

Barriers to Reporting Female-to-Male Harassment at Workplace

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the barriers that hinder the victims of female-to-male harassment from reporting such events. Workplace harassment has traditionally been researched as sexual harassment by males to females. However, workplace harassment has many dimensions e.g., sexual harassment, bullying, mocking, undue pressurizing etc. To explore the barriers that hindered the male victims who faced harassment by females from reporting the harassment incident. This study followed qualitative research method and applied phenomenology as a research design. The study performed thematic analysis to describe the narratives of victims. A positivist approach was followed to conduct this research. Semi-structured interviews of eight males, who experienced harassment from their female counterparts, were performed. These respondents were from different organizations and different sectors of economy in Pakistan. Thematic analysis revealed that various societal barriers (i.e. unawareness of being harassed, concept of manly spirit, co-workers jokes, fear of disrespect and not being believed, and belonging to female-privileged society) as well as organizational barriers (i.e. unavailability of proper reporting procedures, power/authority/seniority of the harasser, and gender of authority to report) existed and were faced by the victims. Moreover, fear of gender-based discrimination was the key to most of the barriers.

Key words: Harassment, Qualitative study, Phenomenology

Introduction

Sexual harassment is a significant and persistent problem in organizations which results into negative consequences like anxiety, depression, and even suicidal

ideation (Gianakos et. al., 2022). According to Riddle and Heaton (2023), more than 50% females face sexual harassment at all workplaces. Harassment is a vast term having many dimensions including sexual harassment (Smidt, Adams-Clark, & Freyd, 2023). Sexual harassment is a crucial ethical issue (Ehsan et. al., 2024; Egbule, 2023; Tenbrunsel, Rees, & Diekmann, 2019) and normally, when workplace harassment is discussed, it is perceived as male-to-female sexual harassment (Bendixen & Kennair, 2017) but there have been cases of female-to-male harassment as well. Both male and female expatriates encounter workplace gender harassment. This study aims to investigate the obstacles that impede or prevent victims of workplace harassment from reporting such incidents (He et. al., 2024; and Erentzen et. al., 2023).

Literature on workplace harassment shows that female-to-male harassment is very rarely discussed, and this phenomenon needs to be explored. A study performed in Australia showed that in certain organizations, males had higher incidents of harassment as compared to females (Budden et. al., 2017) yet the cases of female-to-male harassment reported are much lesser (Mills & Scudder, 2023). A study performed by Bader et.al. (2018) using data from twenty-five countries showed that both male and female expatriates experience workplace gender harassment. This study focuses on exploring the barriers that stop or hinder the victims of workplace harassment from reporting such events.

Workplace harassment is “any negative workplace interpersonal interaction that affects the terms, conditions, or employment decisions related to an individual’s job, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment, but is not based on any legally protected characteristic” (Rospenda & Richman, 2004, p.221-222).

Besides the formal definitions of workplace harassment, numerous studies label harassment under different terms. For example, Einarsen et al. (2011) use the term Workplace Bullying to represent harassment. Tepper (2000) calls harassment “Abusive supervision”. Term “social undermining” is used by Duffy, Ganster and Pagon (2002). All these terms and various others are covered by the definitions of workplace harassment stated above. These may be considered different dimensions of workplace harassment. As such, these forms of negative behavior represent different manifestations of the underlying construct of workplace harassment (Yang et. al., 2023; Bibi et al., 2018; Bowling & Beehr, 2006) so this study considers all these to be the different dimensions of workplace harassment. The reason is that the characteristic being shared by all these terms is negative workplace interaction. These terms give an impression of harming the target.

The phenomenon of workplace harassment is a global issue which is victimizing employees with an increasing rate. Moreover, in the context of Asian countries, this type of issues is considered more sensitive (Noor & Iamtrakul, 2023; Yasir et

al., 2020; Adikaram, 2018). According to Niedhammer and David (2009), up to 12% of employees may be exposed to workplace harassment at different organizational levels. However, organizations shall not be able to effectively manage harassment if the victims would not report such events. That is why reporting procedures should be an integral part of organizational anti-harassment programs (Becton, Gilstrap & Forsyth, 2017). According to Gupta et. al., (2024), While talking about consequences, workplace harassment is a significant and persistent problem in organizations and individuals being exposed to harassment can have serious implications for mental and physical health including depression, helplessness, anxiety, and despair suicide ideation (Leymann, 1990). Workplace harassment negatively affects victims' psychological, physical, and job-related well-being (Cortina & Berdahl, 2008), create costs for organizations via employee absenteeism and turnover, and reduce productivity and organizational citizenship behavior (Kelloway, Barling & Hurrell, 2006). Workplace harassment is not only a prevalent problem, but also one with strong detrimental outcomes for those targeted (Høgh, Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 2011), as well as for the organization as such (Hoel, Sheehan, Cooper & Einarsen, 2011). Workplace harassment is not simply a widespread issue, but also one that has significant negative consequences for the individuals who are targeted (Gupta et. al., 2024).

Although workplace harassment affects the lives of many employees, until recently it has been ignored in the organizational literature (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). While talking about the gender-wise workplace harassment reporting, men are more likely, than are women, not to report harassment (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). Many psychologists agree that men are less inclined to report the harassment incidents in which the perpetrator is a woman (Bendixen & Kennair, 2014; Petersen & Hyde, 2009; Schnoll, Connolly, Josephson, Pepler, & Simkins-Strong, 2015). Although the experience of male victims being harassed by female perpetrators may prove quite different, exceedingly rare studies in literature have discussed this situation. The reason of under-discussion and non-reporting of such events is that the female-to-male harassment is often taken lightly, and victims are mocked by coworkers. While working on international sexual harassment, Sigal (2006) found that Pakistan was different in terms of studying harassment as compared to other countries in her sample. Moreover, in a culture like Pakistan where women are more privileged in harassment cases (Qayyum et. al., 2023), the phenomenon becomes more important to be studied.

Literature Review

Many employees experience workplace harassment, but organizational literature has overlooked it until recently and men are more likely than women to not report workplace harassment (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). Men are less likely to report harassment by women, according to several psychologists. Male victims of female harassment may have a distinct experience, although few research have addressed

this. Female-to-male harassment is commonly dismissed and criticized by coworkers; hence it is underreported. In her study of international sexual harassment, Sigal (2006) discovered that Pakistan was distinct from other countries. In Pakistan, women are favored in harassment cases, making the topic more relevant to study.

Workplace harassment is a pervasive global problem that is victimizing employees at an escalating rate. Furthermore, within the setting of Asian countries, these types of challenges are regarded as more delicate (Noor & Iamtrakul, 2023; Solomon et al., 2022; Adikaram, 2018). According to Niedhammer and David (2009), a significant proportion of employees, maybe as high as 12%, may experience workplace harassment at various organizational levels. However, organizations cannot successfully address harassment unless the victims report such incidents. Therefore, it is imperative that reporting procedures are incorporated as a fundamental component of organizational anti-harassment initiatives (Becton, Gilstrap & Forsyth, 2017). Gupta et. al. (2024) state that workplace harassment is a substantial and enduring issue in organizations. Individuals who experience harassment may suffer severe consequences for their mental and physical well-being, such as depression, helplessness, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts (Leyhmann, 1990). Workplace harassment has a detrimental impact on the psychological, physical, and job-related well-being of its victims (Cortina & Berdahl, 2008). It also imposes costs on businesses through increased employee absenteeism and attrition, as well as decreased productivity and corporate citizenship behavior (Kelloway, Barling & Hurrell, 2006). Workplace harassment is a widespread issue that has severe negative consequences for both the individuals who are targeted (Høgh, Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 2011) and the business as a whole (Hoel, Sheehan, Cooper & Einarsen, 2011). Workplace harassment is not only a prevalent problem, but also one that has substantial adverse effects on the persons who are victimized (Gupta et. al., 2024).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the barriers that hinder or stop the male victims from reporting the harassment events performed by their female coworkers at workplace. Although such events are few, the reporting to the concerned authorities is much fewer. Moreover, the cultural settings of organizations in countries like Pakistan make such events more problematic to report due to the diverse cultural settings prevalent in Pakistani organizations.

Methodology

The aim of the study was to explore the subjective experiences of male workers who did not report or delayed the reporting of harassment incidents faced by them from their female counterparts. So, the main or grand tour research question of this study was: *what were the subjective experiences of the victims (of female-to-male harassment) regarding barriers that stopped or hindered them from reporting the*

event to higher authorities in the organization? So, the main or grand tour research question was to study the participants' lived experiences regarding the barriers. According to Creswell (2007), a phenomenological study "describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (p. 57). Thus, our research question suggests that phenomenology would provide the best overall research design and research methodology.

Sampling technique and sample

Purposive sampling was used to find those males who had experienced female-to-male harassment at the workplace, and they either did not report the event or delayed the reporting. We visited twelve organizations in Islamabad, Rawalpindi, and Faisalabad which had male and female employees. The reason behind choosing these cities was that most of the organizations in these cities have a good mix of male and female employees. We met various male employees (around 175) and asked them if they themselves or any of their co-worker experienced harassment from a female counterpart. Most of them denied having any such experience (153 out of 175 i.e., 87% denied). A few claimed to be harassed but denied participating in the study (14 out of twenty-two i.e., 63.6 % out of 13% of total). Eight participants, who faced the harassment and were also willing to participate in the study, were interviewed as representatives of the study class. This number of participants was adequate as a sample size of ten or less is used often in phenomenological studies (Polit, Beck, and Hungler; 2006). The participants aged from 28 years to 60 years have work experience of 2 to 25 years. Three of them were from the education sector; three were from public sector organizations and the remaining two were from private sector organizations. All the participants faced a situation when they were harassed by a female coworker. Three of them were sexually harassed while others faced bullying, mocking, hooting or undue pressurizing, which are all different dimensions of harassment under the definition of harassment stated by Rospenda and Richman (2004).

The instrument

A semi-structured interview questionnaire was used to explore the phenomenon. Although no published standards were used to develop the questionnaire, however experts from the field of qualitative research and language were consulted to finalize the interview questionnaire. Minor changes were made after the first two interviews to improve the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of twenty questions and is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview Questionnaire – Barriers to reporting female-to-male harassment at workplace.

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1. What is your working experience?

2. How long have you been working with your current employer?
 3. What is your position in current organization?
 4. Please describe the nature of interaction between males and females in your organization?
 5. Please elaborate your concept of workplace harassment.
 6. What are the procedures of reporting any kind of harassment in your organization?
 7. Is male-to-female harassment and female-to-male harassment treated similarly in the organizations you served?
 8. How frequently you faced the harassment at workplace?
 9. Please share your experience of facing harassment by your female counterpart.
 10. What were your feelings?
 11. Please elaborate your reaction.
 12. How did you respond to the act of harassment?
 13. What was the reaction of your colleagues when you shared your experience with them?
 14. Did you report the event to the higher authorities?
 - a) If no, why not?
 - b) If you delayed, what were the reasons of delay?
 - c) If you did not report, under what conditions you would have reported this event?
 15. What is/was the position of the person harassed you? How did her position affect the reporting of the event?
 16. When did you feel that it is necessary to report the harassment?
 17. What was the reaction of authorities when you reported the incident?
 18. Please elaborate the procedure you followed to report the harassment and problems/hindrances you faced in reporting the event.
 19. What were the barriers you faced in reporting harassment?
 20. What actions did you expect from your organization?
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Data collection procedure

A letter ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity, and the interview questionnaire was given to the employees who admitted being the victims of the harassment so that they can better understand the nature of study and it was also helpful in building rapport and confidence. One-on-one interviews were conducted with half of the participants who allowed audio recording of the interviews. These interviews were transcribed by getting the services of a transcriber. However, the remaining half were not allowed to record the interviews out of fear about confidentiality, so transcriber was also involved during their interviews. All the

participants were invited to give interviews at some café but only three accepted the invitation and the remaining had not enough time to go outside for interviews, so they were interviewed in their offices. The average time of one interview was about 40 minutes which is a good amount of time for qualitative interview (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996).

The informal style of interviews was followed. A little conversation about the participants' interests was done to build a rapport with them. Different probe questions were also asked during the interviews to further elaborate the participants' experiences and to get a rich and thick description of the phenomenon.

Data analysis

Qualitative researchers usually use thematic analysis to analyze the interview data (Feenstra et. al., 2023). Under thematic analysis, the data is analyzed to formulate "themes" that are common in respondents' answers (Sadeghian et. al., 2023). The thematic analysis of the interview data was performed according to the thematic analysis method for qualitative data suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Six steps were followed to perform the thematic qualitative analysis of interview data:

- i. Reading the transcribed data repeatedly so that we could get familiar with data and be able to extract the initial ideas.
- ii. Initial codes were allocated to the data in a systematic way in the second step.
- iii. The allocated codes were assembled in such a way that themes emerged out of the similarities in the interview data.
- iv. Review of the generated themes was performed again, and we checked out if they represent the code allocated to the chunks of data first, and then the whole data.
- v. Now, names were given to the themes according to their nature as the names are representative of the whole idea under theme and define these themes clearly considering the data set.
- vi. Finally, a report was formulated based on clear and captivating extracts of data and analysis of them was performed in the light of the research questions and the literature already available. The parts of interviews that did not relate to the study were eliminated.

Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the barriers that stop or delay the reporting of female to male harassment incidents (Bendixen & Kennair, 2014; Petersen & Hyde, 2009; Schnoll, Connolly, Josephson, Pepler, & Simkins-Strong,

2015). It was made clear from the literature that men are reluctant to report the harassment, especially when the harasser is a female. In this study also, the participants admitted that either they did not report the acts of harassment done by their female coworkers or they delayed reporting due to several reasons. This study tried to explore these reasons.

The themes emerged from the analysis of data were divided into two major categories:

- A. Societal barriers
- B. Organizational/workplace barriers

A. Societal Barriers

Following themes related to society emerged from the interviews:

A1. Unawareness of being harassed

Only two of the respondents, ages 60 years and 48 years, had valuable information about definition of the term harassment. Remaining six, who aged from 28 years to 34 years, were either unaware of concept at all or they took the term harassment as sexual harassment. For example, when one of the respondents, having code FSD1 and aged thirty-four, was asked about his concept of harassment, he replied:

“I see harassment as sexually exploiting someone, simply!”

There is a general lack of awareness about different dimensions of harassment in Pakistan (Sadruddin, 2013). Bullying, mocking, and undue pressurizing are not considered to be harassment at all by most people. Most workers in Pakistani organizations have no or very little information regarding various dimensions of harassment. Specially, when this kind of harassment involves a female, the persons being harassed do not even take it as acts of harassment. For example, a respondent FSD4 aged twenty-seven, said:

When it all started, I did not take it as pressurizing. Rather, I thought it was part of her job until I discussed her behavior with my senior colleague.

Similarly, respondent RWP2 aged twenty-eight talked about the awareness of employees regarding harassment:

The managers do not talk much about harassment. In fact, there is no briefing, or any such thing, for the new employees to keep them aware of undue behaviors. We do not know what to say and how to react in harassment situations. This was one of the main reasons I could not tell her to stop!

One of respondents said,

I was not aware that this [female-to-male] form of harassment existed unless I became a victim myself.... (RWP2)

A2. Against manly spirit

The social structure of Pakistan is male dominated (Ali and Khan, 2008) and thus, it is considered against manly spirit if you report an act of harassment performed by female counterpart. When respondent RWP1 talked to his friend about the incident of being sexually harassed by his female colleague, the reply he received was:

The first words that came out of my friend's mouth, to whom I told the situation [about harassment], were 'What kind of man you are? You are a shame for men....' (RWP1)

Another respondent received the following comment by his senior:

You must harass her back very strongly when she harasses you the next time. Be a man son.... (ISB1)

There was a general understanding among respondents that it is a shame to report female-to-male harassment incidents, and this stopped the respondents from reporting the incidents of harassment.

A.3. Co-workers' jokes

Some of our respondents, specially the junior ones with low job experience and aged from 28 years to 34 years, faced jokes from their co-workers after revelation of the harassment incidents. All the respondents faced coworkers' jokes on separate occasions and these jokes were a serious barrier in reporting the incident. In one case, the respondent RWP1, who reported the harassment incident, was so embarrassed by these jokes that he had to leave the job.

My colleagues threw jokes at me and made fun of me by calling names, until I decided to leave [the job]. (RWP1)

Another respondent stated this situation in following words:

Do you know what, when you report a harassing behavior by a female in a male-dominated society, your friends, colleagues, and co-workers are going to have a serious fun out of it, and you will become a laughingstock to them? (FSD3)

A4. Fear of disrespect/not being believed

The respondents, who reported the harassment and those who did not, unanimously feared of disrespect from their colleagues because of involving a female colleague into a harassment inquiry. This fear created a moral hazard in the way of reporting the harassment. When one of the respondents reported the incident to authorities, he faced the following situation regards to his colleagues:

...they saw me with weird expressions, as if I had made a sin by reporting the incident....(ISB2)

Another respondent revealed the situation as following:

They [colleagues] even did not answer to my SALAM [greetings].... (RWP1)

Moreover, the respondents who did not report the incidents were afraid of not being believed. For example, one such response was:

I am not a charming guy [laughing] so no one would have taken it seriously that my [female] colleague harassed me....(RWP1).

A.5. Female-privileged society

Although Pakistani society is male-dominant, yet females are more privileged in certain matters. It is a general perception that women cannot harass men due to their lower societal position. Just like respondent ISB2, who was at managerial post and aged forty-eight, stated:

Well, females are always considered to be weak in our society and their rude behavior is protected sometimes due to their weak position..... this kind of behavior is never considered harassing.

Another response was:

...I think if I had reported the bullying thing to higher authorities, everyone would have favored her. (FSD1)

B. Organizational Barriers

B.1. Unavailability of proper reporting procedures

Pakistani organizations lack proper procedures and policies necessary to report the workplace harassment (Ali and Kramar, 2014). And even if such policies and procedures exist, they are not known to the employees. This situation was revealed

by our respondents also. One respondent stated his unawareness in following words:

I was newly hired at that time. I did not know very well then how to manage such situations. (FSD1)

When question about procedures to report harassment was asked, same respondent answered:

To tell you the truth, I do not know if any such procedure exists.... (FSD4)

B.2. Power/authority/seniority of harasser

Another powerful organizational barrier that stops the victims from reporting the harassment incidents is the authority or power of the harasser. In one situation, where the harasser was in a senior position to the respondent, respondent stated the following reason of not reporting the incident:

She was superior to me, and I could do nothing about her. (ISB1)

One respondent, RWP1, did not report the incident just because of the reason that his immediate boss was also female.

How could I complain about a female to a female boss? Do you think she would have understood me? I do not think so. (RWP1)

A tendency of avoiding the reporting was present at workplaces where the incidents had to be reported to a female boss. The respondents thought at large that the female boss would favor the harasser who is also a female and thus they avoided to report.

Discussion and Conclusion

Various societal and organizational barriers stop the victims of female-to-male harassment to report such incidents. It was observed that different dimensions of harassment brought various kinds of barriers. For example, the respondents who faced sexual harassment were very conscious about anonymity. They did not report the incident because they did not want anybody to know. That was the reason, why two of the victims of sexual harassment did not allow to audio tape the interview. Discrimination and undue pressurizing were the most under-observed dimension of the harassment. The barriers are inherent in the social system as well as organizational workplace settings. Respondents interviewed in this study admitted that reporting this type of harassment is difficult and sometimes the situation becomes so complex that the victims find it hard to report the harassment. People

in Pakistani society usually presume that females cannot harass males. This presumption makes the situation more intricate.

The respondents also spoke about the importance of preventing harassment by developing policy protections and intervention strategies at different organizational levels. Proper informational sessions are necessary to keep employees aware of various negative workplace practices and several dimensions of workplace harassment. Findings indicated that unawareness of being harassed, co-workers' jokes, concept of manly spirit in the society, fear of disrespect from the co-workers, the organizational authority and placement of harasser and unavailability of proper reporting procedures all influence the reporting of harassment incidents.

Improvement in harassment-related HR practices, bringing awareness about harassment, development, and application of harassment policies irrespective of gender will certainly improve the individual as well as organizational performance.

Implications, Limitations and Future Direction

The findings of this study showed that numerous factors function as barriers when it comes to reporting the female-to-male harassment. Obviously, these barriers are a big hurdle in the efforts of organizations to have a harassment-free workplace. Based on findings of this study, we suggest some outlines that may facilitate in building effective anti-harassment policies. To begin with, employees should be provided with awareness programs regarding various dimensions of harassment. Sexual harassment is the only dimension that is well-known to employees. However, the many victims of other kinds of harassment, e.g., bullying, facing discrimination, mocking, being pressurized unduly etc. do not even know that they are being harassed. So proper awareness should be provided to all employees to better understand the harassing behaviors.

Organizations should draw anti-harassment policies which are not women oriented. No such distinction should be made while writing up these policies. We suggest that organizations in general, and HR managers in specific, should not discriminate and give an impression of female preference over male in harassment incidents. The employees should be made clear that no discrimination shall be done with the reporter of the harassment incidents. It was observed during the interviews that if the authority to which victims must report the incident is of opposite gender, the victims do not feel easy to report. Moreover, the victims have a feeling that there will be bias of gender. Therefore organizations should have both males as well as female managers who are to be reported in case of any incident of harassment. The organization should make it clear to employees that their rights shall be protected in case they fear the authority or power of the harasser.

The phenomenon of workplace harassment is not new in organizational research but there are various aspects of this phenomenon which need to be covered. For

example, the same study may be performed on different sectors of the economy as different sectors have different workplace settings. Although our study has covered different dimensions of workplace harassment, studies based specifically on each of the dimensions of harassment e.g., sexual harassment, bullying, discrimination, mocking and undue pressurizing may also be performed. Moreover, the legal aspects and their applications need also be covered. Further research is required to elaborate female-to-male harassment as this area is very under-researched. More research would permit better understanding of the 'effects' of non-reporting harassment incidents. Moreover, areas regarding prevention of such incidents and strategies that would permit early intervention in workplaces also need to be explored.

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