FIELD WORK HARASSMENT AGAINST WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN ISLAMABAD

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Abstract

The current study looks at the harassment of women journalists during fieldwork in Islamabad. It puts this issue in the larger context of Pakistan's social, cultural, and professional environment. Women reporters face both physical and psychological harassment, which impacts their safety, confidence, and careers. The system has flaws, such as barriers within the culture that encourage silence and under-reporting, although laws exist. A qualitative study methodology was employed in this study, where in-depth and face-to-face interviews were conducted with female reporters in different media houses in Islamabad. The thematic analysis contributed to the formation of insights among these women as to their experiences with harassment in the workplace and in the field. The study centered on their socioeconomic status, forms of harassment, coping and reaction of their institutions. The findings show that the primary sources of harassment are male dominance and cultural barriers leading to an atmosphere of discrimination and fear. According to the respondents, mental pressure, loss of confidence and stagnation of their careers were the consequences of the harassment since women tended to doubt their professional devotion to journalism. There was also a problem of underreporting; most reporters did not file complaints because of stigma, fear of reprisals and a general lack of support by their organizations. The analysis finds that addressing the problem of harassing women journalists needs to be done on multiple levels.

INTRODUCTION

Journalism has been considered an important segment of a democratic society. Nonetheless, women reporters in Pakistan do face severe obstacles due to the prevalence of inequalities, gender discrimination, and constant harassment. The risk that women in the field have to deal with is greater than that experienced in their jobs (Jamil, 2020). In Islamabad, where Pakistan's political and media activities are concentrated, these issues become even

more apparent. While carrying out their professional duties, women journalists often encounter harassment, including unwanted comments, intimidation, threats, and sexual advances (UNESCO, 2021). These experiences create a hostile environment that harms women's safety and limits their ability to express themselves and advance in their careers.

Context and Problem Statement

Harassment is a wide-ranging term that describes unwanted behaviors that embarrass, threaten, or offend individuals based on gender, social, cultural, and personal identity. In the Pakistani media landscape, bullying involves not just physical attacks but also more subtle actions. These include staring, unwanted touching, and patronizing comments directed at female reporters. Such behaviors are rooted in the patriarchal structures that dominate news organizations and reinforce gender inequalities harmful to women (Bhatti & Ali, 2022). As a result, women journalists in Islamabad face dual pressures. They must perform in a competitive newsroom while also coping with daily harassment that affects their dignity and mental health. The ongoing nature of harassment reflects gaps in policies and enforcement. Although workplace harassment laws exist in Pakistan, most media organizations fail to offer proper reporting and support systems (Hadi, 2022). Journalists often report that when they do file formal complaints, the responses are weak or nonexistent, which fosters a culture of impunity (Jamil, 2023).

The outcome is underrepresentation: in this study, only 8 percent of respondents reported filing complaints, and almost 58 percent chose to remain silent due to fear of stigma and punishment. This silence not only continues the cycle of harassment but also adds to the so-called chilling effect that prevents women from becoming fully immersed in journalism (Bhatti & Ali, 2022). The security and equality of women in journalism are of utmost importance not only to gender justice but also to the integrity of the media as a whole in Pakistan. The scholars argue that the absence, marginalization, or silencing of women can undermine the diversity and democratic nature of journalism (Aslam, Malik, & Khan, 2023). Harassment not only impacts the individuals affected but also undermines press freedom, minimizes diversity in the profession, and erodes the reputation of media institutions (Iqbal, 2022). In war-torn areas or when reporting politically sensitive matters, the danger increases tenfold, whereby female journalists frequently face threats, physical assaults, and forced exile (Jamil, 2020). The existence of such realities highlights the need to approach harassment as a systemic or structural issue, rather than merely a personal problem.

This study is significant for Islamabad, which is also the country's political capital, and female journalists typically engage with politicians, the state, and law enforcement agencies. This encapsulates their experiences into the bigger picture of gender inequalities embedded in Pakistani society. The paper complements the existing literature on the harassment of women journalists by contextualizing the issue within a sociological framework, which takes into account not only personal experiences but also socio-economic status and cultural barriers, as well as institutional ineptness. In this way, it points out the human and structural aspects of the issue.

Guided by the above context, this study pursues the following objectives:

- ✓ To examine the socio-economic background of women journalists in Islamabad.
- ✓ To investigate the consequences of physical and psychological harassment on their professional and personal lives.
- ✓ To explore the extent of underreporting and reasons for silence among women journalists.
- ✓ To analyze the institutional and cultural barriers that perpetuate harassment in media organizations.

These initiatives align with the broader goal of prioritizing the experiences of women, giving them representation and a voice in academic and policy domains (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

The understanding of this study is grounded in feminist thinking, which views harassment as a gendered consequence of power dynamics in the workplace and other social contexts (Harding, 1991). Women experience harassment within the context of cultural norms, socio-economic status, and the actions of institutions, which all influence their ability to be disciplined and open to harassment. This lens enables the researcher to situate individual stories of harassment within the broader context of gender inequality and patriarchy in organizations. Additionally, the research employs thematic analysis to elucidate the lived experiences of the respondents, as it involves the exploration of patterns, narratives,

and meanings within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Literature review

This issue of harassment against women journalists is clearly expressed in various writings due to the mix of gender-based power dynamics and professional risks in the media field. In Pakistan, where patriarchal values still dominate cultural, political, and institutional areas, women journalists face unique challenges. These challenges go beyond workplace discrimination and threaten their physical and mental health. Research shows that harassment is not just individual incidents but a widespread problem rooted in established gender hierarchies and accepted discriminatory behaviors at work (Jamil, 2020). Male dominance in media organizations is both culturally and organizationally supported, making harassment a regular experience for female reporters. This issue is often overlooked through silence, stigmatization, or the failure of media institutions to act (Bhatti & Ali, 2022).

Studies from both international and regional contexts (South Asia) highlight various forms of harassment faced by female media workers. These range from subtle intimidation to outright physical abuse. In Pakistan, these behaviors include verbal abuse, inappropriate physical contact, online trolling, and even death threats, particularly when women discuss topics like politics and gender-based violence (Iqbal, 2022). These activities operate within a framework of systemic injustices that perpetuate fear and erode professional proficiency. The cultural background is an aggravating factor, where bullying is commonly downplayed as an individual issue instead of a systemic issue, which causes victims to hesitate to report (Hadi, 2022). Field studies evidence proves that underreporting is a persistent aspect; the majority of female journalists use silence as a result of fear of reprisal, stigmatization, and the absence of an organizational safety net.

Feminist philosophers argue that sexual harassment in the workplace stems not from random acts but from forms of power that continue to subordinate women (Harding, 1991). In media organizations, this power imbalance affects media structures, reinforcing male dominance and sidelining women's voices.

Researchers like Faith (2022) highlight that harassment must be viewed through the lens of gender inequality. The cultural stigma and motivations driven by patriarchy systematically push women out of public life and their careers. This approach underlines the systemic nature of the problem: harassment is not just about individual misconduct; it is a way to maintain a gender hierarchy that limits women's mobility, confidence, and career growth in the workplace.

At the international level, studies show that the threat of persecution makes women journalists reluctant to continue their careers. Chadha, Steiner, Vitak, and Ashktorab (2020) found that female journalists are more likely to hold back on certain stories, participate less in public life, or leave journalism altogether. Similarly, Amnesty International (2019) noted that women in media often change or limit their interactions with audiences due to harassment. This leads to a more uniform media conversation. These findings reflect the situation in Pakistan, where harassment has been a long-standing barrier for women entering the news industry (Jamil, 2023). This hostile environment affects not only the careers of individual journalists, but also threatens the democratic nature of journalism, as society continues to undervalue women's voices and stories.

The literature also shows that harassment has huge psychological and social implications. The empirical research demonstrates that women facing systematic harassment experience increased stress and anxiety and low self-esteem, which often accumulate in their lives beyond the workplace (Aslam, Malik, & Khan, 2023). The research conducted in the media sector of Pakistan has attributed that harassment invokes a sense of social withdrawal, humiliation, and a lack of willingness to be given an assignment on a high-profile or field posting. These experiences are echoed in international literature, which highlights how harassment in the workplace compromises female agency, interferes with career advancement, and perpetuates institutional-level inequality, as noted by Diana Harrigan (Fraser & Martineau-Searle, 2018).

The current studies also indicate institutional infeasibilities of dealing with harassment. Pakistan
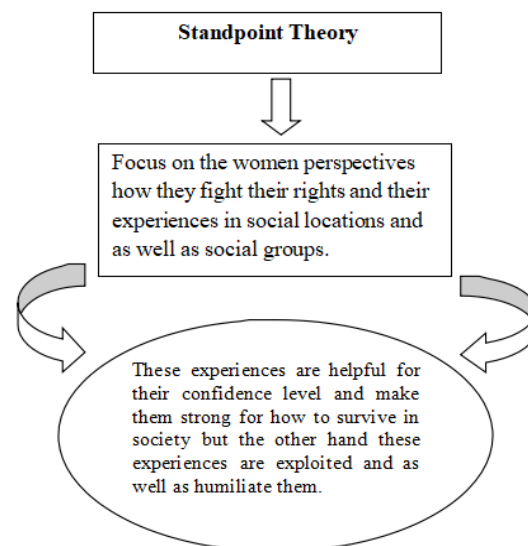
has passed protection laws in the workplace, although enforcement has been erratic. According to Hadi (2022), many enterprises do not have official manifestos or do not adhere to them in practice, which deprives women of effective channels of complaint. Whether complaints are lodged or not, the responses of an organization tend to downplay the matter or place blame on the victim, which deters reporting (Bhatti & Ali, 2022). Such institutional loopholes continue to foster a culture of impunity, allowing harassment to persist unchecked. The lack of a secure mechanism is also indicative of how existing legal provisions cannot fill the gap without organizational commitment and cultural change (Digital Rights Foundation, 2017).

Harassment in journalism, in general, can deter women from entering the profession or drive them out, and also influences how the news is created and consumed. Research presented by Jamil (2020, 2023) suggests that the underrepresentation of women journalists, whether due to intimidation or the presence of barriers, compromises the sensitivity and inclusiveness of news coverage. This exclusion has repercussions for society since it limits the voices of women regarding issues in the country, emphasizing gender inequality. Such dynamics are further established by the cultural stigma widely present about harassment, as women are depicted as less believable or professional when they address the subject of their abuse (Bhatti & Ali, 2022).

The thematic analysis of the available literature reveals that harassment is not an isolated case, but a systemic issue that can only be addressed through structural intervention. It has been critical that a multi-stranded approach, interrupting legal enforcement, organisational modifications, and cultural factors, needs to be incorporated. Clarke and Braun (2013), for example, claim that the qualitative experiences of being harassed can also provide valuable insights into lived experiences, which can be used to inform specific policies. Similarly, invoke the role of educational and awareness campaigns in questioning the cultural underpinnings of harassment. In the Pakistani case, the Digital Rights Foundation Congress (2019) has reiterated that institutional responsibility and online

safety are crucial measures to protect women reporters in both cyberspace and real-world spaces.

The literature positions the issue of harassment against female journalists in Pakistan as having a background of patriarchal leaning, cultural, and institutional limitations. Although in an individual, women can be affected by harassment (e.g., in terms of mental health or career growth), it is also perceived as a failure to increase the overall media environment, where free speech and the playing field of democracy are impaired. Feminist theories about knowledge have instilled an awareness of how the experiences of women are shaped by structural disparities rather than random events (Harding, 1991). This study synthesizes empirical results and theoretical perspectives to advance the debate on gender justice, media integrity, and professional equality through a combination of context-specific and global applications, focusing on the case of Islamabad.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of women journalists in Islamabad who face harassment during fieldwork. A qualitative approach was best because harassment is a sensitive issue influenced by social factors, which quantitative methods can't fully capture. Islamabad was selected for its accessibility and the researcher's

professional connections. Through purposive sampling, twenty to twenty-five female reporters from different media outlets were recruited, and interviews continued until themes became repetitive. In-person, semi-structured interviews were held in Urdu. In order to maintain participant anonymity, each interview lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes and was conducted in settings selected by the participants. The enquire centred on coping mechanisms, how institutions react to harassment, and its impact on mental and professional health. Thematic analysis was used to examine the English transcriptions of each interview. Both deductive and inductive methods were used to build the codes.

Results and Findings

The interviews with female journalists in Islamabad illustrated a complex scenario on the issue of harassment in work and personal contexts. The participants talked about the issues they were experiencing with regard to social and economic classes, employment roles and cultures at work. All these factors were linked together. The sample was diverse in terms of age, education, marital status, and provided a wide variety of examples demonstrating how harassment is related to more social problems. The participants were relatively young people in the Pakistani media industry with the majority of them being in their late twenties to mid-thirties. Some attended college to study journalism or mass communication, and some were in other disciplines. Marital status also was important. Women journalists who were single were primarily harassed at work. Conversely, married respondents experienced harassment at work and by individuals not employed in their jobs and this contributed to the stigma associated with their jobs. Salary disparities were also significant; younger reporters received lower pay and could not withstand or avoid unfavorable working conditions.

Table 1 summarizes the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents interviewed for this study.

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Age	25–30 years	11	44%
	31–35 years	9	36%
	36 years and above	5	20%
Education	Bachelor's degree	10	40%
	Master's degree	12	48%
	Other	3	12%
Marital Status	Single	13	52%
	Married	12	48%
Monthly Income (PKR)	Less than 40,000	14	56%
	40,000–70,000	8	32%
	More than 70,000	3	12%

Along with social and economic reasons, the thematic analysis showed that four primary patterns influenced how women experienced harassment: cultural barriers, psychological impacts, institutional silence, and coping strategies. These are the themes that were used throughout the majority of interviews, but their influence was different depending on personal backgrounds and experiences in the field. The cultural barriers were the most widely cited problem. According to the respondents, the traditional gender roles that are supported by the Pakistani society can be seen in media companies and in the public. Harassment is defined by many respondents as something women are used to going through in order to remain in the field of journalism. This normalization resulted in women rarely reporting harassment as they usually anticipated blame or termination.

Another theme was the psychological effects of harassment. Women expressed feelings of concern, shame and lack of self-confidence following repeated incidences. Others noted that they were refusing to do some assignments, or shunning interactions with

people to reduce contact, and academics describe this as the chill effect on women in journalism. Respondents observed that this mental pressure tended to seep into their personal life and caused stress in family relationships and isolation. These problems were aggravated by institutional silence. The majority of women who attempted to discuss their issues with managers or human resources reported that they were disregarded, dismissed, or that their issues were overstated. In other cases, the respondents were encouraged to calm down or silence down to save the face of the organization. This unsupported institute system formed a chain of underreporting because even those who initially reported still opted not to report to avoid the consequences of being a professional. Lastly, coping strategies highlighted the resilience of women journalists at both individual and systemic levels. Some respondents mentioned relying on their peer network, especially female colleagues, for support and advice.

Table:2 Major Themes Identified from Thematic Analysis

Theme	Description	Illustrative Example (Respondent Quotes)
Cultural Barriers	Patriarchal norms normalize harassment and discourage reporting.	"In our culture, people say women should ignore such things; otherwise, they will be labeled as troublemakers."
Psychological Impact	Harassment leads to stress, anxiety, and reduced confidence.	"I started avoiding press events because I felt too anxious to be there."
Institutional Silence	Weak or absent organizational responses to complaints.	"When I reported, they told me to stay quiet because the channel's reputation was at stake."
Coping Strategies	Individual efforts such as peer support, avoidance, or direct confrontation.	"I only share my problems with other women colleagues because I know management won't take action."

These findings show that the challenges faced by women journalists are not just individual problems; they stem from systemic inequality. The results highlight the cultural conditions that allow harassment to persist. These conditions have psychological effects that discourage women from fully engaging in their careers and lives. Additionally, institutional silence contributes to underreporting. While women journalists develop coping strategies, these are often insufficient without changes to organizational structures and policies. More importantly, the data reveals that harassment affects diversity in journalism and weakens democratic media practices by keeping women from speaking out.

Discussion

The results of this case research advocate that harassment against women journalists in Islamabad is ubiquitous, multi-dimensional, and inscribed in structures and cultures. These findings align with previous studies, which explain that gendered harassment cannot be viewed as sporadic actions, as women's subordination is a part of natural patriarchal processes (Harding, 1991; Faith, 2022). With extensive qualitative interviews with women reporters, the study shows how the phenomenon of harassment has less to do with specific instances of sexual violence and more to do with social stratification and institutional breakdowns.

The theme of identifying cultural barriers is closely related to the literature on the normalization of harassment in South Asia. Women respondents explained how they downplayed the harassment or contextualized it as a natural aspect of professional life, just as Jamil (2020, 2023) had found that women in the Pakistani media industry are both advised and expected to be submissive or to accommodate such situations. The cultural framing functions both as a rationalization of the perpetrators and as a tool of not allowing the victims to take action in changing the situation by denying them the right to seek redress at institutional level. Stories in this research add to the findings of Bhatti and Ali (2022) who observe that not infrequently, silence is not a choice but a cultural pressure imposed on a woman who makes a step.

The psychological consequences as reported by the respondents also echo the chilling effect identified in the research in other countries. This, according to the findings released by Chadha et al. (2020) and

Amnesty International (2019), has led to environment in which women journalists censor themselves, avoid engaging with the population, or abandoning the work. The respondents in Islamabad also complained of being assigned to work on tasks, avoiding press events, and experiencing stress, which impacted their lives either negatively or directly. These results propose that not only does harassment reduce individual confidence, it also limits the diversity of voices in the Pakistani media. The lack of female representation in critical reporting areas will make journalism less inclusive and less able to represent society fully (Aslam, Malik, & Khan, 2023).

Institutional silence is one of the most troubling outcomes that Hadi (2022) argues stems from poor implementation of legal frameworks in Pakistan's organizations. Participants in this research indicated that employers frequently dismiss and trivialize complaints they receive. The lack of accountability in organizations is not unique to Pakistan; other researchers have linked the failures in protecting people from harassment to divided institutional priorities (Fraser & Martineau-Searle, 2018). However, such institutional failures carry extra weight in the Pakistani media. The findings also shed light on the socio-economic conditions and harassment issues. Women in lower income brackets reported fewer opportunities to resist or escape hostile environments.

This supports the idea that financial dependence increases vulnerability. Many tolerated harassment, viewing it as a necessary sacrifice to keep their jobs. In contrast, women with more financial security or better social networks could confront their harassers or leave their organizations. Meanwhile, the coping strategies women used show their strength and unity, even when systems fail to provide support. Anticipated support networks, which included female coworkers, informal groups, and friendships, offered some relief to participants, as noted by Clarke and Braun (2013). This paper contributes to the discussion on underreporting. While previous surveys have reported low levels of harassment enforcement in Pakistani workplaces (Digital Rights Foundation, 2017), the qualitative findings here

reveal reasons for this reluctance, which include fear of punishment, loss of credibility, and insufficient institutional response. The study shows that silence is often a strategy for self-protection, leading to dis-empowerment and stigma rooted in cultural norms. These revelations go beyond statistics, addressing individual experiences related to gender-based violence in the workplace.

Theoretical insights can be drawn from these findings. It becomes clear that the harassment faced by women journalists is not an isolated issue but a manifestation of gendered power dynamics. As Harding (1991) explains in feminist epistemology, women's experiences are shaped by their social context. This research highlights the importance of understanding the context in which harassment occurs. The stories from Islamabad resonate locally and reflect patterns seen in other situations where patriarchal values exist alongside weak institutional accountability. Several implications arise from this discussion. First, legal reforms are not enough without strong enforcement in organizations. Policies should include accountability measures, training sessions, and effective reporting systems that protect and support those who complain. Second, changing the normalization of harassment needs a cultural shift (Ahmed, 2019). Educational programs, discussions, and media campaigns can help reshape the belief that harassment is normal or unavoidable. Third, media organizations should create better support systems, such as counseling services and peer support groups, to address the psychological effects reported by respondents (Barton & Storm, 2016). Finally, society must acknowledge that having fewer women in journalism damages press freedom and the representation of the public.

Conclusion

The research paper focused on the lives of women journalists in Islamabad who experience harassment while working. The report indicates that harassment is not only a personal issue but also a wider problem within media culture. Through the stories of female reporters, the study shows that cultural expectations and the silence of institutions normalize this harassment. Socio-economic inequalities also contribute to this behavior. Together, these factors

put women journalists in a tough position as they seek professional recognition while trying to ensure their safety and dignity. The respondents' accounts demonstrate that bullying can occur on a large scale, such as verbal and psychological abuse in public spaces, or on a smaller scale, like harmful actions in workplaces, including newsrooms. Some individuals displayed resilience and found ways to cope, but these solutions are personal fixes for a systemic problem. The findings also emphasize that underreporting is a major issue. Women often remain silent to avoid consequences or stigma. The effects of harassment go beyond individuals; they harm journalism as an institution and undermine the authority of media organizations. When women are sidelined in reporting, especially in difficult areas or on sensitive topics, they lose their voice. This leads to a media landscape that is even more dominated by male voices.

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