GUARDIANS OF TRUTH, TARGETS OF HARASSMENT: THE UNTOLD STORIES OF WORKPLACE HARASSMENT AMONG PAKISTANI FEMALE JOURNALISTS

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Abstract

There is a significant prevalence of gender-based discrimination and harassment towards numerous female journalists in Pakistan. It has been identified as one factor contributing to the absence or limitation of female perspectives within public discourse. Using social feminist theory as a lens, this research undertakes an exploration into both cause and effect concerning workplace-related sexism and maltreatment. The qualitative data used for analysis was collected through comprehensive interviews with seven female journalists from Pakistan who are victims of workplace harassment. Employing thematic analysis provided insight that permitted identification, interpretation, recording themes (patterns), and "analysing" them. The research findings underscore the fact that gender discrimination and harassment are persistent issues within Pakistan's media industries, typically orchestrated by insiders. This scenario significantly impacts women journalists, causing distress in their personal and professional lives. To cope with such situations often results in silence due to mistrust towards institutional systems designed for their protection. In some instances, this disillusionment might even lead them to withdraw from their duties or obligations.

Keywords: Female journalists, media, gender discrimination, workplace harassment, Pakistan

1.0 Introduction

The field of journalism has historically been male-dominated, with women facing numerous challenges and barriers to entry and advancement in the industry. While the representation of women in journalism has increased in recent years, they still face unique obstacles, including discrimination, unequal pay, and sexual harassment and violence.

1.1 History and Contributions of Women Journalists

In the field of journalism, women have a long history. It dates back to the First World War. Women risked their lives to report news from the most dangerous locations during World War I, but their stories are largely unrecorded. Sigrid Schultz was a well-known American reporter and war correspondent during a time when women were underrepresented in print and radio journalism. Schultz joined the Tribune in 1919 and rose to become the chief for Central Europe in 1926, because of her multilingual skills. Schultz is thought to be the first woman to hold such a position at a major news company [1]. Despite many challenges, women have made significant contributions to journalism throughout history. In the early nineteenth, females began to enter the field of journalism as essayists and editors, with publications like Godey's Lady's Book and Harper's Bazaar providing open doors for ladies to distribute their work [2]. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth, women's suffrage and social equity developments prompted the ascent of women's rights in journalism, with publications like "The Unrest" and "The Woman's Journal" advocating for women's freedom and social change [3]. During World War II, women journalists made significant commitments to war reporting, covering the home front and the bleeding edges. Nonetheless, despite their commitments, females were often relegated to "women's pages" and were not taken earnestly as correspondents [1].

1.2 Journalism: A Risky Profession for Women

In recent years, the representation of women in journalism has increased, with women now comprising roughly half of all journalists worldwide. However, women still face significant challenges in the industry, including discrimination, unequal pay, and sexual harassment and violence [4-6]. Harassment and violence against women journalists are pervasive and longstanding issues in the industry. Women journalists face a range of harassment and violence, including physical, verbal, and online abuse [7]. This harassment and violence not only threaten the safety and well-being of women journalists but also undermines their ability to do their jobs effectively. Due, in large part, to the effects of globalism, there has been an exponential increase in the number of women joining the media workforce over the last decade [8]. Females are known to have skills, talents, and potential in every field, and this is widely recognised globally; however, women across the world tend to endure discriminatory behaviours, harassment, and sometimes even violence, that also restricts their ability to participate fully in the economic cycle [9, 10].

Despite these advancements, women in journalism continue to face challenges such as gender bias, unequal pay, and limited opportunities for career advancement. Women are also more likely to experience online harassment and abuse, which can harm their mental health and professional reputation [1, 16].

This paper, therefore, raises the following research questions:

1. What are the various forms and manifestations of workplace harassment encountered by Pakistani female journalists?
2. How do Pakistani female journalists cope with or address workplace harassment?
3. What are the effects of workplace harassment on the personal and professional lives of Pakistani female journalists?

2.0 Review of The Literature

2.1 Harassment, Women, And the Workplace

Broadly speaking, harassment can be defined as 'interpersonal behaviours aimed at intentionally harming another' [11]. At its most extreme, harassment can include physical assault and even homicide, 'but the more common, minor instances include obscene gestures, dirty looks, threats, yelling, giving the silent treatment, and belittling' [12]. Harassment may also involve physical intimidation, such as violating personal space or engaging in unsolicited touching. In the context of work environments, harassment can encompass a spectrum that includes verbal threats, contempt and insults to undermining an individual or implicating them in untrue accusations or gossip [13]. In conceptualizing sexual harassment specifically, the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) defines it as 'unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature' [14]. However, the EEOC is clear in asserting that sexual harassment is only part of what it calls 'sex discrimination harassment'. Discrimination based on sex may encompass sexual harassment, although it's not strictly confined to instances of a sexual nature. It can also include distasteful comments regarding an individual's gender. Likewise, gender-based harassment does not have to be sexually oriented but it represents any form of hostility originating from the victim's sex (predominantly women) [15]. This definition encompasses various forms of harassment, which could be violent, threatening, verbally or physically abusive—even if somewhat mildly—or a combination thereof. It acknowledges that such unpleasant encounters can take place both online and offline with either single incident or recurring instances being possible. Studies on harassment within the workforce commonly highlight the part played by individuals inside an organization, such as superiors or peers [16].

2.2 Prevalence of Violence and Harassment Towards Female Journalists

In a democratic culture, journalists must inform people in general and consider people with significant influence accountable. However, female journalists are frequently subjected to various sorts of harassment and assault while at work. Studies show that inadequate female journalists' safety and security is a significant problem [17]. In research conducted by the International Women's Media Foundation, it was discovered that two-thirds of the polled female journalists have encountered some kind of intimidation, threats, or abuse while working [18]. The Board to Safeguard Journalists found in another research that female journalists were almost certain than their male counterparts to face sexual assault threats.

Workplace discrimination creates a hostile environment that with negative implications for women and men alike, and ultimately undermines the potential of any organization. Since the 1970's, the International Women's Movement has sought to overcome all forms of discrimination women face as they enter the workplace [19]. The increasing number of women seeking professional positions often presents a challenge to traditional social and cultural mores. This can result in forms of discrimination or harassment including sexual abuse [20], in an wide variety of professions and industries [21]. Furthermore, in the field of journalism, this discrimination may be faced both in the workplace and in the field. Journalism is a dangerous occupation for women [22]. Pakistan has been one of the world 's most perilous countries for journos [23]. Militant groups, religious, cultural, and secessionist groups, government and law enforcement agencies, and even mainstream political parties target media personnel. Since 2001, the Pakistan Press Foundation has recorded 405 incidents of violence against journalists, which include 49 killings, 269 assaults, as well as 42 abductions and detentions. Given this perilous situation, it was disturbing that media organizations themselves were not working together to ensure the safety of media professionals [24]. Many female journalists also endured brutal rape at the different parts of the world. Many female journalists also received identical threats due to their job [25].

2.3 Effects of Violence on Women Journalists

The effects can include feelings of fear, anxiety, depression, and trauma [24]. Additionally, harassment and violence can lead to self-censorship, which limits the freedom of expression and the ability of journalists to do their jobs effectively. Especially in Pakistan along with cyber, public, authority and workplace harassments, pressure from the family and society affect their creditability at their jobs [26]. Fear of defamation chances, sustaining status quo are halt female journalists from refraining such issues. These factors make the female passive and non-assertive due to fear of defamation [4]. As journalism continues to play a critical role in empowering citizens throughout the world and serving as a watchdog on powerful institutions, this research seeks to explore the challenges female journalists routinely face that negatively impact their professional careers or their ability to fully participate in the media around the globe.

This report investigates how women journalists are frequently subjected to threats from outside the workplace, which have an impact on their ability to work. Apart from on-the-ground surveillance, one writer reported receiving text messages on Facebook questioning her personality and referring to her as a "prostitute" while working in the field of FATA. Her entire family was receiving similar forms of communications at the same time. It was a frightening experience for her. She would not only have to cope with the strain of placing her family in danger, but she also had to deal with the fallout because she comes from a socially conservative background [27]. The intersectionality of discrimination is no exception when it comes to harassing comments against journalists. Compared to men, female, Black, Asian as well as other minority ethnic journalists are attacked more than their male counterparts [28]. This means that female journalists can face online harassment because of their gender and additionally because of other factors like their race or sexuality which add psychological stress on them. Women of color are 34% more likely to receive abusive messages than white women. With 84% more likeliness of being attacked compared to white women, Black women are targeted in a disproportional way [29, 30]. According to medical professionals, physical, verbal, psychological or sexual assault may feel a variety of emotions, including dread, frustration, anxiety, or even numbness, which prevents her from feeling much at all. Perhaps as a direct consequence of being victimised, she begins to feel guilty or ashamed. Some people try to hide or lessen the abuse by covering up bruises and coming up with standard defences for the abuser. Obtaining council for attack or abuse can make it possible to stop long-term mental health issues and various other overall health challenges [31].

The following research is firmly supporting socialist feminist approach for the rights of women journalists. The objective of socialist feminism in following study is a social modification of unequal associations between men and women in the field of journalism [32]. In this study, women are victimised of workplace harassment due to their work. They encounter various types of violence from verbal to psychological. Even in the 21st century, women are facing injustice in society. This particular study is discussing workplace assultations of women journalists from Pakistan. Gender inequality and female journalism are interrelated with each other. Violence against female journalists usually vivid in a form of female discrimination, stereotypes and oppression are major variables. That inclines the research to construct feminist theory for making a theoretical framework for the proposed study.

3.0 Methodology

Instead of evaluating offensive comments or assaulters' intentions, this research concentrates on female journalists as well as the impacts of workplace harassment on their lives. The objective is to comprehend but also make explicit the women's perspectives. The aim of understanding the social reality and considering gender and race as important factors make this research a part of feminist research which is concerned with asking new questions, focusing on women's concerns and standpoints, stressing the importance of empowerment and creating a more socially just world [33]. This study relied on interviews to allow affected journalists to share their experiences and to have their viewpoints heard. The in-depth interview (also recognised as an intensive interview) has been selected as a tool to "explore a specific topic and gain focused information on the issue from the respondents" [34] and is described as issue-oriented [35]. The in-depth interview intends to gain a better understanding of normally hidden opinions that are not as recognisable in our society due to its being useful for accessing subjugated voices and gaining subjugated knowledge of those who have been marginalised [36]. The tool thus provides the purpose of this study that is to make the perspectives of individuals who have been subjected to work harassment visible, with a focus on the topic and its consequences. There were seven female journalists interviewed from Pakistan. Qualitative nature of the study and the consideration of depth, feasibility, and resource constraints were the main reasons why seven female journalists from Pakistan working in both developed and developing cities were selected. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative studies are focused on depth rather than breadth, so fewer people take part in more extensive interviews with higher levels of trust that allow obtaining detailed information about their experiences of dealing with harassment in the workplace. This sample size allows combining sufficient depth and feasibility and resource constraints to fulfil the aims with the available resources.

The size of the sample is typical for the scope of study as well as for in-depth interviews since the goal is to look at the individuals attributed meanings instead of generalizing [34]. So far, there has only been a few studies dealing with the topic of female journalists and their experiences with workplace harassment in Pakistan. The main criterion for selection was determining whether they had encountered workplace harassment as a result of their occupation, regardless of their status, or years in the industry. The majority of them were connected through personal contacts within a large network of female journalists, mostly formed through Twitter and shared interests. Other female journalists were chosen based on recommendations, resulting in a snowball sample. Each woman was approached directly via email to participate. The research revolves around this specific topic because this study is interested in the experiences with workplace harassment. An interview guide was thus used to assist in the conduct of the interviews. All interviews were completely transcribed. In total, seven women with different backgrounds, employment status, and years of experience at the current job were interviewed. Data from the transcriptions of the interviews were analysed through thematic analysis. A coding frame was created to organise the newly identified themes. The coding process is done aligning with the research questions of the study. The main codes are created according to research questions' themes. There are more specific sub-codes, stemming from main codes that provided more detailed breakdown of themes. Based on that analysis, themes and sub-themes are laid out, and data is triangulated and categorised according to them. This way, a primary and secondary level of categories are produced, and data is examined through these findings to identify patterns that would otherwise be overlooked.

4.0 Findings

The findings of the study reveal the main themes along with sub-themes analysed from the interview by female journalists from Pakistan.

4.1 Understanding the Nature of Workplace Harassment

This part of the study focuses on the first research question and investigates the various forms and manifestations of harassment in the workplace faced by female journalists in Pakistan. The findings, based on interviews and analysis, uncover the discriminatory, verbal, sexual, and psychological abuse that these women journalists endure in Pakistani newsrooms, leading to a hostile work atmosphere.

4.1.1 Discriminatory Harassment

One prominent category is discriminatory harassment, where female journalists face unfair treatment solely because of their gender. Participants have experienced discrimination in task assignments and promotions, despite being highly skilled and reliable employees. Female journalists have reported being overlooked for upper positions due to their gender, which creates a sense of victimization and unfairness.

4.1.2 Verbal Harassment

Additionally, female journalists encountered verbal harassment from male colleagues, including insulting comments, name-calling, jealousy, and belittling remarks. These behaviours contribute to a toxic work environment that undermines the well-being and confidence of female journalists.

4.1.3 Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment remains a significant problem in Pakistani newsrooms, often perpetuated by men in positions of power. Participants revealed incidents of sexual harassment, such as inappropriate requests for sexual favours in exchange for career advancement. Unwanted touches and sexually suggestive comments further contribute to an unsafe environment for female journalists.

4.1.4 Psychological Harassment

Psychological harassment also takes a toll on female journalists' self-esteem and well-being. Tactics like isolation, bullying, gaslighting, and intimidation create mental pressure and hinder their ability to work effectively with confidence. Workplace harassment in Pakistani newsrooms encompasses discriminatory, verbal, sexual, and psychological forms of mistreatment. Addressing these issues is essential to creating a supportive and equitable work environment for female journalists.

4.2 Perpetrators and Context of Harassment

Workplace harassment among Pakistani female journalists is perpetuated by various actors within the organizational context, reflecting complex power dynamics and systemic inequalities. Through interviews with participants, several key perpetrators and contextual factors emerged, shedding light on the dynamics of harassment within newsrooms. This main theme also aligns with first research question which is highlighting different types of harassment. This section elaborates on how the actions of peers, superiors, and editors exacerbate the harassment through practices such as competition and manipulation. These behaviours align with the research question's investigation into workplace abuse.

4.2.1 Role of Colleagues in Perpetuating Harassment

The primary perpetrators of harassment are colleagues, and their tactless jokes, rivalry and jealousy, and power wrangle are responsible for a hostile work environment. Those co-workers may be in the same position as the harassed worker or in a lower hierarchical position. In the newsroom, the competition for assignments, recognition, and career promotions can foster unhealthy interpersonal relationships and result in scenarios of competition, backstabbing, and interpersonal dynamics. One participant, for example, said she was a target of passive aggression and subtle sabotage by a co-worker who was threatened because of her professional success. Participants discussed that senior colleagues could not get success and that became the main reason for envy from young female colleagues. Another participant shared her experience of being rejected and isolated by a group of older journalists who wanted to keep their club exclusive. The respondents discussed the importance of how colleagues' behaviour created a hostile work environment that worked against women's professional achievement.

4.2.2 Influence of Supervisors and Editors

Newsrooms also have gatekeepers like supervisors and editors who have substantial power over workers. They abused that power and harassed participants in many ways. Participants revealed that one of the tactics that supervisors and editors used to harass them was through an inappropriate use of power. The power of supervisors was misused to foster control, manipulation and exploitation. Harassing supervisors often exerts subtle and insidious power through favouritisms, over-involvement, or dominating work climates of fear, intimidation, and anxiety.

4.3 Impacts of Personal and Professional Lives

The majority of journalists participating in this study have reported that experienced harassment considerably impacted their journalistic practice. This section is closely aligned with research question 3, "What are the effects of workplace harassment for the personal and professional lives of Pakistani female journalists?" It explores the significant effects of workplace harassment on the personal and professional lives of Pakistani women journalists.

4.3.1 Professional Effects

Participants of this study indicated as an adverse consequence of workplace harassment that led them to adopt self-censorship strategy. Female journalists have described the feelings of discomfort during interviews for news stories because some sources displayed provocative and unprofessional behaviour and used derogatory language. Moreover, one journalist expressed that harassment had a serious psychological effect, causing the so-called "self-doubt" which led them to think about themselves as they are not qualified — as they are not good enough for certain tasks. It is identified in this study that the harassment made the journalists feel angry, scared, uncomfortable, and anxious. Many journalists have claimed that harassment negatively influences their work, and some of them have implemented actions to avoid harassment. For example, one journalist indicated a high emotional toll that harassment had impacted her work and effectiveness both in newsrooms and interviews for TV news stories. Consequently, she requested a transfer to another department or organization as a measure to escape this hostile environment. This example demonstrated that the workplace-friendly environment could be easily destroyed by the phenomenon of harassment, making the professionals feel desperate and degraded. Thus, the fear and anger that the participants felt influenced their actions.

4.3.2 Personal Consequences

Participants in the study indicated that experiences of harassment within their work environments extended beyond professional boundaries to adversely affect their personal lives. The interviews revealed instances where individuals reported suffering from psychological conditions such as depression and anxiety, stemming from workplace harassment. Furthermore, there was evidence of

familial pressure exerted on some participants, urging them to leave their jobs due to the negative impact it had on families. One participant shared a particularly distressing account where her marital relationship was jeopardized over her insistence on remaining employed despite facing harassment. Another recounted an episode of physical abuse at work so severe that it led to her resignation.

4.4 Coping and Resilience Strategies

All participants in this analysis have developed at least one approach to prevent harassment in the workplace. This main theme aligns with research question 2, "How do Pakistani female journalists cope with or address workplace harassment? All female journalists have implemented certain measures to combat or handle workplace harassment. It emphasises the struggles made by female journalists to survive in this field. These approaches are broadly categorized into themes such as avoidance, ensuring they do not remain alone, direct confrontation and opting to leave their jobs.

4.4.1 Avoidance Strategies

A significant portion of the subjects has implemented some form of avoidance strategy to tackle harassment issues. Female journalists prefer to stay silent and avoid discuss it. The most of media organisations do not have appropriate safety and legal mechanisms. All the top positions seniors are male and they do not support enough female employees. That's why, this method is considered as the most appropriate strategy to maintain emotional distance and refraining from engaging deeply with potential harassers or colleagues; notably, one participant terminated all forms of contact with a supervisor who had harassed her.

4.4.2 Direct Confrontation

In this study, nearly half of the respondents cited engaging directly with the perpetrator—often a supervisor or peer—as a tactic. This involved confronting them or initiating conversation about their actions. According to these participants, such direct engagement frequently proves successful in either ceasing ongoing harassment or deterring it from occurring initially.

4.4.3 Job-Related Decisions

The harassment experienced by the journalists has reached a point where it compelled two of them to quit their jobs. They encountered troubling behaviours from either their boss or colleagues, leading to this decision. Another journalist also faced harassment from her supervisor and considered quitting but was unable to do so initially due to certain circumstances. When she eventually had the opportunity, she cited multiple factors for leaving her job, including issues with her superior.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

Across the world, both men and women regularly experience professional obstacles. However, for contemporary journalists in numerous nations globally, their profession poses a unique set of safety risks making it not only challenging but also one of the perilous occupations worldwide. The protection of journalists is one of the issues that all media outlets in Pakistan face. Female journalists live in a society that believes it is acceptable to violate, intimidate, harass, and abuse them. In the last decade, more females have entered the Pakistani journalistic profession, increasing their exposure to all types of harassment, discrimination, fear, and favour [37]. Most Pakistani journalists are faced with the everyday responsibility of producing exclusive and breaking news stories, each with its own set of problems and risks. It is not an easy task for journalists of any gender. Females, on the other hand, are more vulnerable in a culture plagued by conservatism, religious fanaticism, violence, and gender discrimination.

Based on the social feminist theoretical framework, the above findings of the study further emphasize the intersectionality of gender-based discrimination and existing structural inequalities in the media industry of Pakistan. Female journalists' experiences are a reflection of the existing societal

norms and power relations that reinforce patriarchal infrastructures and hinder women's abilities to have equal representation within the professional sphere. The level to which harassment, discrimination, and impunity occur reflects the consistent systemic barriers that prevent women from accessing equal opportunities and achieving equity in the workplace. The research found that women journalists face a significant level of silence because they lack faith in the legal framework and protection procedures of their media outlets. Furthermore, the study showed how sexual harassment, gender-based discrimination, and impunity harm journalists' personal and professional lives. Many female journalists began to assume that they had to close their mouths, self-censor themselves, or continue working in a sexist setting or leave the field. By adopting a social feminist lens, this study calls attention to the complex interplay of gender, power, and social structures, emphasizing the importance of collective action to challenge and dismantle oppressive systems and create a more equitable and inclusive media environment for all.

In addition, several suggestions were made for improving the depressing state of the media. It includes encouraging the government to take action, and addressing harassment and discriminatory incidents rather than remaining silent to stop more occurrences. Moreover, the government should encourage more women to join the media industry to ensure women's voices are heard more and call on legislators to address these issues. Pakistani women journalists experience high levels of harassment, which has a negative impact on their mental and professional well-being. In this context, fundamental structural transformation within the media is required to address gender-based discrimination and ensure a safe and respected work environment for Pakistani female journalists. Women ought to emerge from their shells and speak up more in the media. Discriminatory preconceptions and patriarchal sociocultural norms should be eliminated. It is also advised that the media authorities provide enough safety training for female journalists, access to psychological counselling services, a complaint box located on the office premises, and strong penalties for offenders.

Future research could include studies on the long-term implications of the harassment of female journalists in the workplace on their career advancement, mental well-being, and general quality of life. Research that contrasts the particular media companies in Pakistan to those in other countries would provide valuable information regarding how successful institutional procedural interventions and other cultural elements are in reducing or eliminating harassment of all forms. Finally, to better understand how multiple oppressions affect female journalists, depending on the level of their harassment, it is necessary to conduct a study that examines how individual factors, including class, religious affiliation and racial history, affect individual experiences.

6.0 References

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