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Unveiling the Effects of Workplace Harassment on Women Workers in the Higher Education Institutions, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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Abstract: *Harassment is a pervasive problem that occurs in various workplaces, such as in the health sector, organizations, and educational institutions. The issue of harassment impacts female workers, with the nature and intensity of these effects varying. Harassment affects women personally, socially, and psychologically and has an effect on women's occupations and occupational performance. This study aimed to understand the personal and psychological effects of workplace harassment on working women and aims to assess the effect of harassment on women's occupational performance. The study employs a quantitative research method and a phenomenological research design. Data was collected through a proportionate sampling technique from female faculty members while employing an interview guide that consisted of open-ended questions. Data was collected in various universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which include Hazara University, the University of Peshawar, and Agriculture University Peshawar. Data was collected from 15 respondents while the researcher reached saturation point at the 12th interview. The collected data was analyzed thematically as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Three major themes were extracted: personal effects, psychological effects, and effects on occupational performance due to workplace harassment. The results show that workplace harassment (WPH) affects women personally, psychologically, and professionally. It causes them to face verbal insults, shouting, and comments from male colleagues, which lowers their confidence and instills feelings of insecurity. Additionally, the fear of going alone to the office contributes to anxiety, depression, and mental stress among female workers. Furthermore, workplace harassment (WPH) negatively impacts the occupational performance of female workers, hindering their ability to focus on their classes, conduct research, and write articles. This pressure can lead to resignation or force them to change jobs due to the hostile environment.*

Introduction

In the workplace, significant occurrences such as health outbreaks, societal disputes, and catastrophes from nature pose problems that might severely threaten the viability of organizations. These issues may show as substantial productivity declines, heightened turnover intentions, and the introduction of problematic behaviors, including workplace harassment and other harmful actions. In reaction to these

situations of crisis, numerous organizations may be inclined to reduce preventive measures against gender-based violence, prioritizing its immediate survival of their organization (Vara-Horna et al., 2023). Currently, a significant issue is the prevalence of workplace harassment reported by working women globally, encompassing verbal, discriminatory, and psychological forms of harassment. Social services, including industries, various organizations, healthcare institutions, and educational institutions, are impacted by this widespread phenomenon (Saeed et al., 2024). In work environments, women experience harassment from both male and female supervisors. Women's deprivation can be attributed to the power factor rather than merely male dominance because women are victimized from both the male and female sides (Cheema & Jamal, 2022). These actions can also involve physical violence, coercion, social exclusion, and verbal or written offensive remarks (Najafi et al., 2016).

The primary issue in Pakistani society is that acts of harassment, especially at work, are attributed to the victim rather than the perpetrator (Baig et al., 2018). Consequently, there is a lack of empirical research regarding workplace harassment, with the exception of sexual misconduct at work (Saeed et al., 2024). For a long time, men and women have collaborated to improve society's social and financial circumstances (Rahman et al., 2024). Despite women's active participation in the labor market, they face considerable hurdles in their careers (Rahman et al.,2019). The rise of modern technology and the fall of feudalism have both contributed to a general increase in the complexity of human life. Harassment grew increasingly common as industrialization and societal complexity progressed (Rahman et al., 2024). For women in the workforce, harassment is the biggest issue they face, and it mostly happens at work (Gnanaselvam & Joseph, 2023). Gender harassment denotes behaviors that convey negative, hostile, or insulting feelings concerning someone's gender, often aimed at women (Rahman et al., 2024).

Statement of the Problem

Harassment exists in all spheres of life. Today women are threatened due to the fear of harassment; she has the fear of harassment while going outside of home or working in an organization or an institution. The hostile environments in workplaces where women perform their jobs present numerous challenges and issues that significantly impact their lives. Harassment is a barrier for women that hinder their social, economic, and political growth. There was a need to conduct an in-depth study on workplace harassment and its effects on working women at the university level.

Research Objectives

1. To understand the personal effects of harassment on working women
2. To know the psychological effects of harassment
3. The aim is to investigate the effect of harassment on the occupational performance of women

Literature

Harassment in an office setting refers to any form of interpersonal behavior with the intent to cause harm to another employee while they are on the job. Workplace misbehavior also encompasses sexual harassment or unwanted sexual relations in working environments (Rahman et al., 2024).

When someone is harassed at work, it affects their health and well-being. Harassment bring various impacts in women's life. Women worker face various effects of harassment such as personal, psychological and professional. Psychological harassment refers to the repeated and continuous act of attacking an individual with the intention of disappointing, angering, frustrating, degrading, or tormenting them, with the aim of causing them personal or professional harm (Saeed et al., 2024). The deliberate application of power, including the threat of physical force, toward someone or something else with the aim of harming an impacted individual's mental, spiritual, physical, and ethical, or social

growth is defined as psychological abuse (Lippel et al., 2016). Men who torment employees in the workplace Victims frequently exhibit symptoms of anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, physical ailments, lack of interest, moodiness, nightmares, low self-worth, and hatred toward oneself (Saeed et al., 2024).

Workplace harassment poses a significant threat to employees, adversely impacting their productivity both directly and indirectly. Harassment is a sexual act that diminishes an individual's respect and worth, creating a hostile and uncomfortable environment (Anwar & Burfat, 2021). Insufficient employee happiness can adversely impact business outcomes by diminishing productivity. The likelihood of elevated staff turnover rates is substantial (McDonald, 2012). Sexual abuse has organizational implications for productivity among employees, corporate dynamics, cooperation, recruiting, continuation, and employee motivation (Dionisi et al., 2012). Men predominantly contribute to the substantial challenges faced by women in employment. Harassment at work substantially diminishes women's job satisfaction and commitment to their institution or organization (Vara-Horna et al., 2023).

Methodology

The researcher employs qualitative research methods for the collection and analysis of data in this study. A phenomenological research design was adopted for this research. The respondents were female faculty members of Hazara University, the University of Peshawar, and Agriculture University Peshawar. Data was collected through a proportionate sampling technique from the targeted population. Further, the data was collected through an interview guide consisting of open-ended questions from 15 respondents in the targeted universities, and the researcher reached the saturation point on the 12th interview.

The data was collected in local languages (Pashto and Urdu), keeping in view the convenience of the respondents and the language of the respondents, and then the collected data was transcribed to English. The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The themes were generated from the collected data; review the themes and refine the themes. Furthermore, the researcher extracted three major themes by following Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedure. The themes were personal effects, psychological effects, and effects on occupational performance of working women. Moreover; we take verbal consent from the study participants, confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents were assured while collecting data.

Results

Theme #1 Personal effects

Harassment at the workplace often leads to various personal problems for women. The largest obstacle to women entering the workforce is harassment, which has negative effects. The intimidating and male-dominated nature of these organizations and institutions also contributes to a lower percentage of women applying for positions (Anwar & Burfat, 2021). The respondent 1st described the personal impact of workplace harassment as follows:

> "I have had workplace harassment manifested through verbal insults and shouting directed at me by a male colleague and department leader. It diminishes my confidence and adversely impacts my self-esteem. Furthermore, the antagonistic atmosphere at work hinders my motivation. The harassment adversely affects my domestic duties, as I carry the stress home, disrupting my family life."

Respondent 5th narrates that:

> "I experience harassment at work, with the male counterpart staring at me, and I feel uncomfortable because of that act. Often, he makes comments about my physical appearance,

which causes me to feel guilty. Other coworkers have observed this behavior and disseminated rumors about it. It affects my dignity at work and also stigmatizes me in the working environment."

The respondent 10th said that:

"I am personally impacted by workplace harassment." I experience feelings of insecurity in the hostile work environment. A threat of harassment has consistently existed. I am typically compelled to resign from my position due to the threat of harassment and the insecurity it imposes. However, my family offers me support and confidence, which is why I continue to work."

Theme #2 Psychological effects

Research suggests that the psychological well-being of women worldwide is significantly impacted by the prevalence of sexual and general harassment in the workplace, which is particularly detrimental to working women. They are frequently the victims of males, and they are subjected to a variety of unjust and ruthless treatment (Yasmin & Jabeen, 2017). As pointed out by the participant 3rd:

"The experience of harassment at work has left me vulnerable to various psychological issues. I fear going alone to the offices because of the unfair environment at work. Even the thought of working with male colleagues makes me nervous. I feel alienated at work, and because I am a woman, the intimidating environment at work isolates me from various activities, including participation in events and study trips."

Respondent 12th narrates that:

"Harassment at the workplace affects my psychological wellbeing. It creates anxiety and depression, which divert my focus from workplace activities. The threat of harassment causes me mental stress while working. Furthermore, the harassment incites anger, which negatively impacts my interactions with my family, disrupts my family affairs, and hinders my ability to provide proper care for my children."

Theme #3 Effects on occupational performance

There are several effects of workplace harassment in organizations and women's professional lives. Staff dissatisfaction can have a detrimental effect on financial performance by reducing their productivity. The current issue of harassment at work will result in a high turnover rate among employees of an institution. (McDonald, 2012). The respondent 7th said that:

"The harassment at the institution has affected my occupational performance." The harassment at the institution hinders my ability to perform my duties effectively, as I am afraid to visit any office due to the potential for harassment. Harassment puts a lot of pressure on me, distracting my focus, and I am unable to give proper attention to my lecture in the classroom, which mostly affects students' studies. Furthermore, it negatively impacts my productivity, preventing me from completing my research tasks or writing research articles."

Respondent 4th narrates that:

"The head of the department yells at me when I commit a mistake in an official file. It is a coincidence that my male colleague also commits the same error; however, the chairperson treats him differently. I regard it as harassment when the head of department (HOD) instructs my male colleague, "It's all right, but be cautious in the future." I then composed my resignation letter and intended to resign; however, my spouse intervened and persuaded me to remain in my position. Furthermore, he asserted that both resigning from a job and starting a new one carry significant risks, potentially leading to additional challenges in life."

Discussion

The problem of harassment is widespread and can be found in various types of working environments. Harassment impacts women in different ways, such as personal, psychological, and professional effects. At a personal level, the problem of harassment lowers their confidence level, affects their self-esteem, faces various unwelcoming words from male counterparts, and affects their family affairs. Employees subjected to workplace harassment risk substantial adverse consequences on their productivity, whether directly or indirectly. Harassment is an act that damages a person's honor and dignity and creates a dreadful, unpleasant environment. (Anwar & Burfat, 2021). Women often experience discomfort in the harassing environment at their workplace. The unequal balance of power between the sexes at work, where women were considered sexual commodities for male colleagues, presented an unpleasant challenge for working women (Bhat & Deshpande, 2017). The harassment negatively impacts women's job satisfaction, growth, and self-esteem. In the workplace, bigotry against women makes them seem like male subordinates (Pa, 2020). Furthermore, workplace harassment primarily targets assistants (Nauman & Abbasi, 2014). Women's harassment increased the concern that female employees might lose their employment (Shetty & Nithyashree, 2017). Additionally, harassment negatively impacts the mental well-being of working women. They fear going alone to work, which in turn triggers feelings of fear, anxiety, and anger, ultimately leading to depression. Harassment of women continues to be prevalent in the workplace, despite the fact that the majority of employers' employ individuals with higher educations (Sadruddin, 2013). Organizational harassment is a persistent phenomenon that has various psychological impacts on working women. It induces feelings of self-blame, bewilderment, anxiety, concern, sadness, and disillusionment (Yasmin & Jabeen, 2017). Women who endure or experience workplace harassment are frequently psychologically distressed (Sadruddin, 2013). Women also dread being harassed by men in public settings (Ahmad et al., 2020). Harassment in a sexist workplace worsens psychological conditions, reduces presentism, and increases anxiety among employees (Shetty & Nithyashree, 2017). Furthermore, repeated harassment can impair an individual's performance and cause severe emotional distress. They may face severe mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal ideation, difficulty adjusting to new surroundings, and other phobias (Powell et al., 2020). Furthermore, they face various forms of discrimination at a professional level, as the results reveal a difference in the treatment of males and females who commit the same error. It also affects the productivity of both the institution and women's professional and academic growth. Harassment has significant effects on recruitment, retention, motivation, collaborative behavior within the organization, and workforce productivity (Dionisi et al., 2012). The harassment not only harms the victims but also effects the credibility of institutions (Nauman & Abbasi, 2014; Anwar & Burfat, 2021). Further, there is a significant likelihood that employee resignation will increase (McDonald, 2012). Young women frequently change employment as they transition into adulthood due to harassment they encountered during their initial career phases. Women are dissatisfied with the hostile and intimidating work environment (McLaughlin et al., 2017). This situation impairs their growth as professionals, inhibits their socioeconomic progress, and makes it more difficult for them to perform their occupations well (Sadruddin, 2013).

Conclusions

Within the realm of educational institutions, harassment is a phenomenon that has a significant impact. Within the scope of this research, workplace harassment (WPH) and its effects on working women were investigated. Women in the workforce encounter numerous manifestations of harassment, including verbal abuse, power dynamics that undermine their position, discriminatory practices, and psychological

intimidation in their professional environments. The impact of WPH on women is profound, affecting female workers on personal, psychological, and professional levels. The harassment present in the workplace serves to degrade women, diminish their confidence, and adversely impact their self-esteem. The presence of a hostile environment engenders insecurities among women, leading to feelings of threat for female employees when required to work alone with male colleagues. Workplace harassment inflicts enduring humiliation, with women being particularly susceptible to such experiences. The attire and physical appearance of young females contribute to their increased vulnerability to harassment. The primary risk associated with harassment is the anxiety it instills in female workers, which may eventually give rise to depression. This, in turn, fosters feelings of anger, fear, and mental distress, significantly impacting their familial relationships. Their offspring, the dynamics of familial relationships, and domestic engagements are adversely affected by the issue of harassment.

Recommendations

1. A multitude of questions remained unresolved due to the complexities involved in examining the various dimensions of the problem WPH. Consequently, it is recommended that future researchers focus on the dynamics of male-to-male and female-to-female harassment within institutional settings.
2. The institution is obligated to guarantee a secure and healthful atmosphere for female employees while rigorously enforcing the harassment policies in place. The absence of effective policy implementation within the institution exacerbates the prevalence of harassment in the workplace.
3. The NGOs additionally fulfill a supplementary role by organizing various workshops and awareness seminars focused on workplace harassment and related policies.
4. To provide an appropriate working environment for female workers, it is imperative that government law enforcement agencies execute laws and legislation regarding harassment.

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