Experiences of Sexual Harassment: Interplay of Working Environment, Depression and Self-Esteem in Pakistani Women

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Sexual harassment is a barrier to proper integration of women into the labor market. Forms of sexual harassment can be simple: starring, making sexual comments, trying to touch a woman's body without permission or invitation, and demanding sexual intercourse. A study using cross sectional design was conducted to investigate if there is a link between sexual harassment and work place environment and whether depression, anxiety, stress, and self-esteem are correlated with sexual harassment. The study was carried out at four different types of workplaces in Lahore, Pakistan. Workers from banks, hospitals, factories and departmental stores were included in the study. A sample of 300 working women, age 18-55 years old were selected for data collection from workplaces via purposive sampling technique. Data were collected using the Sexual Harassment Experience Scale (SHEQ), Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE), and items from the Assessment Inventory of Working Environment (AIWE). Results revealed that sexual harassment is positively correlated with depression, anxiety, stress and low self-esteem. The organizational system can play vital role in minimizing sexual harassment at workplace by fostering an environment in which colleagues are busy with work and other interactions are unlikely to occur. Implications of the work are working women living healthier lives free of fear and maintaining their employment status.

Keywords: Sexual harassment, workplace, organizational behavior, women

In the last few decades, the number of women taking employment outside the home in non-agricultural sector has increased in South Asia, an area that includes Pakistan, by six percent (United Nations, 2013). With this influx of women into the working world, women's safety at the workplace needs to be considered. Data indicate that female workers experience a significant risk of sexual abuse (Salter, 1993). Sexual harassment can negatively impact both the organizational system as well as an employee's mental and physical health and is an obstacle to proper integration of women into the labor market. Forms of sexual harassment can be explicit: starring, making sexual comments, trying to touch a woman's body without permission or invitation, and demanding sexual intercourse.

Research finds that with each passing day, the level of frustration, rate of mental depression, health problems, and curiosity about sex related information is increasing among Pakistani population, especially adults. They are ignoring their moral and religious values. It is alarming situation that Pakistan is on the top for searching "sex" related topics and searching sex related information on internet. (Pakistan National Report, 1995). It has certain consequences on the societal norms and values. It has also been observed that Pakistani women spend most of their lives in a state of depression, stress and confusion because they are frazzled and drained by the demands imposed on them by the opposite sex. Whether a teenage girl or a mature woman, generally every woman in Pakistan is harassed at some point or in some situation by a man. Women are taught from childhood in Pakistani society that they have to accept this type of situation as a fact of life (Kamal, 2005).

Pakistan has adopted a code of conduct for gender justice in the workplaces that will deal with the alarming issue of sexual harassment. The Alliance against Sexual Harassment at Workplaces (2010) announced that they would be working with the collaboration of inquiry committee to take inquiries and actions against sexual harassment at workplaces. The purpose of this bill is to protect women from harassment and provide them safety by not allowing any type of gender discrimination in workplaces or promotions on the basis of sexual actions.

An interesting information was gathered from structured interviews with two hundred working women in Karachi which revealed that despite knowing about women's' rights, working women were unaware of the full implications of the Protection against Harassment of Women in the Workplace Act, 2010. Sadruddin (2013) also identified that sexual harassment was prevalent in the workplaces and affected the ability of women to perform job duties. About 71% of women surveyed from public and private sector organizations of Lahore were asked that if they know that the government had enacted legislation against sexual harassment. Only 55% recognized sexual harassment as a punishable crime. In addition, only 20% said they would file a suit against a co-worker who sexually harassed them and 50% said that they would not (Mahmood & Ahmad, 2011). This clearly shows that a large segment of women workers are unaware of their rights and legislations which can provide them safety.

Sexual harassment has not only a devastating impact on the physical health of female workers but also has severe negative impact on their emotional health. Those who report higher rates of sexual harassment victimization experience negative psychosocial

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effects such as depression, loss of appetite, nightmares, disturbed sleep, and low self-esteem and report being sad, afraid, scared or embarrassed (Gruber & Fineran, 2007). A number of studies present similar lists of the negative effects of sexual harassment on the mental health of adult victims. Victims report symptoms such as: low self-esteem and low levels of confidence (Gruber & Bjorn, 1982). Being a victim of sexual harassment may also result in anger, social isolation, anxiety, depression, and mood changes (Coharn, Frazier, & Olson, 1997). The most common effects women report are related to disruptions in daily life like loss of appetite and sleep disturbances. Female victims also suffer anxiety, depression, headaches, and weight changes (Gutek & Koss, 1993)

Women enter the workplaces to gain benefits and higher wages (O'Leary & Ickovics, 1992). According to the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals Report (2013), when women enter the workplace, they achieve greater autonomy and self-reliance as well as gaining more decision-making power. Beneficial, satisfactory and organized employment situations provide a number of important psychological benefits such as good self-esteem, feelings of accomplishment and social support networks (Powell, 1988). On the other hand, threats to satisfactory employment are also threats to self-esteem, feelings of adequacy, and social support (Davidson & Cooper, 1992).

Sexual harassment occurs at workplaces in all types of professions and organizations and at all job levels. Sexual harassment takes different forms including statements, proposals, or jokes of a sexual nature, touching, showing vulgar images or playing lewd songs. In the more serious forms, female victims reported that their rights, benefits, promotions and job security were contingent on whether or not they performed sexual favors (Pakistan National Report, 1995).

On the whole, female victims of sexual harassment suffer from lower levels of job satisfaction than women who do not face any incident of sexual harassment. A study by Merkin and Shah (2014) showed that both U.S. and Pakistani female workers who had been sexually harassed at work experienced decreased job satisfaction compared to their non-harassed colleagues. Victim women use sick leave to avoid going to work. Sexual harassment affects job performance in another way by affecting the victim's emotional state which in turn may affect the motivation level of the victim and effectiveness at the workplace in addition to family life suffering (Dansky & Kilpatrick, 1997). In the light of above mentioned literature review following hypothesis were made:

1. Sexual harassment is positively correlated with depression, anxiety, and stress in women working in organizations.
2. Sexual harassment and self-esteem are inversely correlated among women working in organizations.
3. Sexual harassment and work place environment are positively correlated among women working in organizations.

Method

Sample

Data were collected from 300 working women ranging in age from 18-55 years old. (M = 26.38, SD = 5.41) Education level varied from Matric to PhD. The median number of months at the job was 12 months. Respondents worked in four different types of workplaces which includes three banks, three hospitals, three factories and three departmental stores. From each workplace, 25 workers were selected as participants via non-probability purposive sampling technique. The convenience sampling couldn't be used because the minimum work experience required was at least one year. Participants having work experience of less than a year were not included in the study.

Measures

Data were collected using the Sexual Harassment Experience Questionnaire (α = 0.89), the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (α = .93), the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (α = .73), the Assessment Inventory of working environment (α = .88), and a structured interview demographic sheet. The DASS and RSE were translated into Urdu prior to administration.

Sexual Harassment Experience Questionnaire. Sexual harassment was measured by Sexual Harassment Experience Questionnaire (SHEQ) (Kamal & Tariq, 1997). This scale has been developed in the Urdu Language. The SHEQ consists of 35 items and has proven a useful tool in understanding the experiences of sexual harassment which are faced by women in Pakistani workplaces. Responses were measured on a four point Likert scale ranging from 1(never) to 4 (very frequent) with higher scores indicating more harassment. The alpha for the full scale was .896 and remained acceptable for the Unwanted Sexual Harassment (.834) and Sexual Coercion subscales (.767) but not for the Gender Harassment subscale (.643). The Gender Harassment subscale was ignored in analyses.

Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). The scale has shown to be correlated highly with the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (Beck & Steer 1984) and the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) (Beck., et al. 1961) Reponses were scored on a 4-point Likert scale defined as follows: (0) never, (1) few time, (2) sometimes, and (3) often and because the 21-item version was used, responses were multiplied by two to get the adjusted score. Higher scores indicate more distress. The alpha for the full scale was .93.

Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSE) (Rosenberg, 1986). Self - esteem was measured using the globally accepted Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSE) (Rosenberg, 1986). It consists of 10 items and uses a four-point Likert scale from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (4) with higher scores indicating better self-esteem.

Workplace information was gathered by using the Assessment Inventory of Working Environment (AIWE) (Qayyum & Muazzam, 2012) developed in the Urdu language. AIWE consists of 35 items which are used to access information about the organizational system, environment of the organization, number of male colleagues or staff, frequency of male visitors, job status, power system in the organization and the reason for employment. It is a five point rating scale from 0 (not at all) to 4 (too much).

Procedure

After obtaining departmental approval, official permission was sought from organizations for data collection taking approximately 15 minutes to complete entire test. Data were collected after assuring confidentiality and gauging willingness to participate. Analysis was done using SPSS software assigning code to each value. Accuracy of data output was checked on 10% of the sample.

Results

Correlations between the work items of assessing privacy, talking between colleagues, and productivity from Assessment Inventory of Working Environment (AIWE) had the strongest correlations with the RSE scale and DASS-21. Depression subscale of all the work items incorporated into the survey

The three work items assessing privacy, talking between colleagues, and productivity were significantly negatively correlated at the .01 level with the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress subscales of the DASS-21 as well as significantly negatively correlated at the .01 level with the SHEQ Unwanted Sexual Harassment and Sexual Coercion subscales. The privacy, talking between colleagues, and productivity items were significantly positively correlated with the RSE. See Table 1 for a breakdown of the correlations.

Correlations significant at the .01 level were found between the SHEQ Unwanted Sexual Harassment and Sexual Coercion subscales and the psychosocial factors with the self-esteem being negatively correlated with sexual harassment and depression, anxiety, and stress being positively correlated with sexual harassment. See Table 2 for a breakdown of correlations.

Table 1
Correlations between Work Items and Scales

	Privacy	Talking between Colleagues	Productivity
RSE	.26**	.22**	.23**
DASS-21 Depression	-.23**	-.28**	-.23**
DASS-21 Anxiety	-.24**	-.30**	-.16**
DASS-21 Stress	-.25**	-.31**	-.24**
SHEQ Unwanted Sexual Harassment	-.32**	-2.20**	-2.62**
SHEQ Sexual Coercion	-.33**	-1.65**	-1.99**

Table 2
Correlations between Sexual Harassment and DASS 21

	SHEQ Unwanted Sexual Harassment	SHEQ Sexual Coercion
RSE	-.53**	-.42**
DASS-21 Depression	.47**	.35**
DASS-21 Anxiety	.49**	.40**
DASS-21 Stress	.33**	.32**

Discussion

The study revealed important findings exploring sexual harassment of women at workplaces in Lahore. It was seen that workplace sexual harassment is an ongoing and serious problem and there are several reasons behind this. Firstly, proper education on what constitutes sexual harassment, about how to fight against acts of a sexual nature, and how to take steps against a harasser are not provided to female workers. Secondly, the environment and atmosphere of workplaces are not well organized. It has been observed that oraganization, even those with ethical codes, are not putting those into effect and there exists no safety and security rights for women or men.

The results of the study show that women who work in workplaces where there is privacy, where discussion between male and female colleagues is limited to work purposes, and where everyone is busy working at their own tasks experience less unwanted sexual harassment and sexual coercion. Subsequently, these women experience fewer depressive symptoms, less anxiety, and less stress in their lives. A similar study conducted in the banking sector of Lahore, also revealed that privacy in office set-up was negatively correlated with experience of sexual harassment. (Nauman & Abassi, 2014).

Our findings are consistent with available literature on the role environment of organizations in sexual harassment incidence. (O'Hare & O'Donohue, in press). A professional environment acts as an external inhibitor to sexual harassment. Women who work in less professional environments experience more sexual harassment than women who work at workplaces with a more professional atmosphere. An unprofessional environment includes all extra activities not considered part of the job. This fits in with our finding that as talking for work purposes only increases, the rate of sexual harassment and coercion decreases. Besides the occurrence of non-work activities in professional workplaces, use of dirty language, alcohol, and drugs is very common. There, employees are also allowed to express inappropriate facial expressions and emotions.

The present study also indicated that there is some relation between stress, anxiety, depression and sexual harassment. Harassed working women exhibit more stress, depression and anxiety in their lives than working women who did not experience any incidents of sexual harassment. It was observed that sexual harassment has adverse effects on the victim's mental state and health. Working women who were the victims of sexual harassment had lower self-esteem than their non-harassed counterparts. This is all in line with findings from previous studies. Evidence from O'Donohue, Downs and Yeater (1998) suggested that any woman who experiences sexual harassment will express some kind of psychological change. In the beginning, she may think that her harasser will stop committing sexual acts. Then, she may begin to blame herself perhaps thinking that she invited the harassment somehow. But when the situation worsens she starts to feel helpless, fearful, and anxious. Besides these feelings, harassed women may also feel trapped, paranoid, being unsure of their future and career, and following by someone outside the work. All these feelings can affect women's performance at work.

Conclusion

The study showed that working environment does correlate with women's experience of sexual harassment as well as their mental and emotional well-being. Women who work in organizations which have strict rules, regulations and an organized system may experience fewer sexual harassment incidents.

Hence, more studies should be conducted in Pakistan to find out nature and frequency of sexual harassment. Although sexual harassment is a very pressing problem, not every women who leaves her home to earn money and enhance her professional skills, faces sexual harassment. There are men who respect women as our culture and religion propagates. It is important to educate both men and women about their rights as well as their duties. Respecting

both genders is the only way to create a stable and harmonious society.

Limitations and Recommendations

Limitations included lack of cooperation by authorities of workplaces. Besides this, it was also difficult to collect data from the working women because every woman does not agree to respond to the survey, which shows an underreporting of sexual harassment.

It is also recommended that the government should make the issue of sexual harassment a part of the "Pakistan Labor Force Survey" in order to generate more data on the issue and work on improving the conditions of working women in Pakistan. The government should guarantee the implementation of the bill or laws for the rights of working women so thatworking women are protected from sexual harassment at workplaces.

Implications

The study implies that organizational system plays an important role in controlling or minimizing the rate of sexual harassment. Working women of organizations which have strict rules, regulations and organized system may experience fewer number of sexual harassment incidents.

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