
PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT AMONG WOMEN AGRICULTURAL LABORERS AND PERCEIVED IMPACTS ON THEIR PHYSICAL & MENTAL HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

Large number of women is working as laborers in agricultural sector of Pakistan particularly in cotton picking, wheat harvesting, rice transplanting, and dairy sector. Gender based Violence and sexual harassment is fairly observable and reported in the formal sector of the urban areas but a research gap exists to study sexual harassment in informal sector, and particularly in agriculture sector. Present study is intended to understand the patterns and types of sexual harassment of woman laborers in agriculture sector. A sample of 250 women agricultural laborer/workers from five districts of Punjab province were selected for a face to face survey to explore the patterns of sexual harassment and its perceived impact for their health and the stigma attached to report such incidences. The views of male counterparts were obtained through key informant interviews of agricultural contractors and landlords. The results revealed that majority of the respondents faced gender based discrimination (50 %), low wages as compared to men (64 %), lack of respect (45.2 %) and negative attitudes of male workers (44 %). The data regarding verbal harassment indicated that such incidences are on the higher side (38.4 %) as compared to non-verbal (28.8 %) and

physical (9.6 %) types of sexual harassment. The woman laborers also suffered different physical and psychological consequences of sexual harassment like; sleeping problem, depression, anxiety and isolation. However, the trend of not lodging the complaints by the victims was clearly evident i.e. 91.6 % representing the stigma and fear of disgrace associated with sexual harassment in the rural communities of Pakistan. Strong advocacy campaigns by academia and Non-governmental agencies to sensitize the rural communities are seriously required coupled with extending the purview of labor laws and harassment act of Pakistan to informal workers by policy makers.

KEYWORDS

Agricultural laborers, Informal sector, sexual harassment, Pakistan, Women.

INTRODUCTION

The most pervasive form of gender based (GB) violence i.e. Sexual harassment is considered as a burning issue related to gender discrimination. Workplace sexual harassment is widespread, and regarded as an “occupational hazards” which directly affects the quality of working life and it is an obstruction for promoting decent working circumstances for employees (Hobbs, 2022; ILO, 2018). It may result in decline in work efficiency, reduced work output, great absenteeism, and truncated self-esteem of an organization’s staff (Cortina & Areguin, 2021; Naveed et al., 2010). The victims of sexual harassment may have to bear various adverse costs, ranging from physical to mental traumas, career disruptions, and gender wage gap. Further, due to such incidences women may be discouraged for advancing into their career due to trauma of sexual harassment (Durana et al., 2018; Shaw et al., 2018).

Sexual harassment is the most common type of harassment that might be seen as verbal/non-verbal abuse, or unethical action for gaining attention or sexual bribes or threats. This undesirable behavior and obscuring phenomena is found in almost every occupation and organization (Prado et al., 2021; Hobbs et al., 2022). During last few decades, there is worldwide awareness about sexual harassment at workplace and now it has been quite prevalent even in those cultures where it had been generally overlooked. International community introduced legislations and policies to prevent and control sexual harassment and GBV. In 1989, the general recommendation No. 12 of CEDAW recognized sexual harassment as a form of violence against women and characterizes it as sex discrimination.

Women participation in economic activities is inevitable for their empowerment and sustainable livelihoods but sexual harassment at workplace discourage them to continue working. With growing participation of women in labor force in developing countries (particularly in South Asia), incidences of sexual harassment are also

increasing. In a male-dominated labor force, gender based violence and harassment against women are rather widespread globally and intensely reported (Hanson et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2016; Kominers, 2015). Regrettably, well documented evidence for workplace sexual harassment in Asian countries are rarely available, however, in these countries gender based harassment is routinely practiced. In a recent study Henry & Adams (2018) studied workplace issues of women farmworkers in low and middle income countries including some Asian and African countries and pointed out various sexual harassment incidents.

In Pakistan, Gender based violence (GBV) and workplace sexual harassment is prevalent in both formal and informal sectors of economy (PILDAT, 2009). The Pakistani women endure to face various forms of gender discriminations both socially and legally. There exist many constitutional provisions for them but unfortunately being persistently confronted and violated. The victims are discouraged to file their case against the offender hence; they continually exposed and imperiled to offensive behavior and several kinds of violence at home and in their workplace. The continuous marginalization of women is a result of longstanding tribal and feudal socio-customary practices. Among the other causative factors cited are the lack of awareness both about their rights and the constitutional provisions, lacunas in the domestic laws, societal responses and lack of faith in access to justice (SPDC, 2009).

The last few decades observed a significant number of women working in different sectors in Pakistan like; education, medicines, science & technology and agriculture. However, this increasing ratio of working women is also associated with rising incidence of workplace harassment that provoked the government of Pakistan to take some serious action against it and The Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Bill 2010 was passed to provide a safe environment to the women working in different field. Further, Pakistan is a signatory to some International Resolutions to safeguard the rights of women but execution of laws is missing. However, Workplace Harassment Act 2010 covers formal sector of economy and the major portion of rural community i.e. the women agri. labor is ignored. Women agricultural laborers are also not covered by the labor laws (Iqbal, 2015).

Being an agrarian economy, agriculture is the mainstay of rural people and by far the leading employer engaging 38% of the total labor force (Govt. of Pakistan, 2021). Within agriculture sector, about 73% of the labor force is comprised of women. Women are working as laborers in cotton picking, wheat harvesting, rice transplanting and dairy sector etc. Similarly, most of the activities related to fruit and vegetable production are performed by women (FAO, 2015; Govt. of Pakistan, 2021). Intensive studies on sexual harassment at formal workplace have been taken place in different countries besides Pakistan (SPDC, 2009; Naveed et al., 2010; Sadruddin, 2013; Ali,

2015) but fewer studies are available on sexual harassment in agriculture sector creating a research gap regarding sexual harassment at informal workplace.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To explore the patterns and types of women workers/laborers in agriculture sector.
2. To probe out types and causes those trigger the sexual harassment faced by women agricultural laborers, and its impacts on their physical and mental well-being.
3. To investigate the reasons for failing to report the sexual harassment cases by the victims.
4. To compile research based suggestions and measures to reduce harassment of women workers in agriculture sector.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the patterns and types of sexual harassment faced by women agricultural laborers, and its impacts on their personality?
2. Which factors contribute towards non-failing to report the sexual harassment cases by the victims?
3. How the research findings can suggest measures to reduce harassment of women workers in agriculture sector?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted to examine the prevalence of Gender Based Violence (GBV) and sexual harassment in agriculture sector in the Punjab. Punjab province has the largest share in the agricultural production of Pakistan. It contributes 80% percent of maize, 75% of wheat, 70% of rice, 68% of sugarcane, 86.5% of gram and 68% of cotton to national agricultural production. Similarly, 96% of citrus, 78% of mangoes and 77% of guava fruit is grown in the Punjab (FAO, 2015). For this study, five (05) districts of Punjab province i.e. Hafizabad, Vehari, Okara, Khanewal and Faisalabad were selected purposively for rice, cotton, dairy, cotton-maize and vegetable zones respectively. By selecting different districts (cropping zones) of the Punjab, this research study provides evidence based guidelines to sensitize the stakeholders on sexual harassment and gender based violence

Cropping Zone	Districts	Number of Respondents
Cotton-Wheat- Maize	Khanewal & Vehari	100
Rice	Hafizabad	50
Vegetables/Mixed cropping	Faisalabad	50
Livestock/Dairy	Okara	50

From each cropping zone, districts were selected purposively by keeping in view

intensity of cultivation, geographical location and evidence of woman workers. Initial field visits were made to find-out the areas within each district where there is maximum concentration of woman workers. Based on initial field visit, fifty (50) respondents were selected randomly from each district for a face-to-face survey. In order to get an insight from the male counterparts, key informant interviews (KII) with the male landlords and contractors of agricultural farms were conducted as well.

FINDINGS

Women agricultural laborer involved in vegetable growing, wheat harvesting, cotton picking, rice transplanting and livestock management were the target groups for this research study. A total of 250 women agricultural laborers from different agricultural zones were interviewed.

Table 1: Respondent's Demographic information

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Age (in years)		
Below 20 years	75	30.0
21-30	62	24.8
31-40	69	27.6
above 40	44	17.6
Marital status		
Married	169	67.6
Unmarried	71	28.4
Divorced	2	0.8
Widow	8	3.2
Education		
Illiterate	206	82.4%
Primary	33	13.2%
Matric	10	4.0%
Master or above	1	0.4%
Income (Rs.)		
Up to 5000	51	20.4
5001-10000	120	48.0
10001-15000	37	14.8
Above 15000	42	16.8
Nature of work		
Paid workers	209	83.9%
(Seasonal/Part-time)		
Unpaid family work	41	16.1%

The demographic information (Table 1) shows that the respondents were

predominately young i.e. up to 20 years of age (30.0%), illiterate (82.4 %), married (67.6%) and having low monthly income i.e. Rs. 5000 to 10000/- (48.0 %). Majority of these women agricultural workers (83.9 %) worked as part time/seasonal laborer on daily wages. In some similar studies, Duran et al., (2018) and Hobbs et al., (2022) also found that were among young women with low economic status and seasonal workers were most commonly harassed by perpetrators, who are mainly powerful males like landlords and senior workers.

Prevalence of Sexual Harassment among women farm laborers

To examine the incidence of sexual harassment, the women agricultural laborers were inquired about the different types of harassment faced by them during working as agricultural laborers. The women agricultural laborers were hesitant to discuss harassment related issues with the researchers/interviewers. However, on winning their trust and using different probing techniques the key informants (women laborers and lady councilors) told many stories related to harassment.

A 3-point likert scale (1=Never, 2=Sometime, 3=Often) was used to identify the intensity of harassment faced by the women agricultural workers at their workplace. The results shown in Figure-1 indicate that major challenges faced by most of the respondents at their workplace included low wages as compared to men (60.4 %), gender based discrimination (54.0 %), sexual harassment (52.8 %), and lack of respect (45.2 %) to some extent. Although considerable percentage of the respondents reported the prevalence of workplace challenges from “Not at all” to “Some extent” scale, however, substantial percentage of the respondents reported different challenges faced by them to a great extent. Negative attitude of male workers was also reported by a pretty higher percentage of respondents (44%) and 43% of the respondents reported that they have to do more work than their potential. These results also validated the findings of previous studies regarding gender based discrimination at workplace in Pakistan (Iqbal, 2015; ILO, 2018; SPDC, 2008).

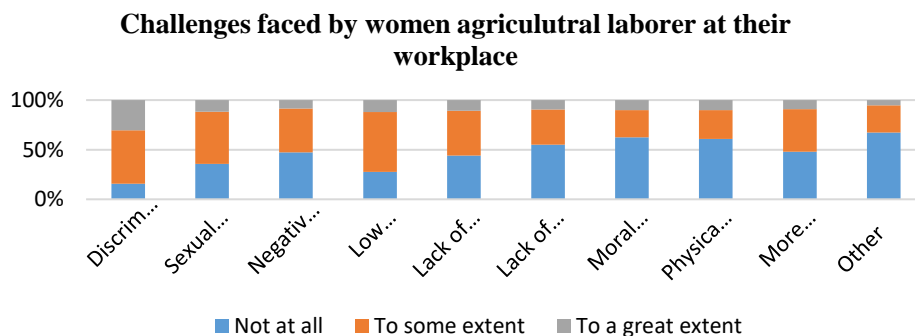


Figure 1: Type of challenges respondents faced as agricultural laborers (n=250)

Some recent studies (Shaw et al., 2018 & Durana et al., 2018) also highlighted that for women may be discouraged for advancing into their career due to trauma of sexual harassment. Sadruddin (2013) examined that the sexual harassment is usually experienced by women at workplace in Pakistan and have obstructed their work productivity. The results were also supported by a study conducted by SPDC (2008) in Pakistan that 40 % respondent's encountered harassment, while the remaining experienced various verbal or non-verbal types of violence. Further, Karega (2002) found that in Kenya, most of the women employed in agricultural and textile sectors have experienced different forms of sexual harassment. However due to poverty and low income jobs they are forced to compromise.

Table-2 shows the data regarding different type of sexual harassment faced by the respondents. The data have been quantified on Likert scale of 1-3 (Never, Sometimes, Often). The results indicate that majority of women informed that they faced verbal harassment as most of the data lies between "Sometimes" and "Often". Nevertheless, incidence of offensive jokes was highest in Faisalabad (vegetable zone) with mean value of 1.64 (sometimes). Similarly, unwanted letters or telephone calls, asking personal questions and sexual fantasies were also on the higher side in Faisalabad. Our qualitative data also indicated many incidences of verbal harassment. Prado et al., (2021) also found that the Mexican women farmworkers commonly practiced verbal, behavioral and physical workplace harassment including degrading language and requests for sex in exchange of work.

Table 2: Type of sexual harassment faced by the respondents at their workplace

Type of harassment	Never	Sometimes	Often
Non-verbal	32 (12.8 %)	146 (58.4 %)	72 (28.8 %)
Verbal	61 (24.4 %)	93 (37.2 %)	96 (38.4 %)
Physical	190 (76.0 %)	36 (14.4 %)	24 (9.6 %)
Total	250 (100 %)	250 (100 %)	250 (100 %)

Scale: 1=Never, 2=Sometimes, 3=Often

The results about non-verbal type of harassment again reveal that most of the respondents reported non-verbal sexual harassment between "sometimes" and "often". Making sexual facial expression, offensive gestures, continuous staring and looking up and down were reported on the higher side in Okara district. The results are supported by the findings of Kim (2016) that women farmworkers perceived that

staring, unwelcomed verbal remarks and discomfort feelings stuck their workplace safety and efficiency.

The results regarding physical sexual harassment given in Table-2 indicate that such incidences are on the lower side as compared to verbal and non-verbal types of sexual harassment. Most of the indicators of physical harassment were ranked between “Never” to “Sometimes”. Incidences of touching of cloths, hairs, standing close, rape or sexual assault etc. were more in Okara and Khanewal districts. While, the actions like deliberate touching, following the person and giving personal gifts were reported highest in Faisalabad.

Results of qualitative research revealed many stories about physical harassment. A women councilor (Key informant) of Hafizabad told,
“Few months ago, a group of women working in pea field were kidnapped by some men. Poor women did not have enough power and resources to take any action against them. Those women (victims) said that no one would listen to them regarding such events”.

A women laborer in Faisalabad told,
“.....not only on the way of women laborers but they (harassers) are in the workplace as well. On fields it (harassment) is done by zamindar and his personal workers. They use obnoxious language and sometime they even physically beat the women laborers. Sometime they even cross the limits and do shameful actions. They try to touch the sensitive body parts of women laborers and also tell vulgar jokes. It is a sort of enjoyment for men because poor don't have any respect and honour”

It was, however, interesting to note that most of the male *Zamindars* (landlords) and labor contractors denied the existence of any type of harassment at their farm. Typical comments in this regards are;
“There is no problem regarding women harassment as it is our responsibility to protect the honour of women. Still if there is any issue, the women consult us and we take strict actions to stop the harassers.” (A labor contractor, Hafizabad).

Further, many male landlords and contractors claimed that women laborers themselves are responsible for harassment because they provoke the men to do so.

Perceived impacts of harassment

Sexual harassment served as a trauma experience of a person's life that brings physical and mental sufferings for that person. This event often impacts on emotional and physical health and can be seen as a long-lasting and devastating effect on the health of victims. During the survey, the women agricultural laborers were asked to tell about

their perception on general impacts of harassment. The results designate that a significant percentage of women agricultural laborers perceived various impacts of sexual harassment on their personality. It also indicates that sleeping problem, depression and isolations were encountered by 31%, 36% and 29% of the respondents respectively. Similarly, loss of trust and loss of self-confidence were other pronounced impacts of sexual harassment (Figure 2).

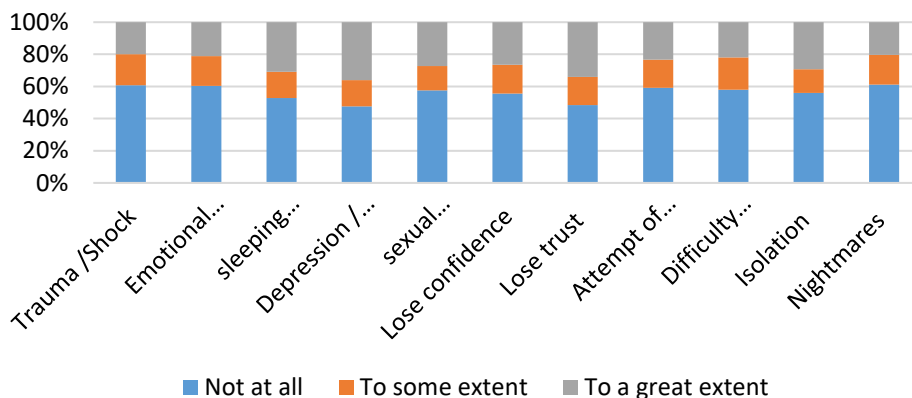


Figure 2: Perceived influences of sexual harassment on women

The adverse imprints of workplace sexual harassment on individual and intimate family health of women were documented in preceding literatures (Waugh, 2010; Nielson et al., 2012; Murphy et al., 2015). Similarly, Kapoor and Dhingra (2014) also found that women, who have suffered from harassment, show certain characters in their behavior like embarrassed, annoyed, mortified, afraid, helpless and low self-confidence etc. Schneider et al., (1997) in their widely cited research in effects of sexual harassment at workplaces on women concluded that substantial negative consequences on working women psychological wellbeing and behavior are found due to comparatively low-level but frequent types of sexual harassment. Some recent studies (Cortina & Areguin, 2021; Mamaru et al., 2015; Durana et al., 2018) also found a strong association of verbal, non-verbal and physical sexual harassment at workplace with psychological distress, poor self-esteem, loss of confidence, fear of being ridiculed, loss of trust and suicidal trends among the victims.

During field observation and interviews with the key-informants it was found that many laborers were found depressed and hopeless.

“Harassment is part of our life and we have to remain silent because we don’t have any alternate source of income” (A woman laborer, Faisalabad).

Participants of a focus group discussion told that many families reside on the place of landlords who treat women as their property. The workers of landlord ask women to

develop sexual relation and if we deny they might have to leave their land and vacate the shelter.

“We cannot take any action against them. If we try to register a complaint in police station, they do not believe on us and not take any action against the powerful Chaudhrys (landlord)”.

Reporting of cases

The results of the study clearly reflect that majority (91.6 %) of the victims did not report the incidence of sexual harassment to police. It was observed that certain sociological and cultural factors hindered women in rural communities of Pakistan to lodge a complaint about the cases of sexual harassment. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan also admitted that in the year 2020 most of the cases of Gender based Violence were not reported by the victims in Punjab province. Among the high ranked factors for not filing such cases included Shame fear and stigma (Mean=4.23; SD=0.884), lack of knowledge about how to report (Mean=4.21; SD=1.129) and to be blamed (Mean=3.74; SD= 1.119).

Table 3. Distribution of the respondents according to their opinion about the reasons for failing to report the sexual harassment cases by the victims

Factors for failing to report	Weighted score	Mean	S.D.	Rank order
Shame, fear and stigma	1058	4.23	.884	1
Lack of knowledge about how to report	1052	4.21	1.129	2
Afraid of being objectified and humiliated by scrutiny gossip	940	3.76	1.119	3
No actual promise of justice at the end	934	3.73	1.117	4
Fear of revenge or being harassed	929	3.72	1.096	5
Fear of not being believed	924	3.70	1.139	6
Lack of support from family and friends	909	3.64	1.219	7
Consequences of reporting will be devastating	895	3.58	1.146	8

The results are consistent with various previous studies that women workers hesitate to openly discuss sexual harassment due to stigma associated with the sexual harassment (SPDC, 2009; Ali, 2015). Further, several studies reflected that the victims of workplace harassment have to face the similar consequences of lodging their complaints, like; dismissed from the job, deny for promotion lowering of wages or quit from the job. Most frequently, such women are humiliated and made to feel at fault, and regarded as wicked women and hence choose to keep silent (Durana et al., 2018;

Lopaz, 2009; Sabitha, 2008; Kim, 2016; Prado, 2021). This unreported action generally provokes the offenders to repeat the violent behavior (Hamlin & Hoffman, 2002). While studying the factors for non-reporting of harassment incidents Henry & Adams (2018) attributed power differential coupled with cultural norms to tolerate such incidents in middle and low-income societies of Asia. The study also found that power of supervisors and senior workers threaten the victims to keep silent and do not report

The issues concerning to filing a report an act of sexual harassment by victims in social set up of Pakistan involves 3 levels. Firstly, women hide the incidence due to cultural tradition and religious modesty. Secondly, if they take stand against such culprits, organizational level redress is also lacking. Finally, if they are succeeded to report the issue social stigma and victimization by society is their fate (Ali, 2015). The similar findings were reflected in a report by Social Policy and Development Center of Pakistan, that the stigma related to embarrassment and dishonor prevents most of the women workers from reporting such incidences. It would be pertinent to mention here that mostly illiterate women usually didn't report incidences of sexual harassment (SPDC, 2008).

DISCUSSION

Agriculture is the largest sector of Pakistan in terms of labor force and within this sector there is a huge number of women laborers (73%) as compared to men. Gender based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment at workplace is prevalent in both formal and informal sectors. This paper unfolded that gender-based violence and workplace sexual harassment are grave issues in the study areas. The women agricultural laborers are facing different types of harassment (Verbal, non-verbal & physical) while working in the fields; however, the cases of verbal harassment are on higher side. Among different cropping zones, mixed cropping zone i.e. Faisalabad district possessed highest intensity of sexual harassment followed by dairy/livestock zone district i.e. Okara. The prevalence of harassing is much more with the women who move alone as compared to those who accompanied by their families. Trend of not lodging the complaints by the victims was clearly evident representing the stigma and fear of disgrace associated with sexual harassment in the rural communities of Pakistan. Again in the absence of no formal mechanism of registering a complaint in case of harassment (except in police station), women feel hesitation in talking/complaining to men about sexual harassment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Agricultural workers are not in the purview of current labor laws and harassment Act but the extensive prevalence of violence against women and sexual harassment in the agricultural fields requires addressing the legislative gap in various civil provisions,

labour laws and the criminal codes.

It is enormously imperative to reassess the prevailing patterns of traditional socializations and build a social milieu that is not merely safe for women, but also permits them to raise their voices against any type of discrimination.

Serious efforts are required to sensitize the rural community, in general and women agricultural laborer in particular, to raise their voice against gender-based violence and sexual harassment. Non- government organizations and academia should jointly initiate advocacy campaign to raise this issue at national level. Seminars, workshops, talk shows should be organized to sensitize the policy makers on this issue.

The role of print and electronic media is very important in sensitizing the communities on gender issues in general and sexual harassment in particular.

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