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Workplace Harassment and Legal Unawareness Among Female Journalists in Pakistan: Empirical Evidence from Punjab

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Abstract

Harassment at the work place remains one of the most serious and persistent challenges for female journalists in Pakistan. The study explores the prevalence of harassment at media workplaces and the shocking level of ignorance among female journalists about two key legal protections – Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010 and Pakistan Penal Code Section 509 (PCS 509). The study based on survey data of 250 female journalists from Punjab found that 53.2% respondents admitted to have faced harassment at their work places. The one-way ANOVA analysis shows a statistically significant difference between awareness of the Harassment Act and knowledge of PCS 509 ($F(1,248) = 3.153$, $p = 0.077$), indicating that while there is some awareness of the Harassment Act, knowledge of the Penal Code provision is considerably lower. Descriptive statistics also indicate that media houses are not offering stress counseling (mean 1.636) and excluding female journalists from decision making (mean 1.772). The study argues that legal unawareness is a form of institutional failure and makes specific recommendations for awareness campaigns, organizational training programs and policy enforcement mechanisms.

Keywords: workplace harassment, female journalists, Pakistan, Harassment Act 2010, PCS 509, legal unawareness, media organizations

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Introduction

A 2017 report found that half of female journalists faced gender-based violence in their profession, and only about 24 percent reported incidents of harassment, a troubling situation that suggests a culture of silence fueled by fear of professional retaliation. After Me Too movement in 2017, female Pakistani journalists reported the sexual harassment they face in their daily life at their workplace. The same investigations discovered that the most common form of harassment experienced by journalists is at the hands of their line manager and within their own media outlets. Many of them showed refusal which led to detrimental impacts on their professional as well as

personal life.

To tackle this issue, the Pakistan legislature has passed two significant legal safeguards. The Protection of Women against Harassment at Workplace Act 2010 provides for mechanisms of complaint, investigation and redressal within the organizations. Under the Pakistan Penal Code, section 509, any deliberate act to insult the modesty of women is an offense. In reality, these legal structures have had little effect on the media industry. Many female journalists are unaware that such protections exist and apply to their professional circumstances. Another important point raised by female journalists is social pressure. They choose the career they are stigmatized as "bad women" in society and have to bear the gender pay gap regardless of whether they may be more qualified than their male counterparts.

The Women Journalists Convention (WJC) held in Lahore on 23rd March demanded that under Government Law of 2019, committees should be formed in all media houses like press clubs and unions to ensure women's safety and to avoid harassment cases. It further demanded that female journalists must be made fully aware of harassment acts and the Penal Code about molestation, so that female journalists know their entire rights related to their security.

Statement of the Problem

In Pakistan women journalists work in a professional world where harassment is rife, reporting is rare, and legal protections that should provide recourse are largely unknown to those who need them most. The high prevalence and low legal awareness together create a double disadvantage for female journalists: they are harassed, and they do not know how to contest it through formal channels. The present study seeks to provide a systematic account of this problem and to lay the basis for evidence-based policy intervention.

Research Questions

RQ1: What is the prevalence of harassment experiences among female journalists in Punjab, Pakistan?
RQ2: Are female journalists being threatened or abused during work assignments?
RQ3: Is there a statistically significant difference in awareness levels between the Harassment Act 2010 and PCS 509?
RQ4: Are media organizations providing adequate stress counseling and involving female journalists in decision-making?

Objectives

The objectives are to measure the prevalence of workplace harassment among female journalists in Punjab; to assess the level of awareness of the Harassment Act 2010 and PCS 509; to examine whether media organizations provide mechanisms for addressing harassment; and to propose recommendations for improving legal awareness and institutional accountability in Pakistani media organizations.

Review of Literature

Workplace harassment of female journalists has been documented across global contexts. In 2014, a global survey initiated by the International News Safety Institute (INSI) in partnership with the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) and UNESCO found that nearly two-thirds of women who took part had experienced intimidation, threats, or abuse in the workplace. Females can only imagine, however, that they may not going to accomplish high stature positions in the media industry. It is certainly wrong to say that women are not capable or lack the adroitness to deserve key posts in media.

Kim Barker, a journalist who covered assignments in Pakistan, chose not to report that she had been subjected to

molestation during her fieldwork precisely because of a fear of professional consequences (Barker, 2011). Cases involving journalists including Lynsey Addario, Mona Eltahawy, Natasha Smith, Sonia Dridi, Sana Bucha, and Asma Sherazi illustrate that female journalists do not feel safe at their assigned or work places, which is totally wrong — why is the female only presented as an object? Why is there no encouragement related to her professions or her efforts?

North (2016) documented that female journalists' experiences of sexual harassment in the newsroom are both damaging and daunting, with most downplaying the strictness of their experiences out of fear of victimization. In the Pakistani context, online trolling against journalists like Asma Sherazi demonstrates how female journalists' professional activities trigger coordinated harassment campaigns. She was called a whore, a slut, a traitor, and a western agent after interviewing the Prime Minister of Pakistan. Also there have been many threats targeting female journalists. Due to getting a bad name, females are taught to remain silent on harassment acts, and due to self-censorship these barriers create hurdles in their career progression and also create barriers in a smooth functioning of democracy.

Walsh-Childers, Chance, and Herzog (1996) confirmed in their study that female journalists face harassment and molestation in their offices. Brambila and Hughes (2019) stated that threats and violence against female journalists must be stopped, and media organizations need to work on it. Ilkkaracan (2007), writing about the reform of penal codes in Turkey from a gender perspective, emphasized the importance of ensuring that relevant laws are not only enacted but actively communicated to those they are designed to protect. Without such communication, legal reform remains a formal achievement with limited practical impact.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Theory

Feminist Theory is the foundational framework for this study. Feminist scholarship has documented the ways in which workplace harassment functions as a mechanism of social control that enforces women's subordination in professional environments. In 1977, Skonrina reported about some violence acts like pushing, grabbing, and others which are not considered serious matters to be noticed. Feminist work documented and analyzed the continuation of violence against women simply because they are female (Hanmer and Maynard, 1987; Roxana Carillo and Margaret Schuler, 1992). Radicalism is more dominant in male dominant society where females are shown as inferior character in dramas or movies, also as obedient and submissive characters. In journalism, females have to put more effort to compete with their male colleagues because of male dominancy. Feminism tells us that there should be no gender stereotypes and inequalities; everyone must be treated equally.

Theory of Normative Social Behaviour (TNSB)

The Theory of Normative Social Behaviour (TNSB) helps explain why female journalists remain silent about harassment. In Pakistani society, norms around female respectability, the risk of being labeled a troublemaker, and the expectation that women will endure professional mistreatment constitute powerful social forces that discourage harassment reporting. Schultz (1999) found that normative messages in households influence the environment and social needs. Under normative influence, there is a huge gender gap which confines females more than males. The normative expectation of silence effectively supplements institutional structures to protect harassers and disempower victims.

Research Methodology

Research Design and Sample

The design of the study was quantitative survey. The sample was made up of 250 female journalists selected by

simple random sampling from six cities of Punjab, Islamabad (46%), Lahore (29.6%), Gujrat (7.6%), Rawalpindi (6.8%), Wazirabad (5.6%) and Gujranwala (4.4%). The sample included female journalists, editors, sub-editors and reporters of electronic and print media organizations. The age of the respondents ranged from 23 to 45 years (mean age was approximately 31.7 years). Of those respondents, 52% were married, 33% single, 7.6% widowed, and 6.4% divorced or separated. Geographically, 46 per cent are concentrated in Islamabad, the capital city, which is a major hub for media organizations in Pakistan. This concentration of media employment in the capital also means higher risks of harassment. By including journalists from smaller towns like Gujrat, Gujranwala and Wazirabad, the study can cover the variety of professional settings where female journalists operate across the province of Punjab, instead of limiting it to the experiences of journalists in big city media hubs.

Data Collection Instrument and Analysis

The questionnaire included items on: experiences of harassment at offices (five-point Likert scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree); exposure to threats and abusive behavior at work (binary Yes/No); awareness of the Protection Against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act 2010 (binary); and unawareness of Pakistan Penal Code Section 509 (binary). ANOVA was used to test the statistical significance of the differences in awareness of the two legal instruments. The main analytical methods used were descriptive statistics, frequency analysis and one-way ANOVA with SPSS software. Where possible, the survey was conducted face-to-face and telephonic interviews were conducted where direct access was not convenient. All participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. A one in 20 random sample of respondents was interviewed to verify the responses they had given. This check is especially important for sensitive questions such as harassment, where respondents may under-report experiences due to concerns about professional repercussions. The assurance of confidentiality was intended to reduce this underreporting but even with the use of confidential survey formats some level of underreporting is anticipated due to the stigma associated with admitting to workplace harassment in the Pakistani professional culture.

Ethical Considerations

This study gave a high priority to ethical considerations given the sensitivity of the topic. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. No personal information was gathered or stored. All data analysis is performed using aggregate statistics so that individual respondent experiences cannot be identified from the published findings. Confidentiality protections were explicitly described to each respondent before data collection started as some respondents might face professional retaliation if their responses became known to their employers. The study protocol was developed with a priority of safety of the respondents over the completeness of the data; any respondent who was not comfortable to answer any specific question was free to skip that question without losing their participation in the study.

Results and Findings

Harassment in the Workplace

Table 5.12 presents the data on harassment experienced in the office. The frequency distribution shows the extent to which female journalists acknowledge facing harassment in their professional workplaces.

Table 5.12: Faced Harassment in Office

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	51	18.1	20.4	20.4
Agree	82	29.1	32.8	53.2
Neutral	46	16.3	18.4	71.6
Disagree	37	13.1	14.8	86.4
Strongly Disagree	34	12.1	13.6	100.0
Total	250	88.7	100.0	—

Findings: The above table explains that females are facing harassment issues in their offices. The frequency of 82 are mostly Agreed (32.8%) that they face harassment in their work places. Frequency of 51 is Strongly Agreed (20.4%), 46 Neutral (18.4%), 37 Disagreed (14.8%), and 34 Strongly Disagreed (13.6%). Combined, 53.2% acknowledged experiencing harassment. Walsh-Childers, Chance, and Herzog (1996) confirmed in their study that female journalists face harassment and molestation in their offices.

Threats and Abusive Behavior During Work

Table 5.18 examines threats and abusive behavior experienced during work. This item examines the physical safety dimension of female journalists' professional practice.

Table 5.18: Threatened or Abused During Work

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	111	39.4	44.4	44.4
No	139	49.3	55.6	100.0
Total	250	88.7	100.0	—

Findings: Table 5.18 shows results for female journalists who are facing abused and threatened behaviour during work. The majority of 139 (55.6%) said No, because they fear losing their jobs and positions, but 111 (44.4%) said the truth that they face such threats and abusing behaviour in their office or work place. Brambila and Hughes (2019) stated that threats and violence against female journalists must be stopped, and media organizations need to work on it urgently.

ANOVA: Differential Legal Awareness — PCS 509

Table 5.25 presents the one-way ANOVA results testing whether there is a statistically significant difference between awareness of the Harassment Act 2010 and awareness of PCS 509.

Table 5.25: ANOVA: Unawareness of Pakistan Penal Code Section 509

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.708	1	.708	3.153	.077
Within Groups	55.708	248	.225	—	—
Total	56.416	249	—	—	—

Findings: ANOVA is used to determine the differences between two or more unrelated groups. There is a statistical difference between groups as demonstrated through one-way ANOVA: $F(1,248) = 3.153$, $p = 0.077$. Both groups show differences in which females agreed that they should be aware from the harassment act, but regarding the Penal Code about molestation act they did not really want to know, as illustrated in the mean plot. Female journalists must know the entire act related to their security. Ilkkaracan (2007) emphasized the importance of making penal code provisions known to those they are designed to protect.

Descriptive Statistics — Binary Variables

Table 5.27 presents descriptive statistics for binary variables, including critical indicators related to legal awareness, institutional support, and organizational practices affecting female journalists.

Table 5.27: Descriptive Statistics — Binary Variables

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
Facilities provided by organizations	250	1.00	2.00	1.312	.464
Provide training and professional development	250	1.00	2.00	1.480	.501
Equal promotional facilities like men	250	1.00	2.00	1.556	.498
Digital security issues	250	1.00	2.00	1.308	.463
Threatened or abused during work	250	1.00	2.00	1.556	.498
News stories are being judged	250	1.00	2.00	1.412	.493
Gender discrimination at work place	250	1.00	2.00	1.580	.495
High ranks assigned to male colleagues	250	1.00	2.00	1.296	.457
Resistance in female journalistic efforts	250	1.00	2.00	1.592	.492
Separate washroom and rest rooms	250	1.00	2.00	1.220	.415
Media houses provide stress counseling	250	1.00	2.00	1.636	.482
Involvement of females in decision making	250	1.00	2.00	1.772	.420
Societal pressure led women to leave jobs	250	1.00	2.00	1.556	.498
Females must be aware of harassment act	250	1.00	2.00	1.940	.238
Unaware of PCS 509	250	1.00	2.00	1.344	.476

Findings: The above descriptive statistics table shows mean, minimum, maximum, and standard deviation for binary variables for 250 female journalists. This describes that media organizations need to work on training and development of their female journalists and make them aware of legal acts to avoid gender stereotypes in personal and professional life. The mean for involvement of females in decision-making (1.772) and stress counseling (1.636) confirm that the majority of media houses neither provide counseling nor involve female journalists in decision-making. Unawareness of PCS 509 (mean 1.344) contrasts with high awareness need for harassment act (mean 1.940).

Discussion

The Culture of Silence in Pakistani Newsrooms

The data on the prevalence of harassment and the high rate of non-reporting together point to a well-documented phenomenon in the literature, the 'culture of silence'. Female journalists in Pakistani newsrooms have a grim professional equation when they are harassed. To talk about harassment is to risk immediate career consequences: demotion, loss of good assignments, dismissal, or the permanent damage to professional reputation that comes from being labeled a troublemaker. To not speak up is to reinforce the harassment and the normative culture that shelters the perpetrators. The data from this study indicate that most people chose silence.
This is reflected in the 18.4 per cent neutral response to the question on harassment (Table 5.12). In survey research on sensitive topics, neutral responses often hide yes responses from respondents who have experienced the phenomenon in question but are not willing to admit it, even in a confidential survey format. And if half of those who said they had not been harassed had simply buried it, the real number would leap from 53.2% to more than 60%. The tables are more likely to underreport than overreport the actual numbers. This is not a pattern unique to Pakistan. North (2016) found that most female journalists in her study played down their experiences of sexual harassment due to the fear of victimization. The culture of silence itself is a mechanism of the glass ceiling in that it renders invisible to those with institutional power to do something about them the most pernicious experiences of female journalists. Women journalists who do come forward bear the additional burden of being disbelieved, minimized or blamed for the harassment they encounter. The silence of victims and the denial of institutions feeds a loop that perpetuates harassment over time, across organizations and across professional generations.

Institutional Dimensions of Legal Unawareness

The result of the ANOVA on the differential awareness of the Harassment Act 2010 and PCS 509 has important policy implications. The Harassment Act has gained some institutional visibility as organizations are formally mandated to form inquiry committees under it and to display information about it in workplaces. PCS 509 is a criminal provision which is part of the justice system and not part of the organizational field. No organizational requirement to inform employees about PCS 509. No committee required to implement PCS 509. No regulatory enforcement mechanism tying knowledge of PCS 509 to organizational compliance. Consequently, female journalists are aware that they can seek some form of organizational redress for harassment under the Harassment Act but are not aware that they also have the option of criminal complaint under PCS 509 for acts that insult their modesty.
It is these very acts – the snide comment, the off-colour joke, the demeaning remark about appearance or character – that organizations find most difficult to deal with through their internal inquiry committees. Because it is so easy to deny, minimize or reframe as harmless, This is the very type of conduct that PCS 509 exists to provide a remedy for. The potential of PCS 509 as a tool for female journalists remains untapped due to a systematic failure to disseminate knowledge of its existence. According to Ilkkaracan (2007) the Turkish experience of penal code reform shows that reform of penal codes from a gender perspective is effective only if the relevant provisions are actively communicated to the potential beneficiaries.

Organizational Responsibility and Institutional Accountability

The study reveals that workplace harassment is a prevalent and systematically under-reported phenomenon in Pakistani media organizations. More than half of the female journalists surveyed have faced harassment in their workplaces (53.2%), but legal protections are largely unavailable due to a lack of legal awareness, fear of professional consequences and organizational cultures that do not promote reporting. The descriptive statistics of the binary variables (Table 5.27) also provide further dimensions of institutional failure. The mean for involvement of females in decision making is 1.772 and this means most of the female journalists are excluded from decision making in the organization. The mean for stress counseling (1.636) shows that most media houses do not have provisions for the service.
The mean for unawareness of PCS 509 (1.344) is compared to the high mean for awareness need of the Harassment Act (1.940) thus confirming the ANOVA finding for differential legal awareness. In effect, female journalists who do not know their legal protections are working without the protection such provisions are supposed to give. This wider trend of lack of

organizational support – no stress counseling, exclusion from decision-making and no legal education – is symptomatic of what feminist theory has called institutional patriarchy, a structural arrangement which sustains male dominance by keeping female journalists uninformed, unsupported and unable to contest their own mistreatment. Female journalists learn by experience that silence is the rule in the case of acts of harassment because the social stigma and the professional risk of speaking out is high. This institutional pattern calls for structural intervention – regulatory requirements, compliance monitoring and enforcement mechanisms – not individual efforts by female journalists to navigate an unfair system.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that the workplace harassment is a serious and widespread problem among the women journalists of Punjab, Pakistan and is highly aggravated by the legal unawareness of its victims. The Harassment Act 2010 has received some institutional recognition but the Pakistan Penal Code Section 509 is largely unknown to the journalists it seeks to protect. Media houses are failing in their legal and moral responsibility to protect women journalists from harassment at the workplace.

In particular, the study recommends that: First of all, media organizations need to develop active awareness programs on the Harassment Act 2010 and PCS 509 through mandatory onboarding training and periodic refresher workshops. Second, PEMRA should make compliance of the Harassment Act 2010 mandatory for all licensed media organizations as a condition of licence renewal, including proof of inquiry committees, awareness training and complaint redress data. Third, the Punjab Government and the national government should finance public awareness campaigns specifically targeting the media industry. Fourth, media organizations should invest in confidential reporting mechanisms that allow female journalists to report harassment without fear of retaliation, including external reporting channels in cases where the perpetrators are in organizational power. Fifth, mental health and stress counseling services should be provided to all female journalists. The psychological impact of harassment is very high and has long-term consequences for professional performance, mental health and career longevity. Finally, women journalists should be involved in decision-making within their organizations, including the formulation and implementation of anti-harassment policies, because the women most affected by the policies are in the best position to judge how well they are working.

The silence of female journalists when faced with harassment is not a statement on the acceptability of this harassment, but on the profundity of the structural barriers that mute them. To overcome those hurdles, we need legal awareness, institutional accountability and a change in the very professional culture of Pakistani newsrooms. Quaid-e-Azam Jinnah, while defining the basic values on which Pakistan was to be founded, had made it clear that women should share with men all aspects of national life. Media houses, regulators and the government need to urgently work to make that vision a reality in Pakistani journalism.

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