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# Negotiating Sexual Harassment: Experiences of Women Academic Leaders in Pakistan

By Aisha Bhatti<sup>1</sup>, Rabia Ali<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This paper endeavors to explore sexual harassment encountered by women leaders in Pakistani academia. An in-depth interview method was used to gain insight from women academic administrators working in coeducational universities in two cities of Pakistan. The interviews were analyzed using Foucauldian discourse analysis. The findings highlight that women leaders were sexually harassed by men at positions of power as well as co-workers and subordinates. The acts of harassment were expressed mostly through the use of inappropriate language such as jokes, demeaning comments and sexual remarks, undue offers of promotion for exchange of favors, and use of traditional words instead of their official titles as in the case of men. The subordinates often took advantage of their old age to defy women's positions of power. Young and single women were more likely to experience sexual harassment and were considered 'available.' The participants perceived such acts as a means of control through which men strengthen the gender-based power relations in the academia. The fact that women are discouraged to report acts of harassment shows that the dominant masculine discourses legitimize and defend the acts of male harassment at the workplace. Since women are aware of this normalization of harassment, they engaged in culturally appropriate strategies to cope with the violence such as keeping their distance, and through loud and harsh tones in response. The paper recommends the need for non-hierarchical, consultative, and gender-sensitive approaches in universities to combat sexual harassment and increase the representation of women at top leadership positions.

*Keywords:* Sexual harassment, Women leaders, Higher education, Foucauldian discourse analysis, Traditions, Religion, Pakistan, Women in Pakistan, Academia

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## Introduction

Globally, women's workforce participation is increasing rapidly; however, they continue to experience unequal opportunities in the job market and most of them are confined to lower and middle administration (Bader et al., 2018; Parker & Funk, 2017). The few women, especially in Pakistan, India, South Africa, Bangladesh and Nepal contrary to Norway, Iceland, New Zealand, and UAE, who have managed to reach the top management level of the hierarchy, encounter several personal and professional constraints (Khokhar, 2018; Lathabhavan & Balasubramanian, 2017; Thakur & Kumar, 2019). Despite being well-equipped with professional skills and experience, gender discrimination, harassment, and intimidation at senior management positions remain a reality across the world (Folke et al., 2020; McLaughlin et al., 2017; McKie & Jyrkinen, 2017). In developing countries, the predominant patriarchal structure regulates these discriminative organizational arrangements and legitimizes male hegemony (Bader et al., 2018; Lathabhavan & Balasubramanian, 2017).

Sexual harassment in the workplace is a widespread social phenomenon despite the prevalence of policy interventions and laws for its prevention (Castner, 2019; Folke et al., 2020; Hadi, 2018). Although several countries have established laws against sexual harassment in the workplace, the implementation of laws remains a challenge (Tavares & Wodon, 2018; Thakur & Kumar, 2019). Statistics show that one to three in every five women in United States is exposed to some form of sexual harassment during their careers (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering & Medicine, 2018; Raj et al., 2020).

Women working as staff, faculty, and administrators in academia experience a similar complex series of challenges. They are underrepresented in positions of power, decision-making, and influence. Moreover, they are exploited and harassed by men (Phillips, 2020; Tenbrunsel et al., 2019). Researches on sexual harassment in academia in the West have identified it as a major cause of the underrepresentation of women at the top management levels. However, the issues of harassment vary across societies due to their unique socio-cultural contexts (Folke et al., 2020; McLaughlin et al., 2017). Moreover, each institution represents a distinct organizational culture and individual behavior towards sexual harassment (McKie & Jyrkinen, 2017; Raj et al., 2020).

In Pakistan, male hegemony is normative and violence against women is not a new phenomenon. Women are discriminated against and disadvantaged in almost all fields of life (Shah, 2018; Yasmin & Jabeen, 2017; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2016). According to the Human Development Report (2020), the Gender Inequality Index (GII) value of Pakistan is 0.538 and it is ranked at 135 out of 162 countries in contrast to Bangladesh and India that are placed at 133 and 123 positions respectively, in the 2019 index. Although women's political participation in Pakistan has improved over the past two decades, they are not empowered in other sectors i.e. health, education, and economy (Sadrudin, 2013; Yasmin & Jabeen, 2017). It is also evident that workplace harassment is commonly experienced by women in Pakistan (Ali & Rukhsana, 2019; Shah, 2018). However, many women still feel reluctant to formally report issues of harassment due to the fear of being stigmatized, losing jobs, and feelings of shame (Hadi, 2018; Yasmin & Jabeen, 2017).

Scholarly work on sexual harassment in Pakistan predominantly focuses on economic and political organizations (e.g. see Ali & Rukhsana, 2019; Bader et al., 2018; Hadi, 2018). The existing studies on harassment in academia have mainly focused on women students and faculty (Agha & Magsi, 2017; Thakur & Kumar, 2019). However, the experiences of women academic leaders about harassment in Pakistan are largely ignored (Yousaf & Schmiede, 2016). Therefore,

this study sought to examine and document women leaders' lived experiences of harassment in universities in the context of Pakistan.

This paper aims to contribute to the discursive understanding of sexual harassment in Pakistani universities. We define sexual harassment as an act of physical or emotional discomfort that encompasses sexual advancement from males toward females.<sup>3</sup> We see such acts as a means to control and dominate women in academic culture. The findings of this study will contribute to the existing scholarly work on sexual harassment worldwide. Furthermore, at the practical level, the findings may be utilized by academic institutions and thinktanks in developing effective policy measures to overcome the issues of harassment in academic spaces. Such strategies would play a key role in encouraging more women to aspire leadership roles. At present, majority of women are reluctant to work as academic leaders due to the fear of harassment, besides other challenges such as the issue of work-life balance, traditional gender socialization, lack of supportive structures etc. This paper seeks to answer the following two research questions: (1) How do women leaders in Pakistani universities experience harassment at their workplace? (2) In what ways do they cope with such acts of sexual harassment?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is motivated by the postmodern theoretical assumptions of Michael Foucault and two famous feminist scholars, Dorothy Smith and Rewyn Connell, to examine and evaluate the existing discourses and power relations that legitimize acts of sexual harassment in academic institutes in Pakistan. Foucault (2000) argues that power hierarchies and manifestations are systematically controlled by the institutions through the use of knowledge and ideas. Foucault writes, "Finally, I believe that this will to knowledge, thus reliant upon institutional support and distribution tends to exercise a sort of pressure, a power of constraint upon other forms of discourse" (Foucault, 1971, p.11).

While Foucault's manifestation of power and knowledge has not considered and discussed gender as a separate issue as such, several feminist scholars such as Bordo (1993), Fraser (1992) and Weedon (1997) have built on his work and debated gender issues. This lens facilitates us in understanding harassment as a discursive phenomenon that is utilized to strengthen traditional male power in societies. Post-modern feminists put women at the center of their analysis to uncover women's lived experiences about gender disparities, violence, and harassment. This study has incorporated Connell's assumption of 'hegemonic masculinity' to investigate the discursive construction of leadership norms in the academia. The 'hegemonic masculinity' is defined as a cultural norm that endorses the traditional power of men and restrains women from attaining and maintaining leadership positions (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832).

In addition, Dorothy Smith's notion of standpoint and ruling class ideology guided this study in the reflexive understanding of women's experiences of the workplace harassment. Smith argues that the ruling class ideology is found in all organizations that are largely influenced by the "male subtext"; therefore, women are "excluded from the practices of power within textually mediated relationships of the ruling" (Smith, 1987, p.4). Incorporating postmodern theoretical underpinnings of Foucault, Connell, and Smith facilitated in understanding the socio-cultural context of harassment experienced by women leaders in Pakistani universities.

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<sup>3</sup> We recognize that sexual harassment can include men being harassed by women in powerful positions and also gender diverse people (Hijras in the Pakistani context, for example) experience such harassment, since sexual harassment is ultimately an act of power seeking to uphold the hegemonic gender order. However, in the context of this research we focus on sexual harassment of women by men.

## Literature Review

Sexual harassment includes unwanted statements and jokes, gestures encompassing sexual elements, continuously asking a person for a date after disapproval, or demanding sexual favors or interaction for employment and promotions (Chamberlain et al., 2008). In the context of Pakistan, a qualitative study highlights that sexual harassment includes behaviors such as gazing, touching, bullying, undesirable jokes and statements, putting hands on women's shoulders and back, touching of hips, sitting in more physical proximity, using offensive body language, emails and text messages containing sexual elements (Sadrudin, 2013). An extensive review of the literature reveals that sexual harassment is a major impediment to women's professional success (McLaughlin et al., 2017; Phillips, 2020). Globally, sexual harassment is prevalent in all organizational structures, and the academic institutions are no exception (Phillips, 2020; Raj et al., 2020; Thakur & Kumar, 2019). It is a pervasive problem in academia and is more often directed towards women.

Harassment is one of the main factors hindering women's advancement to the top administrative and academic levels (Phillips, 2020; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2016). It is the most vulnerable form of gender-based violence that is observed at all levels and disciplines in universities and used as form of glass ceiling (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). Women leaders, who become successful in achieving the positions of power in academia, confront greater sexual harassment in addition to other factors such as lack of leadership training, insufficient mentoring and networking experiences, and work-life conflict (Raj et al., 2020; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2016).

A study highlighting sexual harassment of women supervisors in US, Japan and Sweden, revealed that women who supervised mostly men, reported greater incidences of sexual harassment (30 percent more) in all three countries in contrast to women who supervised mostly women (Folke et al., 2020). This includes sexual remarks, insult, disrespectful statements and jokes, and vulgar remarks. Many studies indicate that almost a quarter of the complaints of workplace harassment are alleged against men at senior positions and it is commonly aimed at reducing women's likelihood to attain top hierarchical positions (Folke et al., 2020; McLaughlin et al., 2017).

Attempts of sexual harassment are often perpetrated by same status co-workers (Folke et al., 2020; Oguntoyinbo, 2014). Peer harassment has negative consequences on women's professional as well as personal lives. A study on women leadership in top universities by Oguntoyinbo (2014) reveals that women are discouraged in attaining the positions of power by their male counterparts, and if they become successful in achieving senior executive roles, they are exposed to greater risk of being harassed by their colleagues due to the discouragement, and lack of family and professional support.

Women in highly developed countries of the world such as Australia, Canada, and United States also experience sexual harassment in their workplace (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; Castner, 2019; Raj et al., 2020). In a longitudinal study to analyze the workplace harassment among women medical faculty, Raj et al. (2020) report that harassment becomes more severe for women trying to reach higher academic positions. Top-down harassment has more negative consequences for women, i.e. job withdrawal or fear of losing a job, decreased job satisfaction, emotional and psychological disorders, and ill health (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Tenbrunsel et al., 2019).

Working women in Asian countries like Malaysia, Singapore, Bangladesh and Pakistan also experience varied effects of sexual harassment due to its unique socio-cultural context (Bader et al., 2018; Thakur & Kumar, 2019). Bader et al. (2018) highlights that in Bangladesh, increased

women's participation in the workforce and higher social mobility has a close association with the greater incidences of sexual harassment. Consequently, working women are more endangered and face double jeopardy.

In Pakistan, educational institutions are replete with cases of sexual harassment, which is utilized as a tool by men to control women (Khokhar, 2018; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2016). Moreover, harassment is visible at all levels of the academic hierarchy that leads toward the invisibility of women in executive roles (Khokhar, 2018; Thakur & Kumar, 2019). This trend could be a strategic power-based plan to keep Pakistani women in a disadvantaged status. In a study highlighting the impact of harassment on women's participation in academic leadership, Yousaf and Schmiede (2016), find that harassment hinders women leaders' career advancement in the universities. In particular, women working under the leadership of men continue to develop obstacles in their professional development.

## **Methodology**

### *Study Design*

The methodological foundation of this qualitative investigation is embedded in the postmodernist theoretical stance that views reality as a subjective phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Hence, we have taken an interpretive and constructivist approach that permitted us to develop careful insights into the issues of sexual harassment in the academic administration in Pakistani universities.

### *Locale and Population*

This paper is drawn from the doctoral thesis of the first author that documented women's experiences of academic administration in Pakistani Universities. The populations of women working as academic administrators in co-educational universities, registered in the general category by the Higher Education Commission [HEC], were chosen from two cities of Pakistan: Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Limiting this study to coeducational universities allowed us to explore the prevalent power relations in the academic administration because these institutes represent a distinct professional culture that is highly influenced by the dominant masculine discourses (Khokhar, 2018).

### *Sample*

Purposive sampling was employed to select the prospective participants in this study. Women's availability and willingness were equally considered during the entire sampling process (Robinson, 2014). Our sampling criteria included women (a) having Ph.D. degrees (b) designated as professors i.e. Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, and Full Professor (c) presently occupying any academic leadership position i.e. Dean or Department Chair and (d) having a minimum one-year academic leadership experience in Higher Education. Surprisingly, no woman held the position of Vice-Chancellor in the target population.

Although twenty-three women leaders were included in the sample for the larger study; in this paper, we have included the narratives of seven women who had shared their experiences of harassment in a nuanced way. A brief profile of these participants is given in table 1.

**Table 1: A Brief Profile of the Participants**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Brief Profile</b>	<b>Work (years)</b>	<b>Experience</b>
Participant A	Chairperson, Associate Professor	43 years old, married, two children	20	
Participant B	Chairperson, Assistant Professor	37 years old, married, no children	12	
Participant C	Chairperson, Assistant Professor	43 year's old, unmarried	20	
Participant D	Chairperson, Assistant Professor	31 years old; unmarried, four years of total experience.	04	
Participant E	Chairperson, Assistant Professor	40 years old; married, three children	18	
Participant F	Chairperson, Assistant Professor	37 years old; divorced, two children	09	
Participant G	Dean, Professor	52 years old; married, two children	20	

Source: Interviews with the Participants

The above table summarizes the characteristics of the sample in this study. It shows the diversity of participants in terms of age and marital status. The data highlights that age and marital status influence the exposure of women toward sexual harassment at workplace which is discussed in the findings in detail. Moreover, among these seven participants, there was only one dean and six were departmental chairpersons. Furthermore, they had been in a leadership position for two to nine years and had vast teaching experience in higher education.

#### *Data Collection*

The data was collected in the summer of 2019 through in-depth interviews. The interview guide included a range of preliminary questions about participants' demographic backgrounds such as age, education, designation, marital status, etc. It was followed by more specific and in-depth inquiries about sexual harassment in the workplace i.e. types of harassment, perpetrators of sexual harassment in the occupational hierarchy, and women's strategies to confront such issues and to pursue their career trajectories.

In the absence of a gender-specific database about university employees, we relied on universities' official websites to locate our participants and made personal visits where the website information was outdated or incorrect. All participants were invited to participate in the study by sending an e-mail to their official accounts.

The interviews took place in the offices of women leaders as per their convenience. Audio recorders were used during interviews after obtaining informed consent from the participants. While field notes were also taken to jot down important observations during the interview process. Beyond our expectations, the participants were quite enthusiastic to participate in the study and shared their varied leadership experiences, particularly about harassment—a very sensitive issue, and women in Pakistan generally hesitate to discuss it openly. Since the participants had personal experiences to relate with the research questions and some of them were also interested in researching women's issues, they were keen to contribute to the study and extended all possible

support in data collection. Despite their busy office routines, they gave quality time for the interviews that helped the researchers in understanding the phenomenon more comprehensively. Also, since the researchers too work in universities, building a relationship of trust was not a challenge, and the participants openly shared personal stories that helped to generate rich data. However, some women denied participation in the study. They did not have personal reservation but due to the time constraint and overwhelming official commitments, they were unable to do so.

### *Data Analysis*

Foucault's discourse analysis guided the entire process of data interpretation and analysis to pinpoint not only prevailing masculine discourses but also women's subjectivities and underrepresentation. Interviews were conducted in both English as well as Urdu languages. All interviews were conducted and transcribed by the first researcher. Later, the Urdu transcripts were carefully translated into English and counterchecked by a language expert to ensure the cultural significance of each word being translated. Subsequently, close reading and re-reading of the transcripts were undertaken to access consistency that resulted in the emergence of various relevant discursive codes and themes.

### *Ethical considerations and Trustworthiness*

The study also incorporated ethical principles to protect the rights of all stakeholders (Hammersley, 2015). Confidentiality of the data was ensured by keeping an anonymous record of all stakeholders. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to maintain confidentiality. Furthermore, written informed consent was taken for their voluntary participation in the study. The participants were given a right to stop the interview or withdraw any question that they found unethical. Moreover, we utilized Creswell's (2014) principles to ensure validity and trustworthiness that include member checking, peer debriefing, and controlling personal bias and observation.

## **Key Findings**

Harassment in Pakistan is a sensitive issue that women prefer not to speak about openly. Academic research can play an important role to skillfully highlight this issue for better visibility and understanding. This research was an attempt towards this goal. On the positive side, all universities in this study have anti-harassment policies. However, women's stories of harassment reveal that the policies are not implemented in practice. The majority of the victims avoid reporting such cases due to the existing masculine hegemony in the universities. The participants shared that most of the anti-harassment committees are male dominated. Moreover, there are strong male lobbies that protect perpetrators of harassment at all levels of academic and administrative hierarchies. Therefore, such cases take a long time and often end up in favor of the offenders and humiliation of women in the organizations and society at large. Furthermore, victims are also compelled to remain silent by developing organizational pressure and individual threats, where their character is questioned instead of the perpetrators'. As noted, contrary to our expectations, the participants generously shared their stories of harassment in their occupational settings that helped us to understand the intensity of the problem experienced by women leaders in academic organizations. The main themes are discussed below.

### *Attempts of Harassment by Male Coworkers*



Pakistan has a gender-segregated society where women are discouraged to interact with men in public spaces. Women, who are part of men's networks, are often perceived negatively by the community. However, contrary to such expectations, professional women, particularly leaders are required to communicate with their male colleagues and subordinates to discuss various academic and administrative matters. This study found that the professional relationships between men and women are often misunderstood and misinterpreted by their colleagues due to the existing gender discourses in Pakistani society that don't distinguish between professional and personal relationships between the two sexes. Such discourses are deeply rooted in the work organizations and men working at different hierarchies take advantage of these cultural settings and attempt to harass their women colleagues, subordinates, and managers as well. The findings indicate the prevalence of harassment by coworkers in the form of demeaning jokes and comments including sexual remarks. The following excerpts evidence this:

I often receive impertinent statements, for instance, once after an official meeting, one of the fellow committee members commented about my stance that "*Madam, ap ny to kamal hi kr dia, ap to hain hi kmal ki*" (Translation: Madam you have discussed your point in an amazing way, as you are an amazing woman yourself). The way he communicated the sentence in a sexist way, was alarming for me. (Participant A).

Since my early professional life, I frequently receive sexual jokes and text messages on my cellphone from anonymous contacts. However, I believe that they are mostly my male colleagues, subordinates, and students. (Participant B).

Participant B also shared her experience during an interdisciplinary conference, when a male colleague commented on her style and speech in a sexist tone i.e. "*mam, ap bohat khoob bolti hain, hum to sunty hi reh gy*" (Translation: Madam, you speak so beautifully, we kept listening to your beautiful words). The English translation of these sentences may not be conveying the intensity of the words; yet, spoken in the local language i.e. Urdu, these are sexist and demeaning words, especially when it is used by highly educated people in academia. The excerpt shows that instead of giving remarks on the academic strength and value of the participant's work, the men discussed her feminine style, which she found offensive and disappointing. They believed that such comments stigmatize women leaders' image and influence their career choices. It is clear from the narratives of the participants that men, who are the products of patriarchy, are motivated by the dominant masculine culture to control women through inappropriate remarks.

The findings show that all unmarried women (6) among the total participants (23) in the larger study, experienced some sort of harassment. It unveils the existing vulnerability of unmarried women in academic organizations. In Pakistani society, family and marriage are considered as the primary concerns of women; therefore, career-oriented women are often stigmatized by their family and community and considered as deviant. At workplaces, males often take advantage of their single status and attempt to harass them verbally or non-verbally, for instance, passing sexual comments and jokes, grabbing, touching etc. Many single women have shared their experiences of harassment within the organizational settings that is clear from the following statements:

I take good care of my skin and maintain formal attire. For instance, I use nail paints frequently, and my nails remain well-shaped and grown. Once, an elder male colleague gave a statement, when I was typing a letter, "*ab ma ap kay hath dekhon ya ap ka kam*" (Translation: Should I concentrate on your typing or your beautiful hands). I carefully

responded that “*inhi khobsorat hatoon sy ma thapar bhi bohat achaa maar skti hon*” (Translation: With these beautiful hands, I can also slap hard). (Participant C).

Single women are perceived as weaker and sympathetic in contrast to married women in Pakistani society. This example and others highlight that women are well-aware of existing stigmatization by hegemonic men. Therefore, they remain careful while interacting with their male counterparts and are ready to resist and respond to the stigmatization. Moreover, they have come of age and have acquired the courage and confidence over time to deal with the perpetrators. Such behavior on the part of these women sets examples for other women to defy the cultural norms of obedience and silence, and instead encourages them to stand up for themselves. It also conveys a message to men that women are not freely available subjects, who can be used for pleasure. Ultimately this could lead to a more gender-balanced workspaces that are free from harassment and stigmatization.

I believe that men have a typical perception of a woman interacting with them; therefore, I remain cautious. For instance, if I accept their offer for a cup of tea in their office, they usually take it as a signal for a relationship. In addition, if I spend another tea break with them that is often completely misinterpreted as they start trying to cross the limits such as they start discussing my personal life i.e. marriage, style of dressing and nail paints etc. (Participant D).

The participants reported that male colleagues take advantage of their age in their harassment. The age discourse in Pakistani society offers more respect, prestige, and power toward the elders. In particular, elder men are more influential due the prevalent patriarchal normative structure. Therefore, regardless of the authority vested in the administrative positions, women leaders are bound to give additional respect and compensation to the elder men at work. It allows them to control women through the acts of harassment. The participants reported that most men, especially at the lower levels of hierarchy, are elders; hence, they criticize women at the positions of power and often refuse to follow their instructions.

#### *Harassment by Senior Executives*

Leadership endeavors new and interesting opportunities for individuals, and communication with senior administrators is one of them. However, women leaders experience additional challenges besides good opportunities. In this study, participants highlighted that in many cases the harassers were men at senior leadership positions, who were unwilling to see women competing with them equally. They used harassment as an instrument to downplay and harm women. A departmental chairperson expressed the issue of top-down harassment in this way:

I believe that top management has a powerful role in developing organizational culture. In board meetings, top management often ignores women's opinions and use impertinent and undignified language for them such as using the word ‘*bibi*’ (a typical Urdu word used for women in the traditional sense) instead of using their title ‘Doctor’, ‘Ms.’ or ‘Madam’ as it is in the case of men. I consider it as sexual harassment because it hurts my gender identity (Participant E).

In the Urdu language, there is difference in addressing someone respectfully and casually. For women, slang words and discourteous language are often used; while for men, respectful

words are preferred. This was experienced by majority of the participants, and they considered it as a form of harassment. Examples of such words are compared and contrasted in Table 2, below.

**Table 2: Slang and Discourteous Words Used for Women in Contrast to Men in Pakistani Society**

Sr. No.	Word in English Language	Respectful Urdu Words for Men	Disrespectful Urdu Words for Women
1	Sir/Madam	<i>Janab</i>	<i>Bibi</i>
2	You	<i>Aap</i>	<i>Tum</i>
3	What are you doing	<i>Kya kar rahy hain</i>	<i>Kya kar rahi ho</i>
4	Come here	<i>Idhar aain</i>	<i>Idhar aao</i>
5	Listen to me	<i>Meri baat sunnain</i>	<i>Meri baat sunno</i>
6	His/her	<i>Un ka</i>	<i>Us ka</i>

Source: Interviews with the Participants

These discourses highlight men's traditional approach to suppress women, who intend to compete with them for senior leadership positions. This also evidences that education and professional work do not necessarily bring any behavioral changes in men. Likewise, another participant narrated:

I feel that the senior executives are aware of my credibility; therefore, they often attempt to harass me on different occasions to confine my professional growth. Such as, once a senior executive directly offered me promotion upon accepting his unethical demands and giving my consent for working with his nominated team. I refused the offer straight away. (Participant F).

This excerpt unfolds a harsh reality in academia that women leaders are constantly victimized by the top hierarchy. Strong and confident women are also sexually harassed. Men take advantage of their authority to suppress women's professional growth and maintain their hegemony. Language is utilized as a major tool by these men to disseminate these discourses among women in the workplace. Women are not allowed to speak up loudly during formal interactions, while men often act violently by utilizing impertinent verbal and no-verbal expressions.

*Harassment from the Junior Staff and Subordinates*

The data also reveals the harassment of women leaders by their subordinates in universities. The majority of the administrative personals include men, who have strong lobbies. Since society gives them autonomy to exploit women by various means including harassment, these individuals recreate the same space in their workplace. It is evident that harassment by subordinates is more common against single women, who are an easy target for these men as discussed in the previous theme. The participants expressed multiple obstacles in dealing with their subordinates, especially those who were old in age. A single woman explained her experience in this way:

I often observe that the body language and expressions of the male staff are quite offensive. They know about my single marital status; therefore, they often crack sexual jokes and comments during meetings or start convincing me for marriage. I feel that they use it as a tool to suppress me and create pressure. (Participant D)

The above narrative illustrates the power of men towards women irrespective of their occupational positions and social status. Clearly, hegemonic cultural norms empower men to defy women in powerful positions. They consider it as an offense to be governed by women; hence, they retaliate in the forms of harassment. Moreover, these women have less family and community support; therefore, men try to suppress them quickly by their typical behavior and body language. Another unmarried participant reported:

Harassment is common by men from high to low occupational statuses. Once, in the car parking, a young male clerk pretending to be on his phone, commented on me; “*yar tum ho hi bohhot achi*” (Translation: Dear you are so sweet). The very next day, the same man commented the same in the parking. I was vigilant, so I stopped and asked him to whom he was talking but he cleverly denied. A few days later, he attempted for the third time, so I reacted in a bit harsh tone. I suddenly stopped him, asked for his employment card, and threatened to report to the security officer. Moreover, I informed the case to his reporting officer, who issued him a warning a letter. Since then, he has never affronted me. (Participant C).

In sum, masculine discourse is strongly embedded in academia and provokes men to harass women. Women are generally perceived through their feminine identities and often stigmatized. This discursive construction of gender identity adversely influences women’s personal as well as professional lives. Unmarried women experience adverse effects due to these hegemonic cultural norms. The status of a single woman, including strong, confident women, is perceived by these men as an available status. Therefore, single women leaders remain more careful and interact with their male peers within definite boundaries to avoid sexual violence and stigmatization.

### *Dealing with Harassment in Leadership Pathways*

The findings of this study reveal that all universities have developed anti-harassment policies, and specific committees are also constituted to address the issues of harassment and provide justice to the victims. However, the results reveal that the majority of members in these committees are men, who are biased against women. They show no sympathy towards women and discourage complaints related to harassment as they believe this is damaging for the reputation of the universities and men themselves. This clearly shows that the dominant masculine discourses legitimize and defend the acts of sexual harassment at the workplace. Harassment thus becomes ‘normal’ business in the daily lives of women, which they silently endure. Women in leadership positions are well aware of this normalization of harassment and the consequence of reporting it.

Hence, they remain vigilant about how they perform in their workspaces. They also employ numerous strategies to encounter the harasser. The following excerpts evidence this:

Being women, we need to be vigilant while communicating with men, because they don't hesitate to cross the limit and try to dominate in all aspects. Therefore, while interacting with men, I maintain a good distance, behave in a well-controlled manner, and hold a slightly harsh tone. I find it quite effective for dealing with the harassers. (Participant B).

I don't keep myself segregated from men but communicate within culturally defined limitations. For instance, I follow the traditional dress code and maintain a slightly harsh, rude, and loud voice during interaction with men to avoid any misbehavior. (Participant G).

I never consider my feminine identity as an obstacle in my professional life. I behave professionally; therefore, I firmly respond to perpetrators. Such as, I use the words "*app is qabil nhi hain k ap k saath baat kee jay*" (Translation: You do not deserve to have a chat with me), and this often brings positive outcomes or "*apni had ma rahian*" (Translation: Keep yourself in the limits) etc. (Participant F)

The above illustrations show the unique strategies of women in dealing with the harassers. Women holding leadership positions require frequent interaction with men colleagues and sometimes even minor neglect of their vigilance allow men to cross the limits. Thus, women remain very careful while interacting with men. Any open and friendly attitude by women with men in the workplace is often negatively perceived in academia.

Moreover, the participants argued that women should raise their voices against all kinds of violence and discrimination. To do this, they need to be strong and confident and avoid disclosing their weaknesses to others. The participants believed that young and unmarried women find it difficult to deal with the attempts of harassment, and often feel insecure and hesitant to disclose such events. They react with uncertainty due to existing stigmatization. For instance, participant C shared that if a woman comes forward to resist any kind of violence or discrimination, she receives humiliating statements, such as "*yeah aurat ghunda gardi kar rhi ha*" (Translation: This woman is bullying) or "*yeah na hanjar ha*" (Translation: She is a crusty irascible cantankerous woman). Consequently, men become more powerful and frequently use harassment as a tool to control young women and restrict their professional growth. Most of the women learn to deal with attempts of harassment through personal experiences and constant exposure to the new and challenging academic and administrative environment.

## Discussion

This paper has documented the issues of sexual harassment experienced by women leaders in Pakistani academia and their strategies to cope with such acts. We argue that sexual harassment is used as a tool by the hegemonic men to legitimize their control over women and to restrict their mobility towards top leadership positions in the academia. These nuanced findings add to the existing research in the socio-cultural context of Pakistan, where there is a scarcity of scholarship on sexual harassment of women leaders in the academia. The discussion also confirms prior researches on harassment around the world (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Oguntoyinbo, 2014; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2016). The data reveals that harassment is frequently directed toward women managers in the academia by men with different occupational statuses. Since women are aware of

this normalization of harassment, they engage in culturally appropriate strategies to cope with the violence, such as keeping at a distance and through a loud and harsh tone.

The subjective realities of the participants evidence the exposure of women to the acts of sexual harassment at all levels of the occupational hierarchy. Their experiences demonstrate that masculine norms are strongly embedded in academia that has institutionalized gender-based power relations. In addition, stereotypes endorse these power relations by labeling women as weak, emotional, confused, less confident etc. It is clear from the narratives of the participants that academic culture also strengthens these widespread stereotypes. However, women experience vulnerable effects of harassment by their senior executives, because they are also members of the selection boards. These boards also present obstacles in selecting women participants and in their promotion processes. These findings resonate with prior studies conducted in the West and the East that explicate that perpetrators of sexual harassment belong to different occupational hierarchies (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Folke et al., 2020; Yasmin & Jabeen, 2017).

In particular, marital status is an important factor in understanding sexual harassment. In Pakistani society, women have the primary responsibility of managing marital and family activities; therefore, career-oriented women are not acknowledged and are criticized for their professional goals (Bhatti & Ali, 2020). Such women often remain single and have weak social support; hence, they become the victims of harassment. In this study single women experienced greater verbal and no-verbal harassment in the academia.

The subjective reflections of the participants also unfold the prevailing discourse of age. The results indicate that in universities, elder faculty and staff have a strong institutional support system irrespective of their ranks; therefore, they often attempt harassment. Especially, young unmarried women leaders are an easy target for these elder men. These findings resonate with other studies indicating that elder men impose pressure on young women at the workplace and use harassment as a tool to control them (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; McDonald et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, the experiences of women show that they had learned from their increased experience and exposure to confront harassment. They utilized multiple strategies to deal with the acts of harassment i.e. remaining careful while interacting with men, using a harsh, loud and rude tone, defining clear limitations, wearing traditional attire, and straightforwardly responding to the violent acts to avoid humiliation and embarrassments.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

The growing participation of women in academic leadership has led to new personal and professional challenges for them. Besides other workplace challenges, women leaders encounter sexual harassment at all levels of academic and leadership hierarchies. The hegemonic masculine ideologies in academia such as control, violence, and domination endorse the traditional power of men and legitimize their harassment of women leaders, thereby hindering women's professional growth. Importantly, the stereotypical discourses about marital status and age do not allow young and unmarried women to occupy positions of power in the dominant patriarchal administrative structure of the academia.

The findings of this empirical investigation provide a useful insight into the harassment experiences of women managers in the universities, in the socio-cultural context of Pakistan. The findings are disturbing, because while the Anti-harassment Act, 2011 is in place in the country to deal with challenges to women at workplace there remain significant problems in its implementation. Universities seem to be committed to the Act in theory, through designing anti-harassment policies and committees to deal with such cases. Nevertheless, in practice, the inability

of women to report harassment issues due to cultural barriers, stereotypes and repercussion in the form of delayed promotions show the challenges related to the implementation of the laws. In addition, being a developing economy, Pakistan is unlikely to forgo women's talent from its leadership pool for more equitable development. Therefore, there is a need to devise non-hierarchical, consultative, and gender-sensitive approaches to combat workplace harassment. Women need a secure and harassment-free workplace to pursue their leadership careers.

The findings of this study may be helpful for all the stakeholders in developing supportive mechanisms in universities to control intimidations and harassment against women. This may also increase women's representation at top leadership positions. As this study is limited to the coeducational universities of the general category in two cities of Pakistan, future researches could be conducted in other geographical locations and universities to build comparative insights into such issues. This will also test the implementation of the Anti-harassment Act in practice. In addition, demographic factors such as age and marital status influence women's exposure toward harassment in academic leadership. Other studies may investigate the impact of such variables as age and marital status at various hierarchical levels in academia.

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