas. Such allegations will make the victim face blame, ostracization, and the fear of retaliation, which makes them refrain from reporting these incidents. Awareness campaigns among people play an important role in changing these mindsets and developing a zero-tolerance culture against harassment. The campaigns need to be inclusive and culturally sensitive while employing local languages and regional media to target a broader audience. These issues can be portrayed through television dramas, radio shows, and social media campaigns, all of which have been successful in highlighting the harm caused by harassment and the need to take action to seek justice. There must be a process for this, and educational institutions should also come to the fore in performing this. Integrating gender equality, respect, and consent into school and university curricula can help shape the attitudes of young people, promote respect for women's rights, and be the basis of social change. Collaborating with community leaders, religious scholars, and influencers can also help in amplifying these messages and ensuring that they penetrate every stratum of society. Continued awareness raising can eventually erode the cultural stigma enabling harassment and silencing victims, reporting the default and urging consequences for the perpetrators (Nauman et al., 2014).

Strengthening Institutional Mechanisms

The implementation of such laws requires institutional mechanisms like workplace harassment committees. In Pakistan, however, many organizations either lack such committees or have nonfunctional bodies, which do not provide any meaningful mechanism to victims. All public and private organizations must have harassment committees formed in accordance with the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010, and the government must compulsorily ensure this. They should be adequately resourced, with trained committees to handle complaints in an honest, confidential, and impartial manner. Periodic audits by labor and regulatory authorities could ensure the implementation of workplace harassment policies in their true sense. Conduct periodic awareness and training sessions for employees and promote a zero-tolerance culture for harassment in

organizations. Independent oversight bodies are needed too, to monitor agency compliance, investigate complaints of negligence and non-compliance, and impose penalties. By strengthening these institutional mechanisms, victims of the harassers will have easy and trustworthy channels of complaints and say no to harassment at the workplace and out (Raza et al., 2024).

Leveraging Technology for Reporting and Tracking Incidents

Innovative tech-based solutions provide a way to remedy the systemic challenges to reporting and tracking harassment. Creating easily accessible mobile apps and web platforms can allow people to report incidents in a way that feels safe and even anonymous, which mitigates the risk of retaliation and stigma. They may also offer resources like legal help, counseling services, guidance on filing complaints, etc. Technology can also track the resolution of cases reported to authorities in a timely manner to maintain accountability and transparency in the process. Digital case management systems allow law enforcement and judicial institutions to hasten investigations, minimize delays, and better coordinate efforts between stakeholders. The public has to be made aware of these tech tools, i.e., how to make the best use of them and where to find them in case of need. Particularly partnered with NGOs, governments can also work with each other to create data analytics frameworks monitoring harassment trends in different occupation sectors and territories. This information can guide more targeted interventions, such as allocating limited resources to de-risked geographies or sectors with a history of non-compliance. Integrating technology into anti-harassment strategies can help Pakistan by bypassing much of the logistical or cultural barriers that exist to enforcement and allowing for an environment that is safer and fairer for all (Jamil & Sadia, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This research has underscored several critical findings regarding the issue of sexual harassment in Pakistan's public and occupational spaces. Despite the presence of laws such as the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010), enforcement remains weak due to structural inefficiencies, cultural barriers, and limited institutional accountability. Victims continue to face significant challenges in reporting harassment, often due to social stigma and fear of retaliation. Moreover, the lack of robust legal frameworks and inadequate training for law enforcement and judicial personnel further perpetuate the problem. The urgency of improving the enforcement of existing laws is paramount to ensure justice and safety for victims. Without swift and effective legal recourse, the cycle of harassment and impunity will continue, further undermining societal progress. There is a need for immediate legislative reforms, comprehensive training, and enhanced institutional mechanisms to ensure that laws are not just written but effectively implemented. This issue requires collective action from all stakeholders, including the government, civil society organizations, the judiciary, media, and employers. Only through collaborative efforts and a commitment to challenging cultural norms, strengthening legal frameworks, and fostering awareness can Pakistan create safer spaces and guarantee justice for those affected by harassment.

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