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**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Exploring the Prevalence of Sexual Harassment in Academia:  
Experiences of Female Teachers at Higher Education Institutions**

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**ABSTRACT**

Sexual harassment of females is a pervasive problem in academia that affects women's career prospects and overall well-being. The present study aimed to analyze female teachers' experiences regarding sexual harassment (SH) at Higher Education Institutions. The quantitative research design was employed for the current study. The study's sample included eighty (80) female teachers selected by using the technique of convenient sampling. For the purpose of data collection, the SEQ Sexual Experiences Questionnaire, designed by Fitzgerald et al. (1995) was employed. The findings revealed that the most typical forms of sexual harassment experienced by female instructors were gender harassment and unwanted sexual pursuits. The results of this study suggested that institutions need to adopt a zero-tolerance approach towards sexual harassment and are required to take proactive measures to prevent harassment to ensure a safe and respectful culture for females in the workplace.

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**KEYWORDS** Academia, Experiences, Female Teachers, Higher Education Institutions, Prevalence, Sexual Harassment

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**Introduction**

Sexual harassment is a chronic occupational health concern in institutions and places of work (Quick & McFadyen, 2017). In addition, professional women are more susceptible to being targets of sexual harassment, and the practice is particularly prevalent in higher education institutions (Jamshed & Kamal, 2020).

Furthermore, Aina-Pelemo et al. (2021) elucidated that harassment is any undesirable behavior in social settings that may be sexual or non-sexual and that frustrates, threatens, degrades, discredits, and waives the dignity of a receiver. In this context, Lahsaeizadeh and Yousefinejad (2012) described that the experience of sexual misconduct may be demeaning, embarrassing, and harmful in itself, but the consequences are far more severe than that since it can sap one's confidence.

In addition to this, according to different research studies, sexual harassment is an issue that results in a stressful workplace and affects the overall quality of life for individuals (Jeong & Chang, 2022). However, in spite of all the efforts that have been made to find preventive interventions, it may be having an adverse effect on both the physical and mental well-being of women all over the world who are working (Malik & Farooqi, 2014). Besides this, sexual harassment as a social evil has been occurring for decades in

different spheres, but this issue is particularly prevalent in the context of Asian culture due to different cultural norms. (Cheung et al., 2018). Furthermore, Heymann et al. (2023), in their study, which was carried out to compare the law enforcement of sexual harassment policies in 192 countries, suggested that the economic status of a country may play a role in the prevalence of sexual harassment; furthermore, they found that countries with higher incomes tend to have stronger sexual harassment policies in place as compared to low-income countries. Following this, Salman et al. (2016) highlighted the same fact that women face seemingly insurmountable challenges in low-income countries such as Pakistan. Similarly, Imtiaz and Kamal (2021) also indicated that sexual harassment is a pressing issue in Pakistan. Sexual harassment in Pakistan has received the attention of researchers, particularly because of the increased ratio of females in the workforce (Hadi, 2018; Jamil, 2020; Merkin & Shah, 2014).

In addition to this, Pakistan nevertheless maintains a society in which male supremacy is deeply embedded in all of the country's regions and traditions, making it difficult for women to achieve their rights (Akhtar & Metraux, 2013). Following this, Qureshi et al. (2012) believed that in Pakistan, a culture exists in which harassing practices more generally are accepted, the norms of the society have led these women to remain silent on such issues for the honor of their families in spite of their victimization. Furthermore, (Ali and Kramar 2015; Aqeel et al. 2021; Sadruddin, 2013), highlighted in their studies that the primary elements that impact the issue of sexual harassment are societal and cultural variables such as the modesty of females in Pakistan, and despite being targeted, particularly those who are the sole bread earners, they have been forced to remain silent to secure their jobs. However, it is high time to change the scenarios; as highlighted by Gupta and Garg (2020), "the pictures of women ought to be changed that they have been made for more than several years" (p. 208).

The recognition of the potential and emotional consequences of harassment increased the interest of researcher in this problem, as it is a very significant issue for working females who want to pursue their careers in safe working zones. This study may be beneficial by providing ethical guidelines to monitor the prevalence of different forms of harassment in higher education institutions. This study may consequently help to transform the academic climate according to acceptable norms.

### **Literature Review**

The term sexual harassment first appeared in the United States during the 1970s as an outcome of an organized feminist activism campaign against workplace sexual harassment. The movement has grown internationally, resulting in improved awareness and legislative safeguards against sexual harassment in many of countries (Baker, 2007). Since then, several research investigations into sexual harassment conducted as far back as the 1980s demonstrate that female sexual trespassing in working environments is pervasive and that the rates of sexual harassment have not significantly decreased. In this context, McLaughlin et al. (2012) cited the fact that the cultural image of perpetrators and targets has not kept pace with the changing working reality over the last three decades, despite the rapid progression of legal and institutional strategies for dealing with sexual harassment in the workplace. Furthermore, several researchers in Europe have brought attention to the problem of sexual harassment by identifying and addressing it at the international level. In this regard, Reuter et al. (2020), in an investigation that was conducted in 33 European countries to figure out the prevalence of sexual harassment among working employees, identified a high prevalence of experiences related to inappropriate sexual behavior at their place of employment.

In a similar way, Ceccato and Loukaitou-Sideris (2022) found in their study that women are negatively impacted by sexual harassment, which may cause them to suffer anxiety and stress in their routine lives. Moreover, in another study by Worke et al. (2023) carried out in Ethiopia to look into the current state of sexual harassment, the researchers came to the conclusion that safe workplace initiatives have to be implemented in order to deal with the issue of sexual harassment. Furthermore, Hart (2019) also highlighted the fact that sexual misconduct at work is a violation of the law; and often fails to be reported. In addition to this, Agardh et al. (2022) revealed the high prevalence of harassment in the academic atmosphere in their study, which was conducted to evaluate sexual harassment among workers at Swedish public universities.

## **Material and Methods**

The research methodology that was employed to collect data in order to address research questions was quantitative and descriptive in nature. The population of the present investigation included one hundred and one (107) female teachers from the different departments of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences from three (3) public Sector HEIs, from South Punjab, Pakistan including, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, The University of Education Lahore, Multan campus from District Multan, and The Islamia University of Bahawalpur from District Bahawalpur. According to the resources and time available, the study sample comprised a total of 80 female teachers, selected through a convenient sampling technique. To investigate the perspectives of female teachers, the SEQ Sexual Experiences Questionnaire developed by Fitzgerald et al. (1995) was used and adopted with permission from the main author by the researcher. Though SEQ is a pre-validated instrument and well known due to its psychometric properties. However, it was necessary to test its reliability within the context of the current study. The composite reliability of the scale (SEQ) was evaluated before proceeding with further study. The value of Cronbach's Alpha for all 17 items of SEQ was 0.89. The research questionnaire included two sections: the respondent's demographic information (age, designation, and marital status) was focused in Section A. The questionnaire consisted of 17 items adapted from the SEQ were selected by using a Likert scale to indicate the degree of agreement or disagreement between 1 and 4 on a scale of (0) never; (1) once or twice; (2) sometimes; (3) often; and (4) Most of the times. Three types of items were categorized. 1. (Gender Harassment): a range of verbal and nonverbal behaviors expressing insulting, degrading, and hostile attitudes about women are included in this category (6 items). 2. (Unwanted Sexual Attention): This category can be distinguished by the range of behavior because it includes non-reciprocal requests for dates and many other intimidating as well as professional tactics of harassment that are frequently used (5 items) 3. (Sexual Coercion): behavior of this type refers to the condition related to job benefits based on positive cooperation. Quid pro quo is recognized and labeled as a least common form of harassment (6 items). The researcher explained the purposes of this study to all participants' female teachers to gain their confidence before the data collection. In addition, the consideration of ethical issues is of the utmost importance in all research investigations. Adhering to ethical guidelines in research is crucial to ensuring the safety and well-being of participants. For this reason, researcher prioritized ethical considerations throughout the entire research process, from designing the study to reporting findings. Moreover, in data collection process, it was ensured to the participants that their identity will not be disclosed to protect their privacy and maintain respect for their confidentiality. It is important to uphold these principles in order to maintain trust and integrity in the handling of sensitive information. Furthermore, this measure was taken to prevent any potential retaliation or stigmatization from the public.

**Table 1**  
**Demographic Profile of Female Teachers**

	Variables	Frequency	Percentages
Marital Status	Married	43	53.7%
	Single	37	46.2%
Age Group	Less than 35 Years	45	56.2%
	35 and above Years	35	43.7%

The above table 1 presents data about the representation of female teachers according to their marital status and age group in HEIs. According to the data, (53.7%) of the participants who participated in this research were married, while (46.2%) of them were single. In a similar vein, according to the age distribution of the respondents, the majority of participants (56.2%) were less than 35 years old, while the other category of participants (43.7%) belonged to the age group ranging from 35 and above .

### Data Analysis

All the collected data given by the female teachers was analyzed by using both inferential and descriptive statistics. The data collected from the female educators was analyzed using SPSS version 25 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). In the present investigation, in order to provide an accurate depiction of the problems in which female teachers have been subjected to sexual harassment, a number of statistical techniques, including the independent sample t test, frequency, and percentages, were used by the researcher in order to perform data analysis. The frequencies and percentages are provided in (Table, 2) by adding the responses received from respondents who marked the response options "once, sometimes, often, and Most of the time."

### Results and Discussion

**Table 2**  
**Descriptive analysis for Females' Experiences of Sexual Harassment (SEQ)**

Items:	Frequency	(%)
<b>Have you ever been in a situation where a male colleague/Senior at your institution attempted to...</b>		
<b>Gender harassment:</b>		
1. ... told suggestive stories	24	30
2. ... made crude or unethical remarks	29	36.3
3. ... remarks on appearance	74	92.5
4. ... displayed offensive materials	31	38
5. ... made sexist comments	35	43.7
<b>Unwanted sexual attention:</b>		
6. ... attempted to discuss sex	33	41.2
7. ... unwanted sexual attention	67	83.7
8. ... staring, leering at you	55	68.8
9. ... attempts to establish a close relationship	11	1
10. ... repeated requests for drinks, dinner, despite rejection	69	86.
11. ... touching in a way that made you feel uncomfortable	54	67.5
12. ... attempts to stroke or fondle	45	56.2
<b>Sexual coercion:</b>		
13. ... subtly bribed you	48	60
14. ... subtly threatened you	66	82.5
15. ... made it necessary to cooperate to be well treated	61	82.5

16. ... made you afraid of poor treatment if you didn't cooperate	65	81.3
17. ... experienced consequences for refusing	55	68.7

In the above-given table 2, according to analysis, the highest frequency (92%) in the present sample is on item no. 3, which is related to the experiences of females regarding offensive comments on their physical appearance and looks, which belongs to the category of gender harassment. Moreover, the second item with the highest frequency (86%) is item no. 10, which is related to the category of unwanted sexual attention and indicates that females are frequently endorsed and invited for lunch and dinner in spite of their unwillingness. Similarly, the statement with the highest response rate is item no. 15 (82%), which is related to sexual coercion and indicates the experiences of females in certain situations where they were made afraid to comply positively according to the demands to avoid negative consequences.

**Table 3**  
**Differences in Marital Status and total Score of Sexual Harassment Experience Questionnaire**

Sub-Scales	Married n=43		Singles n=37		t	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Gender Harassment Unwanted	15.51	3.44	15.2	44.27	.311	.756
Sexual Attention	13.09	2.52	13.41	1.95	-.612	.543
Sexual Coercion	15.47	3.14	16.32	3.08	1.232	.222
Total SEQ	44.07	6.17	44.97	6.83	-.621	.536

The above-given table 3 indicates sexual harassment experiences of female teachers according to their marital status. According to statistical findings, females' observations seem to be not influenced by their marital status and there is no significant difference between married and unmarried female teachers regarding their sexual harassment experiences.

**Table 4**  
**Differences among age groups on scales and total score of Sexual Harassment Experience Questionnaire (N=80)**

Sub-Scales	Less than 35 n=45		35 & above n=35		t	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Gender Harassment Unwanted	15.33	3.70	15.46	4.03	-0.14	.887
Sexual Attention	13.11	2.46	13.40	2.02	-.563	.575
Sexual Coercion	15.91	3.34	15.80	2.87	-.157	.876
Total SEQ	44.36	6.705	44.66	6.216	-0.206	.837

The above-given table 4 shows the sexual harassment experiences of female teachers according to their age group. According to statistical findings, there is no significant variance in female teachers' experiences regarding sexual harassment of females with age group less than 35 years with those age groups 35 and above years.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this investigation was to examine the prevalence of sexual harassment at higher education institutions. The result showed that female teachers

experienced various forms of harassment to some extent. In addition, the findings of the study indicated that there is no significant difference, in terms of the severity or frequency of sexual harassment experienced, between the age groups of the female teachers who participated in the survey. The results of this investigation are compatible with those figured out by Kamal and Tariq (1997), who found that a woman of any age group may be the subject of sexual harassment. Moreover, the prevalence of various forms of harassment is same as presented in the previous studies conducted in western countries. Therefore, the prevalence estimate of sexual harassment on the current sample is the same as the estimate for the West. For instance, according to Fitzgerald et al. (1995), the dimension of gender harassment has the greatest reflection of sexual experiences, followed by the dimension of unwanted sexual attention, and while the dimension of sexual coercion has the lowest prevalence of sexual experiences.

Furthermore, it was explored in the present study that there is no significant difference in the sexual harassment experiences according to their marital status. The results correspond with those reported by Gilani and Waqar (2018), who found that married female employees confronted more sexual harassment than unmarried workers. According to the findings of current investigation, females experiences related to sexual bribery are also evident. These finding are in line with those presented by Aina-Pelemo et al. (2021).who found sexual coercion as common practice for getting benefits and rewards in academic institutions.

Sexual harassment is a serious problem, and academic institutions and female teachers are required to understand the various forms of sexual harassment to cope with such problems. Female teachers working in the different faculty were subjected in one way or another to some form of sexual harassment. Moreover, in this study, the main problem was the unwillingness of the women to express their concerns regarding sexual harassment. In academia, quid pro quo, which relates to the provision of sexual favors in exchange for rewards and benefits like promotion, is also taking the form of harassment in the HEIs. In addition, despite the best efforts of HEC guidelines to avoid sexual harassment, it seems impossible to completely eliminate this issue from the cultures of our educational institutions. The harassment in (HEIs) also suggests that institutions should offer seminars to highlight the sensitivity towards harassing behavior and should be more proactive in their respective institutions to create awareness about zero tolerance for sexual harassment. In addition, this research study makes an effort to focus on measures that could potentially be used by administrators working in academic organizations in Pakistan to reduce further occurrences of harassment based on sexual orientation.

### **Recommendations**

1. To address the issue of harassment, it is recommended to implement strict policies and procedures for reporting and investigating incidents. Additionally, providing education and training on respectful behavior and creating a culture of zero tolerance for harassment can also be effective in preventing future incidents
2. It is recommended that institutions implement clear and comprehensive policies on harassment, provide regular training to faculty and staff on how to identify and address harassment, and establish confidential reporting mechanisms for victims.

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