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Sexual harassment and Assault on University Campus Affects Academic Performance and Well-Being: Perceptions and Experiences of Female Students

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Citation: Madani, M., Hashmi, S.S., & Kazmi, S. M. B. (2023). Sexual harassment and Assault on University Campus Affects Academic Performance and Well-Being: Perceptions and Experiences of Female Students. *Journal of Law and Social Sciences*. 1(2), 16-30.

Received: August 3, 2023 Revised: September 27, 2023 Accepted: November 29, 2023 Published: December 31, 2023



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Journal of Law and Social Sciences

University of Turbat

Abstract

Sexual harassment is a global issue. Sexual assault continues to be prevalent and consequential experience for university students. Universities and victims themselves need to understand that the consequences are not just physical and psychological but can also negatively impact academic performance. Therefore, this qualitative exploratory case study research has been conducted through in-depth interviews from a liberal feminist perspective to analyze the perceptions and experiences of female students regarding sexual harassment and assault (SHA) on university campuses as a factor affecting academic performance and well-being. In this study, the universe of the researchers is Karachi. Researchers used purposive sampling with a sample size of 12 female students. The data was analyzed through the thematic analysis method. Although respondents shared a range of viewpoints on how the prevalence of SHA on university campuses affects students' academic performance and well-being. However, the majority of respondents did not perceive much variation in such experiences based on their gender identity and socioeconomic status. Moreover, in respondents' opinion, SHA can be significantly reduced over time by implementing strict measures.

Keywords: sexual harassment, sexual assault, academic performance, well-being, university students, gender identity, socioeconomic status.

Introduction

Sexual harassment (SH) is a global issue that affects individuals, groups, and entire organizations (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). SH is defined as "requests for sexual favors, unwelcome sexual advances, and other forms of verbal or physical harassment." Both the victim and the harasser can be female or male, and they can be of the same sex (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2019). Sexual assault (SA) continues to be a prevalent and consequential experience for university students (Molstad et al., 2021). College students do not have uniform images of SA and frequently define it according to their personal perceptions and experiences (Baldwin-White & Bazemore, 2020). SA is defined as "any nonconsensual sexual contact that occurs without the consent of the other person" (Harris, 2020).

In Pakistan, 93% of women have experienced sexual violence in public settings at some point in their lives (Kazi, 2017). Victims do not come forward in Pakistan since it is regarded as against society's norms to bring such issues up. The world is changing; we should adapt our standards and advocate for justice. Victims can seek support from the Punjab Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW) Toll-Free Helpline: 1043, or they can file a complaint on the PCSW's official website. Punjab's provincial assembly formed PCSW in 2014. Contact Madadgaar by phone (1098 or 03116641098) or email (madadgaar@cyber.net.pk). For the past two decades, the Madadgar organization has



Journal of Law and Social Sciences

University of Turbat

worked in Pakistan with the assistance of UNICEF. Furthermore, harassment can be reported on the Prime Minister's Pakistan citizen portal (Saad, 2021).

Education is universally recognized as the keystone of human improvement (Noor et al., 2021). However, college-age women are disproportionately at risk of experiencing SA. SA causes tremendous psychological distress for survivors (Baldwin-White & Bazemore, 2020). By examining how SHA affect well-being, the research can shed light on the psychological, emotional, and physical consequences experienced by victims. Many higher education scholars, policymakers, and practitioners continue to ignore the intersections of race and gender when focusing on campus SA for the undergraduate student population (Harris, 2020). By acknowledging the diverse experiences across different gender identities, this research can help survivors recognize that their experiences are not isolated incidents, fostering a sense of solidarity and empowerment.

Moreover, SA can have a drastic impact on student work, and the horrors of that abuse can impact not only personal issues within the student but work within the classroom as well (Rogus, 2020). Universities, those providing psychological services, and victims themselves need to understand that the consequences are not just physical and psychological but can also negatively impact academic achievement (Molstad et al., 2021). Understanding the relationship between SHA and academic performance is crucial for universities and policymakers to develop effective intervention strategies. By investigating this relationship, this research can provide insights into the extent to which such incidents hinder students' academic performance.

Objectives

- To examine the effects of the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault on university campuses on students' academic performance and well-being.
- > To explore the variations in students' experiences of sexual harassment and assault on university campuses based on their gender identity and socioeconomic status.
- > To find out preventive measures to reduce sexual harassment and assault on university campuses

Research questions

- 1. How does the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault on university campuses affect students' academic performance and well-being?
- 2. How do students' experiences of sexual harassment and assault on university campuses vary based on their gender identity and socioeconomic status?
- 3. How to reduce sexual harassment and assault on university campuses?



Journal of Law and Social Sciences

University of Turbat

Literature Review

Htun et al. (2022) have investigated whether mandatory; in-person sexual misconduct training accomplishes its goals of increasing information about sexual harassment and assault (SHA) and increasing the desire to report incidents of assault. Participating in training, they claim, makes female students less likely to indicate they will disclose sexual assault (SA) to university authorities. Students receive broader definitions of sexual misconduct and are less likely to believe popular rape myths following training, while female students report fewer sexist attitudes soon after training. According to Gartner (2021), Gender micro aggressions are everyday slights, insults, and invalidations theorized to create and sustain environments in which SHA of women is normative and permissible. According to Rostami (2021), consensual SH on Iranian campuses is becoming more prevalent; however, this phenomenon has not been examined yet.

Molstad et al. (2021) have identified 13 articles that examined the academic consequences of sexual assault during university. Across all studies, sexual assault was associated with more academic problems, including a lower grade point average, dropping out of university, and self-regulated learning problems. According to Frazee (2020), higher education institutions in four of the top 20 richest nations in the world (based on GDP per capita) damage gender equality by neglecting sexual violence against women with disadvantaged identities. Javorka and Campbell (2020) investigated the degree to which the criminal justice system affects Title IX procedures at universities as well as any potential repercussions of this influence. According to them, the U.S. federal Title IX policy, which forbids sex discrimination in educational institutions, defines SA among college students as both a criminal and a civil rights violation.

Rogus (2020) investigated how students respond immediately and in the years following a sexual incident as they face the academic demands of graduate-level study. He claims that many educational and trauma psychologists have researched the effects of rape and SA on the well-being of undergraduate students. Certain potentially offensive activities and behaviors have been found to be widely normalized, according to Guschke et al. (2019). Students also remark that, depending on the situation, different activities are acceptable to differing degrees. On the basis of this, they have claimed that normalization makes it more difficult for some students to identify and report SH.

Methodology

This research has used the qualitative exploratory case study approach to analyze perceptions and experiences of female students regarding sexual harassment and assault on university campuses affecting academic performance and the well-being within a liberal feminist theoretical framework. Researchers fulfill the purpose of this qualitative research approach, i.e., qualitative research aims to answer questions about the meaning and experience components of people's lives and social situations (Fossey et al., 2016). In this



Journal of Law and Social Sciences

University of Turbat

study, the universe of the researchers is a university campus in Karachi. The study sample consists of 12 female students.

In this study, Purposive sampling is used by the researcher because it provides a better match of the sample to the purposes and objectives of the research, thereby strengthening the rigor of the study and the reliability of the data and conclusions (Campbell et al., 2020). In-depth interviews were used for data collection in this study. Indepth interviewing is a qualitative research approach that entails conducting intensive individual interviews with a limited number of respondents to investigate their viewpoints on a certain issue (Boyce & Neal, 2006). The data was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is a technique for methodically locating, classifying, and providing insight into recurring patterns of meaning (themes) in a body of data (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Results and Discussion

The study sample consists of 12 **respondents fro**m different departments. Gender of all respondents is female. Socioeconomic status of all respondents is middle class.

Case no.	Gender	Socioeconomic status
1	Female	Middle class
2	Female	Middle class
3	Female	Middle class
4	Female	Middle class
5	Female	Middle class
6	Female	Middle class
7	Female	Middle class
8	Female	Middle class
9	Female	Middle class
10	Female	Middle class
11	Female	Middle class
12	Female	Middle class

Respondents shared a range of viewpoints on how the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault (SHA) on university campuses affects students' academic performance and well-being. However, the majority of respondents did not perceive much variation in students' experiences of SHA on university campuses based on their gender identity and socioeconomic status.

Themes: After analysis, a total of three themes emerged from the data. It includes



Journal of Law and Social Sciences

University of Turbat

- 1) Effects of SHA,
- 2) Variations in experiences of SHA, and
- 3) Prevention.
- 1) Effects of SHA: According to respondents, the effects of SHA are that the victim is unable to trust others and focus on study. The victim experiences restlessness, depression, insomnia, shame, and continuous thoughts about the incident. These effects lead to skipping exams, being scared of every guy, and disrupting daily life. It also decreases the victim's attendance, self-esteem, self-confidence, and attention as shown in fig 1.

For example, case number 2 said:

"SHA affect students because they continuously think of that situation that affect students' mental abilities and also had a great impact on their academic performance. They are unable to attend their lecture properly."

Case number 6 shared some true stories:

"I saw with my own eyes. A guy opened the gate of his car in the parking area at the university and asked my friend to come along with him. The next day, my friend was very scared to go there. I had another friend who faced harassment at the university. We were sitting in the lobby when a guy from another department started bothering her. After that incident, she took a week off, and her final lab missed. She was afraid that the same group of boys might bother her again. I have seen individuals in my life who have experienced harassment and faced depression due to it, and it affects their studies significantly."

Similarly, case number 12 shared some true stories:

"I heard a story about a girl who attempted to harass another girl through social interaction at the university, which eventually ruined the victim's future. The girl decided to stop coming to the university, and her life was greatly affected. She was a second-year student, and her life was destroyed by this incident. Something similar happened to a girl I know. She used to avoid passing through certain areas or sitting there, and she stopped going there completely. She abandoned her interests and started living in fear. If any girl or boy becomes a victim of harassment, their family warns and advises them, and sometimes they don't allow them to go to the university. When such situations arise, everything happens. Poor people or those with less education tend to lock up their children at home, marry them off at an early age. They do not have enough information or education to fight for their children."

Moreover, case number 8 explained:



Journal of Law and Social Sciences

University of Turbat

"In many families, girls are not given permission to study further if they have male friends or when such an incident occurs with them. When a girl is harassed, it becomes very difficult for her to continue her education. They will start seeing their male friends with suspicion. She will become highly distressed, and her confidence level will drop significantly. She won't be able to trust anyone and, in our society, if a girl speaks up, she is often blamed and criticized. It has been reported that some girls were pushed to the point of attempting suicide due to the harassment they faced."

Furthermore, case number 10 said:

"After going through such a traumatic experience, Victims avoid coming to the university for some time and may not want to meet anyone. Furthermore, their trust in others might diminish. They may limit their interactions with people. They will stop talking to people and avoid making friends. It can also impact their diet and overall well-being."

Additionally, case number 11 said:

"If harassment occurs in the university, it obviously has negative effects. It poses many challenges for students. People do not prefer to come to the university after witnessing or hearing about such incidents. The university's reputation also suffers, and if someone goes for a job interview, they become aware that the university has a bad reputation due to such incidents, resulting in false perceptions. Victims are unable to focus on their daily life, become distressed, and struggle to move on."



Journal of Law and Social Sciences

University of Turbat

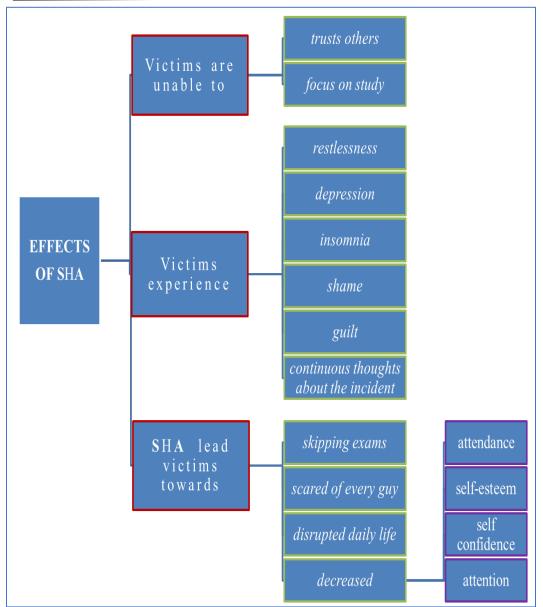


Fig 1: Effects of sexual harassment and assault (SHA) on students.

A similar study has illuminated the dramatic impact that trauma can have on a student's mind and shows that no matter what level of higher education a student is encountering this trauma at; the effects on a student's learning capacity are drastic. The results of a study



Journal of Law and Social Sciences

University of Turbat

also reflected the academic and psychological consequences of SH on the victims' future (Rostami, 2021).

2) Variations in Experiences of SHA: Most of them said that experiences of sexual harassment and assault (SHA) are not based on differentiating factors such as gender identity and socioeconomic status. Regardless of these factors, harassment can happen to anyone.

For example, case number 1 said:

"Harassment doesn't depend on sexuality, it can happen to both. Harassment affects both individuals equally."

While case number 5 said:

"Harassment can happen to any student, regardless of gender. Both girls and boys can experience it, but it is more common with girls. If a boy talks or behaves like girls, they will be harassed. Some people judge them based on appearance, not considering whether they are doing something wrong or not. They face harassment just because they are different."

Similarly, case number 6 said:

"It does happen with boys too, but more often with girls. Considering the socioeconomics status, I don't think it will be as much of an issue. However, sometimes clothing can be a factor, but it's not the case that it only happens to girls who don't cover themselves. But, if we observe, clothing might slightly affect the level of harassment a person faces."

However, case number 9 said:

"In my experience, harassment is directly linked to gender identity and socioeconomic status. Many people with more power tend to harass others using this leverage, and they know that nobody will question or accuse them."

Similarly, case number 10 said:

"Gender identity and socioeconomic status do play a role in harassment. These factors can lead to different types of harassment. For example, when we talk about gender, boys tend to harass girls more."

However, based on survey data, a study found varying responses according to their gender, indicating that men were least likely to experience and perceive situations as SH (Guschke et al., 2019). Moreover, in another study, only 20% agreed that the university is creating an environment in which unwanted sexual experiences seem common or normal (Silvera et al., 2022). Furthermore, according to a study, the basic needs of the females and



Journal of Law and Social Sciences

University of Turbat

the professors' leering seduced the females to enter into sexual relationships (Rostami, 2021).

- 3) **Prevention:** Most of them said that, harassment (SH) can be significantly reduced over time by implementing these measures:
 - > Strict security measures should be taken.
 - Police should be involved.
 - Guards should be deployed at various locations.
 - Create a self-defense program
 - CCTV cameras should be installed.
 - Emergency contact numbers should be provided to report incidents.
 - ➤ Harsh penalties should be imposed.
 - > Teachers and parents should be helpful.

For example, case number 1 said:

"University should have police and guards stationed around, especially for female students. When girls walk or ride bikes, they face harassment. Improvement can happen in such an environment when motivational speakers are invited to hold seminars for students. They should teach them how to raise their voices for their defense so that they don't fear such things".

While case number 2 said:

"Biggest support system is Parents who make their child stronger after facing that problem and then their friend circle that encourage him/her to continue their study after that Academic Teachers who teach that students also help them. Other people say that it's your fault you don't have to go outside and you do something to provoke and your character is bad."

Similarly, case number 4 said:

"We should have support from our parents in every aspect. They should create a friendly environment where we can share all our problems and issues. When students feel comfortable with their parents and share everything, there will be no need for support from others. Also, if harassment is happening at the university, it shouldn't be addressed by just one faculty member; the head of the department should be informed to take appropriate actions."

Moreover, case number 5 said:

"Minor harassment that happens is often dismissed as common behavior until something big like rape happens. Minor harassment, such gazing, is considered normal by people, but it's not normal. In our society, when something happens to a girl, instead of addressing the issue, people silence her



Journal of Law and Social Sciences

University of Turbat

or scare her from taking action. People who are scared need a box where they can safely file a complaint. Those who want to share their experience with the name should also be heard properly and their complaints should be thoroughly investigated by a team dedicated to handling such matters. In my opinion, in every department, there should be women who are psychologists or counselors. Many people believe that only those who are crazy visit them, but in fact, in their daily life, they might face something that they cannot share with anyone else. Every department should hire psychologists who can handle such issues."

Furthermore, case number 6 said:

"University authorities should take immediate action rather than suppressing the matter, fearing that it will create a bad name for the university. Sessions on mental health should be conducted to support victims. This will also benefit the teachers as they will understand students better and will be able to help them more effectively. There was a case in the university in the past where someone attempted suicide or made an effort to do so, and it was reported. However, the teachers didn't offer any help or support. I have presented my opinion to my teacher that there should be CCTV cameras in our department. Though there hasn't been any harassment in our department, some people from another department were following us, and one of them even entered our class. So, having CCTV cameras that ensure our safety is essential."

Additionally, case number 7 said:

"People always blame the girl or scold her for what happened, and the issue is brushed aside without taking serious action. Strict measures should be taken for the students, and anyone engaging in such behavior should be punished publicly and expelled from the university. They should be given one or two warnings, and if they still don't understand, they should be expelled. Victims should feel empowered to report them without fear of reprisal, and the university environment should be improved."

Similarly, case number 8 said:

"In our society, especially in Pakistan, if such an incident occurs, there are many challenges to face. Our society immediately declares that the girl is to blame and advises her to ignore it, which leads to ignoring such matters. However, enlightened countries like Europe take these matters seriously and provide proper counseling. We should also have such systems in place, but people are afraid to speak up due to fear of losing their honor. Punishments should be given to those who engage in any inappropriate behavior."

However, case number 10 said:



Journal of Law and Social Sciences

University of Turbat

"Creating a self-defense program for students could also be beneficial. Reporting or seeking help in these cases is challenging. For instance, in Pakistan, most victims of harassment hesitate to report or seek support because they are ordinary people. The university administration should take prompt action regardless of the culprit's family, wealth, social status, or political affiliation. If the person responsible for harassment is a faculty member, they should be removed from their position."

While, case number 12 said:

"In my opinion, to create a safe and good environment, children should be taught good values from the beginning. They should receive good education so that they don't get involved in such activities, and if someone goes in that direction, efforts should be made to improve them through teachers or psychologists. I would advise parents to take care of their children, observe their friendships, and provide them with a positive environment. They should support their children and explain to them kindly if they are going in the wrong direction."

Similarly, a study has suggested planning a safe mechanism so that students can easily report sexual harassment. Moreover, organize regular seminars by professional counselors about the sexual harassment phenomenon (Rostami, 2021). According to a study, creating and providing a standard of SA based on the reality of college students can provide a foundation for creating effective prevention strategies (Baldwin-White & Bazemore, 2020). Another study has proposed policy alterations designed to address the complex needs of women with marginalized identities who experience violence, including implementing cultural competency training and increasing institution-sponsored health care services for sexual violence survivors (Frazee, 2020). According to a study, a decrease in peer SH incidences is realizable if universities improve aspects of their climate and culture. There is a need for victim counseling in order to mitigate the negative impact of peer SH (Mawere, 2021).

Respondents highlight the effects of SHA on the students' academic performance and mental well-being. Some students manage to overcome the challenges and move forward, while others struggle and experience mental distress. Respondents shared the experiences of those friends who were victims but avoided sharing their own experience of being a victim. All of them said that everyone faces SHA at least once in their lives. Still, some of them also clearly said that they never faced SHA. The constraints of Pakistani culture may prohibit them from reporting the incident. Women are thought to be shy and lack the courage to report an occurrence. As a result, the perpetrators do not hesitate to threaten (Ahmed et al., 2023).



Journal of Law and Social Sciences

University of Turbat

In Respondents' opinion, better arrangements should be made on university campuses so that students of each gender identity and socioeconomic status can focus on their education. Teachers, parents, and society should make a positive atmosphere for students. These arrangements and the fear of consequences will make the perpetrator think multiple times before committing any wrongdoing, and SHA will gradually decrease and eventually almost be eradicated.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Sexual harassment and assault (SHA) shatter the lives of victims. They become scattered and disillusioned with life, which greatly affects their academic performance. After such an incident, they can't concentrate on their studies, and respondents become so afraid that they neglect their education altogether and completely give up on studying. Along with that, their overall mental and physical health is greatly affected. In our society, the trend of victim blaming has made it more difficult for some students to share their own experience of being victims of SHA. They need encouragement to stand up for them and fight against SHA. Their family members should stand with them and raise their voice against SHA. Society needs to change the way victims of SHA are looked at and treated. The findings can contribute to the development of support services, counselling programs, and preventive measures that promote a safe and healthy campus environment. Additionally, the study's findings can validate the experiences of students who have been subjected to SHA.

Furthermore, Universities should educate students about SHA, consent, bystander intervention, and available support resources. It's critical to have qualified specialists on hand to offer emotional support and counseling, as well as to guide students through the reporting and rehabilitation processes. Create transparent reporting methods for SHA situations. This includes clear reporting rules, confidentiality assurances, and a commitment to treating claims seriously. Universities should try to provide safe spaces and host activities that encourage healthy relationships, consent education, and gender equality dialogues. Further research could be done to find out the perceptions and experiences of other genders.

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Journal of Law and Social Sciences

University of Turbat

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Journal of Law and Social Sciences

University of Turbat

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