

Gendered Experiences in Academia: Female University Students' Views on HarassmentNasim Khan Mehsud^{*1}, Ayesha Amber²

Original Article

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Abstract

Gendered Experiences in Academia refer to the ways in which individuals experience higher education differently based on their gender. These experiences are shaped by societal norms, institutional structures, and cultural expectations. Women often face challenges such as gender discrimination, harassment, unequal opportunities, and biases in academic and professional advancement. Harassment is rampant in higher education systems around the world, and it has a negative effect on female students, institutions, and society as well in Pakistan. The aim of the study was to know general perception of female students about harassment. The objectives of this study were to know the various types and effects of harassment and to determine the family and community response towards female harassment. This study used quantitative approach and distributed the questionnaires among 120 female students of 04 public and private sector universities from Islamabad. The data were analyzed using SPSS and come up with descriptive statistics and correlation testing. Current research findings revealed that 85% students responded positively to harassment occurrences exist in universities. Female students were subjected to various forms and consequences of abuse, which resulted in a high level of agreement with harassment. Study respondents reported being harassed in universities. The findings of the study revealed that most female university students were harassed by faculty members/staff and administration. It is concluded that addressing these disparities requires institutional policies promoting gender equity, awareness programs, and support systems to create an inclusive academic environment. The findings of this study could help decision-makers in organizations foster improved protection in universities by implementing anti-harassment education policies, thus it can help reducing harassment and its negative consequences in academia.

Keywords: Gendered experiences, higher education, harassment, quantitative research, gender equity

Introduction/Background

This study is a significant effort to generate data that can be used to improve harassment prevention campaigns. Reducing harassment in universities can lead to fewer negative incidents that affect victims and society. The research focused on female students aged 18 to 27 years old who had given their views about violence that female students experience at campus. The researchers looked at the various types of harassment that female university students are subjected to. Gendered experiences in academia have been widely documented as a persistent challenge that affects individuals differently based on societal expectations, institutional frameworks, and cultural contexts (Morley, 2018). Women, in particular, face barriers such as gender discrimination, limited professional opportunities, and harassment, which hinder their academic and career progression (Aiston & Jung, 2015). Within Pakistan's higher education institutions, harassment remains a significant issue, adversely affecting female students' academic performance, mental well-being, and social mobility (Nasir, 2016). Despite the increasing presence of women in higher education, systemic gender inequalities persist, necessitating rigorous research to understand their scope and impact (Shah, 2019). This study is significant as it sheds light on the prevalence of harassment in universities, particularly within

Islamabad's public and private sector institutions. By employing a quantitative research design, this study collected data from 120 female students to gauge their perceptions and experiences regarding harassment. The findings reveal that 85% of respondents acknowledged the occurrence of harassment in universities, with faculty members, administrative staff, and peers being the primary perpetrators. These insights underscore the urgent need for institutional interventions, including anti-harassment

policies, awareness campaigns, and support mechanisms to ensure a safer learning environment for female students (Malik & Courtney, 2018). The relevance of this study extends beyond academic discourse, offering practical implications for policymakers and university administrators. Implementing gender-sensitive policies can significantly reduce harassment incidents, fostering a more inclusive academic atmosphere. Furthermore, this research contributes to the broader sociological understanding of gender dynamics in education, reinforcing the call for systemic change to address gender disparities effectively. Future studies should explore intersectional dimensions, considering factors such as socio-economic background and ethnicity, to provide a more comprehensive analysis of gendered experiences in academia (Ali & Tariq, 2017). The results of this study should be used to make informed decisions when evaluating harassment prevention services and associated agencies at the local, state, and federal levels. Decisions made by universities can promote improved physical, psychological, and emotional health of students which in return will enable the universities environment conducive to produce effective and skilled individuals to society.

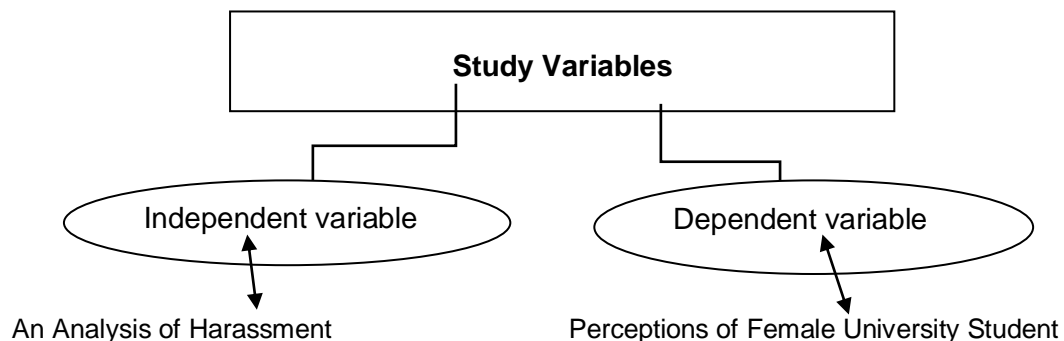
Research Problem

Harassment's Impact on Female University Students, keeping this in view the study focuses on respondents' perceptions about female students who have been subjected to a variety of forms of harassment, including sexual harassment as well as psychological, verbal, and physical harassment. To put the research into context, consider how family and community members reacted to the female harassment incidents remained the focus of the current study.

Objectives

1. To identify the different types of harassment faced by female students.
2. To identify the variant effects of harassment faced by female students.
3. To determine the family and community responses towards female harassment.

Conceptual Framework



Significance of the Study

The purpose of this quantitative study was to assess the student's perceptions about the types and effects of harassment female students face by faculty members/staff at Islamabad universities. As previously mentioned, a variety of studies have looked at the behavioural, psychological, and emotional

consequences of harassment. This research addresses perceptions of female students about the understanding of phenomena of harassment, its existence, types, and consequences bearded by female students in Islamabad the capital of Pakistan. Further, how family and community respond if such incident happened to a female, such aspects exploration has been made in effort to better understand the situation of harassment in higher education institutions in Pakistan and tried to fill the gaps exist in existing researches about understanding and the linkage of the issue with family and community response so effective measures can be taken to overcome the bitter situation for female students.

Literature Review

Harassment in academia is a widespread issue that takes multiple forms, affecting female students disproportionately. Studies have categorized harassment into verbal, physical, psychological, and cyber harassment (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). Verbal harassment, including inappropriate comments and derogatory remarks, remains the most common form, followed by physical intimidation and unwanted advances (DeSouza & Fansler, 2019). Psychological harassment, such as threats and coercion, creates a hostile learning environment, while cyber harassment has intensified in recent years due to the rise of digital communication platforms (Sabri, 2017). The effects of harassment on female students are multifaceted, impacting their psychological well-being, academic performance, and career aspirations (Khan & Qureshi, 2016). Victims of harassment often experience anxiety, depression, and a decline in self-confidence, which directly affects their ability to participate in academic activities (Jameel, 2018). Academic disengagement, absenteeism, and poor performance are commonly observed among students subjected to harassment, leading to an increased dropout rate (Shah & Anwar, 2019). Furthermore, persistent harassment negatively influences students' career trajectories by restricting their mobility and professional development opportunities (Morley, 2018). The response of families and communities to female harassment plays a crucial role in shaping the coping strategies of victims. Traditional societies often blame the victim, reinforcing silence and discouraging reporting of harassment incidents (Bari, 2016). Many families perceive harassment as a source of social stigma, leading to restricted mobility and reduced educational opportunities for female students (Ali & Tariq, 2017). However, progressive community initiatives and institutional policies have increasingly advocated for victim support, awareness programs, and legal frameworks to combat harassment in higher education institutions (Nasir, 2016). Implementing comprehensive reporting mechanisms and fostering supportive academic environments are crucial to mitigating the adverse effects of harassment on female students (Malik & Courtney, 2018).

Methodology

Current research used quantitative approach, data was collected through structured questionnaire from 04 public and private sector universities of Islamabad. The selected four universities which had two private, and two government institutions namely include Quaid-E-Azam University, International Islamic University, Bahria University, NUML University. By using probability sampling procedure, the study opted simple random sampling technique to select 04 universities out of list of all universities of Islamabad. The study aim was to research out only female students, so sample was selected of 120 students (female with the age group of 18-27years) purposively. The data was analyzed statistically by using descriptive and inferential statistics.

Findings and Discussion

The data was encoded in a spreadsheet programmed, such as Excel, after the completed surveys were collected. After that, the study variables were calculated from the collected data and transferred to the SPSS programmed for data analysis. The significance level was .05 for this study. Following paras covering results of the current study:

Table-1: Descriptive Analysis of Understanding Types, Occurrence, Initiation, Reporting of Harassment

	Descriptive Statistics		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Harassment Type	1.24	.534	120
Harassment Type Occur	2.38	1.086	120
Listened News	1.38	.662	120
Who Initiates Harassment in University	2.48	1.223	120
Report Incident	1.98	.825	120

The descriptive statistics provide insights into the perceptions and experiences of female students regarding harassment in universities. The mean value for *Harassment Type* ($M = 1.24$, $SD = 0.534$)

indicates that students recognize different forms of harassment, while *Harassment Type Occur* ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.086$) suggests a variation in how frequently students experience harassment. The *Listened News* variable ($M = 1.38$, $SD = 0.662$) shows that many students have heard about harassment cases, which may contribute to increased awareness. The mean for *Who Initiates Harassment in University* ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.223$) highlights the primary perpetrators, likely including faculty and administrative staff, while *Report Incident* ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 0.825$) suggests that reporting rates remain low.

Table-2: Inferential Analysis of Understanding Types, Occurrence, Initiation, Reporting of Harassment

	Correlations					
	Harassment Type		Harassment Type Occur	Listened News	Who Initiates Harassment in University	Report Incident
Harassment Type	Pearson Correlation	1	.215*	.217*	.054	.014
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.018	.017	.556	.881
	N	120	120	120	120	120
Harassment Type Occur	Pearson Correlation	.215*	1	.067	.216*	.058
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.018		.466	.018	.531
	N	120	120	120	120	120
Listened News	Pearson Correlation	.217*	.067	1	.069	.279**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.017	.466		.455	.002
	N	120	120	120	120	120
Who Initiates Harassment in University	Pearson Correlation	.054	.216*	.069	1	.195*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.556	.018	.455		.033
	N	120	120	120	120	120
Report Incident	Pearson Correlation	.014	.058	.279*	.195*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.881	.531	.002	.033	
	N	120	120	120	120	120

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In the above table-2 correlation among the any two variables are shown. Total respondents (N) are 120. Each pair of the variables show that pearson correlation value is with “***”. which shows that it is significant ($p < .001$ for a two-tailed test). Since “*” means correction is significant at 0.05 while “***” means correlations is signification at 0.01 level (2-tailed). Based on the results, we can state the following: The “***” means these two variables have statistically significant relationship among them. Moreover, direction of these relationship is positive since value is increasing.

The correlation analysis highlights significant relationships among key variables. The positive correlation between *Harassment Type* and *Harassment Type Occur* ($r = 0.215$, $p < 0.05$) indicates that students who acknowledge different types of harassment are more likely to report experiencing it. Similarly, *Listened News* is significantly correlated with *Harassment Type* ($r = 0.217$, $p < 0.05$) and *Report Incident* ($r = 0.279$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that media exposure influences students' willingness to recognize and report harassment. The positive correlation between *Who Initiates Harassment in University* and *Harassment Type Occur* ($r = 0.216$, $p < 0.05$) implies that certain groups in academic institutions contribute more frequently to harassment cases.

Overall, these findings highlight the systemic nature of harassment in universities, emphasizing the need for institutional reforms to encourage reporting and prevent future incidents. The low reporting rates suggest fear of retaliation or lack of trust in institutional mechanisms. Strengthening support systems, raising awareness, and enforcing strict anti-harassment policies can help create a safer academic environment for female students.

Table-3: Descriptive Analysis of Variant Effects of Harassment Faced by Female Students

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Mentally Disturbed	4.28	.916	120
Feel Embarrassment	4.20	.875	120
Decrease Confidence Level	4.19	1.040	120
Avoid Group Study	3.64	1.172	120
Lose Interest	3.57	1.255	120
Changing Quit University	3.58	1.314	120
Absenteeism Sick	3.50	1.100	120
Eating Sleeping Disorder	3.72	1.094	120
Feel Stigmatized	3.71	1.170	120
Feel Discriminated	3.66	1.170	120

The descriptive statistics in table-3 provide insights into the psychological, emotional, and behavioural effects of harassment on female students in universities. The highest mean values are recorded for *Mentally Disturbed* ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.916$) and *Feel Embarrassment* ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.875$), indicating that harassment has a significant psychological impact, leading to distress and shame. The *Decrease Confidence Level* variable ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.040$) further supports the notion that harassment erodes self-esteem, making it difficult for students to participate in academic and social activities confidently. Avoidance behaviours are also prevalent, as indicated by the mean values for *Avoid Group Study* ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.172$) and *Lose Interest* in academics ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.255$). These findings suggest that harassment not only affects students' psychological well-being but also influences their academic engagement and social interactions. Additionally, *Changing Quit University* ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.314$) highlights that some students consider leaving their academic institutions due to persistent harassment, which could have long-term implications for gender representation in higher education. Physical and emotional symptoms are also evident among the respondents. The mean values for *Absenteeism Sick* ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.100$) and *Eating Sleeping Disorder* ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.094$) suggest that harassment contributes to health issues, potentially leading to increased absenteeism and reduced academic performance. Furthermore, *Feel Stigmatized* ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.170$) and *Feel Discriminated* ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.170$) indicate that harassment results in long-term social consequences, including alienation and exclusion from academic and social circles.

Overall, these findings reinforce the urgent need for effective institutional policies to address harassment in universities. The psychological and academic repercussions emphasize the necessity of counselling services, awareness programs, and strict anti-harassment measures. Institutions should also foster an inclusive academic culture where students feel safe reporting incidents without fear of retaliation. Addressing these concerns is essential to ensuring equitable educational opportunities for female students and creating a supportive learning environment.

Table-4: Inferential Analysis of Variant Effects of Harassment Faced by Female Students

		Correlation		
		Mentally Disturbed	Feel Embarrassment	Decrease Confidence Level
Mentally Disturbed	Pearson Correlation	1	.769**	.421**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	120	120	120
Feel Embarrassment	Pearson Correlation	.769**	1	.382**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	120	120	120
Decrease Confidence Level	Pearson Correlation	.421**	.382**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	120	120	120
		Avoid Group Study	Lose Interest	Changing Quit University
Avoid Group Study	Pearson Correlation	1	.522**	.479**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	120	120	120
Lose Interest	Pearson Correlation	.522**	1	.565**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	120	120	120
Changing Quit University	Pearson Correlation	.479**	.565**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	120	120	120
		Absenteeism Sick	Eating Sleeping Disorder	
Absenteeism Sick	Pearson Correlation		1	.580**
	Sig. (2-tailed)			.000
	N		120	120
Eating Sleeping Disorder	Pearson Correlation		.580**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	
	N		120	120
		Feel Stigmatized	Feel Discriminated	
Feel Stigmatized	Pearson Correlation		1	.700**
	Sig. (2-tailed)			.000
	N		120	120
Feel Discriminated	Pearson Correlation		.700**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	
	N		120	120

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The inferential analysis provides a deeper understanding of the relationships between different psychological and behavioural effects of harassment on female students. The results of the Pearson correlation analysis are presented in Table-4.

The first set of correlations examines the relationships between mental disturbance, embarrassment, and decreased confidence level. The correlation between mental disturbance and embarrassment is strong and significant ($r = .769, p < .001$), indicating that students who experience mental distress due to harassment are highly likely to feel embarrassed. Similarly, a significant positive correlation exists between mental disturbance and decreased confidence level ($r = .421, p < .001$), suggesting that psychological distress negatively impacts self-assurance. Additionally, embarrassment and decreased confidence level are significantly correlated ($r = .382, p < .001$), emphasizing the interconnection of these psychological effects.

The second group of variables highlights the behavioural impacts of harassment, particularly avoiding group study, losing interest in academics, and considering quitting university. A strong positive correlation is found between avoiding group study and losing interest ($r = .522, p < .001$), indicating that harassment discourages collaborative learning. Furthermore, losing interest and considering quitting university show a significant correlation ($r = .565, p < .001$), suggesting that declining academic engagement can lead to students contemplating dropping out. Avoiding group study and quitting university are also significantly correlated ($r = .479, p < .001$), reinforcing the negative impact of harassment on academic persistence.

The third set of correlations focuses on absenteeism and eating/sleeping disorders. A strong positive correlation ($r = .580, p < .001$) between these variables suggests that harassment-induced stress leads to both increased absenteeism and physiological disruptions in eating and sleeping patterns.

The final correlation analysis assesses the relationships between feeling stigmatized and feeling discriminated against. The results show a highly significant correlation ($r = .700, p < .001$), indicating that students who feel stigmatized due to harassment are also more likely to perceive discrimination in their academic environment.

Overall, these findings confirm that harassment has severe psychological, behavioural, and academic consequences for female students. The significant correlations highlight the interrelated nature of these effects, underscoring the need for institutional interventions to mitigate these adverse outcomes through support systems and policy measures.

Table-5: Descriptive Analysis of Family and Community Responses towards Female Harassment

Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Family Reacts Strictly	1.63	.609	120
Imposing Restrictions	1.64	.605	120
Avoid gatherings	1.65	.575	120
Community Trust	1.72	.801	120
Community Hears	1.65	.774	120

Table-5 presents the descriptive analysis of family and community responses to female harassment. The mean values suggest that families and communities tend to react in ways that impose restrictions on victims rather than addressing the root cause of harassment. The strict reactions of families ($M = 1.63, SD = 0.609$) indicate that many families respond with stringent measures, potentially limiting female students' mobility. Similarly, imposing restrictions ($M = 1.64, SD = 0.605$) and avoiding gatherings ($M = 1.65, SD = 0.575$) reflect the tendency of families to control female students' social interactions in response to harassment. Further, community responses also show a pattern of skepticism and lack of robust support. The mean value for community trust ($M = 1.72, SD = 0.801$) suggests that female students face challenges in gaining trust from their communities after reporting

harassment. Additionally, the mean value for community hears ($M = 1.65$, $SD = 0.774$) indicates that while communities may listen to harassment cases, they may not always provide active support or intervention.

Table-6: Inferential Analysis of Family and Community Responses towards Female Harassment

		Correlation		
		Family Reacts Strictly	Imposing Restrictions	Avoid gatherings
Family Reacts Strictly	Pearson Correlation	1	.316**	.294**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.001
	N	120	120	120
Imposing Restrictions	Pearson Correlation	.316**	1	.385**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	120	120	120
Avoid gatherings	Pearson Correlation	.294**	.385**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000	
	N	120	120	120
		Community Trust	Community Hears	
Community Trust	Pearson Correlation	1	.354**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	
	N		120	120
Community Hears	Pearson Correlation	.354**	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		
	N		120	120

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table-6 presents the inferential analysis of correlations between different family and community responses to female harassment. The correlation between family reacting strictly and imposing restrictions is significant ($r = .316$, $p < .001$), indicating that families that react strictly are also more likely to impose limitations on female students' mobility and social participation. Similarly, a significant positive correlation is observed between family reacting strictly and avoiding gatherings ($r = .294$, $p = .001$), suggesting that families may discourage social engagement as a preventive measure.

Additionally, imposing restrictions and avoiding gatherings show a strong correlation ($r = .385$, $p < .001$), reinforcing the idea that families often resort to controlling measures rather than addressing harassment through legal or institutional mechanisms. In terms of community responses, a significant positive correlation exists between community trust and community hears ($r = .354$, $p < .001$). This indicates that when communities are more likely to listen to harassment cases, they may also show a slightly higher level of trust in the victim's account. However, the relatively moderate correlation suggests that trust in victims remains a challenge, highlighting the need for awareness campaigns and community engagement to improve societal responses to harassment.

These findings underscore the necessity of shifting the focus from restrictive measures toward proactive interventions, such as legal support, institutional policies, and community-based awareness programs, to create a safer environment for female students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the pervasive issue of harassment in universities, affecting female students' academic success and career growth. While students recognize various forms of harassment, including sexual, physical, verbal, and psychological abuse, more severe incidents occur less frequently. However, despite their awareness, most students choose to ignore harassment rather than report it due to fear of retaliation, skepticism about institutional responses, and concerns about being believed. The study underscores the need for institutions to adopt best practices in assessing harassment, such as using validated instruments like the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire to measure occurrences objectively. Ultimately, the study confirms the existence of harassment in universities, which poses a serious threat to female students' well-being and educational experiences. The findings emphasize the importance of implementing anti-harassment education policies and protective measures to create a safer and more inclusive academic environment.

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