

## **An Exploratory Study of Sexual Harassment in Pakistani Organisations**

### **ABSTRACT**

Despite prior research on the influence of national regulatory and cultural factors on sexual harassment (SH) at the workplace, few studies have examined SH, its impact on victims and redress processes in Muslim majority countries (MMCs) such as Pakistan. This study uses neo-institutional theory to develop a more comprehensive framework to explore SH experienced by women at the workplace in Pakistan. Qualitative methodology is adopted to examine employees' and managers' perceptions of SH. Drawing on interviews with working women and human resource managers in six Pakistani organisations, the study demonstrates that even when there are formal policies designed to prevent SH, cultural factors influence policy implementation. It reveals that there is a tension between traditional culture and behaviour consistent with SH policies in the workplace. The study identifies three major factors which influence SH redressal; these are socio-cultural factors (e.g. female modesty), institutional factors (e.g. inappropriate redress procedures), and managerial expertise/ bias.

**Keywords:** Sexual harassment, Muslim women, Pakistan, socio-cultural factors, equal employment opportunity

### **INTRODUCTION**

Studies on sexual harassment (SH) have largely focused on either the outcomes experienced by the direct targets of SH or on defining SH in different organisational and team contexts (Chamberlain et al 2008; Gruber 1992; Raver & Gelfand 2005; Welsh 1999; Mellor & Golay 2014). Most of these studies have been conducted in Western contexts, e.g. in the US, Australia, UK and other EU countries (Hunt et al. 2010; Zippel 2006; Welsh 1999; Fitzgerald, Gelfand & Drasgow 1995). However, the issue of SH in Muslim majority

countries (MMCs) remains largely underexplored. To develop a contextual understanding of SH in organisations in MMCs, this study addresses the following research question: What factors influence the perceptions of female employees and HR managers about SH in organisations within Pakistan?

There are significant differences between MMCs and Western countries in the cultural concepts of female modesty and gender segregation (Ali 2013). These differences can be traced to cultural and religious practices and behaviours, and may be expected to influence the issues and challenges associated with the prevention and handling of SH in the workplace – even in circumstances where there are measures in place, such as SH policies within organisations, legislation preventing SH and supporting institutional frameworks. This paper examines such issues in the context of Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the second largest MMC in the world with a population exceeding 190 million (CIA 2013).

Differences in religion and culture influence the perceptions of SH in various countries (Merkin, 2008). Cultural perceptions vary because people differ in how they encode and decode messages (Hofstede, 2001). There are a number of studies that discuss how general perceptions and judgments influence SH at work (Gutek & Done, 2001). However, these studies are predominantly focused on Western societies such as the US and the UK (e.g. Fitzgerald et al. 1997; Rospenda et al. 2005). Therefore, such studies are limited in their ability to explain SH in other cultures especially in MMCs where religion and culture play an important role in shaping people's behaviours and expectations.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, it offers a theoretical overview of SH, examining definitions and the incidence of SH at workplace. Next, cultural variations and their impact on the perceptions of SH are discussed. The paper then provides some contextual information on Muslim culture and societal norms such as shame, guilt, inhibition and

modesty in the context of Pakistan. This is followed by the qualitative study, its findings and a discussion of the results.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **The nature of sexual harassment**

Sexual harassment is broadly defined as unwelcome behaviour in the workplace that has a sexual or sexist nature (Fitzgerald, 1993). It is a complex concept and includes behaviour which is directed to an individual, as well as behaviour which creates an environment in which an individual feels intimidated or humiliated. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC 1980) has provided a standard legal definition of SH in the US, based on MacKinnon's (1979) categorisation of 'hostile' and 'quid pro quo' harassment. However, SH appears to be more complex than this standardised legal definition. Psychological research has identified different forms of SH (Fitzgerald et al. 1988; Till, 1980) reflecting demographic, organisational, and psychological factors associated with an individual's own perceptions of what constitutes SH (Blumenthal 1998).

SH has been widely recognised and extensively studied in the US (Toker & Sumer 2010) and other developed countries. In particular, the classification of SH has developed over time. An early attempt by Till (1980) classified SH behaviours into five categories. Till's typology of SH consisted of gender harassment (sexist remarks or behaviour), seductive behaviour (sexual advances or propositions), sexual bribery (sexual favours in exchange for rewards), sexual coercion (sexual advances with a threat of punishment) and sexual imposition (assaults). Scholars have examined these categories to identify the behaviours associated with them and their underlying features. These features included the causes of SH, their correlates, impact on victims, personal coping with occurrences, etc.

This classification system has evolved through a series of studies using behaviour-based assessment instruments (such as sexual harassment experience questionnaire - SEQ) based on Till's typology. For example, using this questionnaire Fitzgerald et al. found that the structure of the SEQ failed to validate Till's five-level typology. Instead, a tripartite model (gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion) better accounted for the data (Fitzgerald, Gelfand & Drasgow 1995). Later, even the SEQ instrument developed by Fitzgerald et al. has been criticized. For example, Gutek et al. (2004) suggest that:

*'... the SEQ is not a finished product, has a number of problems, and has weak psychometric properties. Because of inconsistencies (e.g. in time frame, number of items, wording of items), the SEQ lacks the advantages of standardized measures, such as the ability to assess changes over time. It defines sexual harassment very broadly, having the effect of distorting findings about sexual harassment. Most importantly, it is not clear what or whose definition of sexual harassment the SEQ assesses.'* (p. 457).

A number of studies (MacKinnon 1979; Till 1980; Fitzgerald et al. 1995, 1999) on the behavioural categorisations of SH reveal that scholars disagree about what constitutes SH. Scholars especially disagree whether sexually hostile environments constitute SH — for example, in circumstances where employees in a workplace are subject to a pattern of exposure to unwanted sexual behaviour from persons *other than an employee's direct supervisor* and where supervisors or managers take no steps to discourage or discontinue such behaviour. In contrast, scholars seem to be in agreement that circumstances where a direct supervisor seeks sexual favours in return for something within the supervisor's powers, such as threatening to fire someone, or offering them a raise (this is a form of quid pro quo type of harassment) constitutes SH (Tata 1993; Terpstra & Baker 1987). Some scholars view behaviours included under hostile environment harassment as 'unharassing' (Thacker 1992),

whereas forms of quid pro quo harassment are perceived as SH by almost everyone (Frazier, Cochran, & Olson 1995). Likewise, using Fitzgerald et al.'s (1988) SEQ, Fitzgerald and Hesson-McInnis (1989) showed that undergraduate students viewed seductive behaviour, sexual bribery, sexual coercion, and sexual imposition to be sexually harassing, whereas they did not consider the gender harassment dimension, including sexist and sexual remarks, to be SH. They noted that as the severity of the behaviours increases, perception of SH also increases.

The above studies were carried out largely with Caucasian samples in Western countries. This raises an important question about the extent to which certain sexual behaviours are universally perceived as SH and whether there are any culture-specific behavioural manifestations that are considered. Although the literature is scarce in this regard, a few studies point to cultural variations in perceiving SH.

### **Influence of culture on perceptions of SH**

Culture plays an important role in gender stereotypes. It is argued that assessments of what behaviour is adequate, appropriate, unpleasant, aggressive, right, or wrong is, in great part, a function of culture (Merkin 2008). Therefore, calls have been made for studies on SH in terms of socio-cultural contexts and influences (Merkin 2008; Cortina & Wasti 2005; DeSouza, Solberg & Elder 2007). Studies suggest that culture does influence perceptions of what constitutes SH behaviour. A few small-scale studies compared open-ended definitions of SH from a cross-cultural perspective (Toker & Sumer 2010). A study with a sample of students from a variety of cultures in the US found that Korean, Chinese, Russian, Spanish, Arabic, and Turkish perceived less SH than the US resident student sample (Tyler & Boxer 1996). Another study (Pryor et al. 1997) that compared Brazilian, Australian, German, and

US student samples revealed that the US, German, and Australian samples were very similar in their definitions of SH, whereas the Brazilians differed.

In several cultural contexts, emic (culture-specific) manifestations of SH were also reported. Cortina (2001) collected qualitative data from Latinas (a woman or girl who is a native or inhabitant of Latin America) through focus groups. These focus groups revealed some culture-specific expressions of SH. Latinas were found to assume the occurrence of SH, even from non-verbal behaviours with no explicit sexuality. In another study, that compared US and Thai students' perceptions of SH (Limpaphayom, Williams & Fadil 2006), it was found that in contrast to US students, Thai students perceived sexually explicit language and jokes as very offensive and even considered them a part of sexual coercion. A study by Mecca and Rubin (1999) demonstrated the complexity of SH behaviour perceptions. It highlighted that in certain circumstances racial stereotyping and gender stereotyping were interdependent. The study showed that African-American students' perceived racial stereotyping as sexually harassing instead of gender stereotyping.

The above studies suggest that socio-cultural factors influence perceptions of SH.

### **SH in MMCs**

There are currently very few studies which touch upon the issue of SH in MMCs. The model proposed by Fitzgerald et al (1997) which identifies three categories of SH behaviour has been found to be useful in a variety of organisational and cultural settings, including the Turkish context (Wasti et al 2000). The model, however, has some limitations. Wasti et al (2000) argue that it is possible that the SEQ contains emic items that do not adequately capture the Turkish experience of sexual harassment.

In an examination of perceptions of workplace sexual harassment among Turkish female employees, Toker and Sumer (2010) found that while there were similarities in perceptions about what constituted SH behaviour in Turkey and the US, there were differences as well. While sexist hostility, sexual hostility, physical sexual offense, and sexual bribery and coercion were regarded as SH in both Turkey and the US, behaviour labelled ‘insinuation of interest’ was considered to constitute SH only in Turkey. This ‘insinuation of interest’ behaviour included unwanted personal attention, such as constantly requesting a date from a woman, inquiring or commenting on a woman’s spouse or family, using affectionate terms such as ‘honey’, ‘my dear’, leaving notes showing interest, inquiring about a woman’s personal life, and making compliments about a woman’s physical appearance. Turkish men and women differ in their attitudes to what constitutes SH. Men are more likely to consider SH to be a result of women’s provocation. In their study on predictors of Turkish women’s and men’s attitudes toward SH, Sakallı-Uğurlu and colleagues (2010) state that:

*‘Turkish men were more tolerant to sexual harassment issues than Turkish women were. It seems that Turkish men are more likely to accept the beliefs that sexual harassment is provoked by the way women dress, behave or talk; that if a woman really does not want sexual advances from men, she can prevent it; and that women sometimes use their sexuality as an advantage to get better grades or promotion. Therefore, if a woman is sexually harassed, men might tend to believe that it is her fault and she is the one to blame.’ (p. 877)*

Perceptions of SH have also been explored in other MMCs. In Bangladesh the most common form of SH identified among factory workers was the *gali* or expletives to which women are subjected during work hours (Sidiqi 2003). In addition, ‘the highly sexualized vocabulary and

body language used to discipline female workers creates a hostile, intimidating and sexually charged environment' (Sidiqi 2003: 5).

A descriptive study in Cairo in Egypt found widespread workplace violence against obstetrics and gynaecology nurses. The study revealed that 100 per cent of women faced SH in the workplace (Samir et al. 2012). A little more than 27 per cent of the participants chose to remain silent and continue working while 10 per cent women resigned without any complaint. This means that almost 40 per cent of victims did not formally report their experience of SH. The large percentage of victims not reporting the incident formally could be related to the influence of patriarchal religious or other socio-cultural factors in Egypt which were not analysed in this descriptive study.

The above review of the literature reveals that some behaviours not perceived as SH in the US, are regarded as SH in MMC. This is mainly due to the differences in the cultural context and society. Even in the presence of SH-related legislation, women at workplace face discrimination. For example, EEO legislation exists in some MMC, such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Oman, however, it is weakly implemented (Ali 2013; Sidiqi 2003; Gee & Norton 1999). The implementation is influenced by culture and specifically by employers' preferences and interpretation of the legislation, which in turn reflect their values and beliefs. What managers do and what they say they do varies (Ali 2010; Tomlinson 2007; Liff & Dale 1994). The sociological institutional or neo-institutional theory provides a framework for understanding the influence of culture and societal influences on individuals and organisations (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

### **Neo-institutional theory & SH**

Neo-institutional theory provides a framework which explains the influence of societal, cultural and other institutions on stakeholders, including organisations, employers and



employees (Meyer 2009; Meyer & Rowan 1978). Neo-institutionalism is an approach which defines institutions broadly by considering the influence of the societal context, including moral templates, cognitive scripts and the symbol systems. This conceptualization removes the divide between 'institutions' and 'culture' in traditional institution theory (e.g., North, 1990). This approach suggests that instead of being guided only by rules or policies, employees within organization may be influenced by normative pressures, values and perceptions. Consequently, 'compliance occurs in many circumstances because other types of behaviour are inconceivable; routines are followed because they are taken for granted as the way we do these things' (Scott 2001:57).

According to neo-institutional theory, employees bring their own beliefs, norms and traits to the workplace (Hall & Taylor 1996; Meyer & Rowan 1977). Therefore perceptions of what constitutes SH will be influenced differently in different cultures. In line with neo-institutional theory, social rule system theory (Burns & Dietz 1992; Burger & Luckmann 1966) stresses that institutions and their organisational policy designs and structures are deeply embedded in cultural, social, and political environments and that particular structures and practices are often reflections of, as well as, responses to rules, laws, conventions, paradigms built into the wider environment (Powell 2007). Therefore, when considering SH perceptions, policies and practices, it is not only organisations which are influenced by the culture and society, other stakeholders such as employees also bring their socio-cultural views to the workplace. These views may influence the perceptions of SH within the workplace.

In a recent study conducted in Oman, it was found that ethical beliefs, aspects of national culture and national institutions had an impact on preferences for human resource management practices such as EEO (Katou et al. 2010). The foregoing discussion highlights that traditional gender stereotypes in MMCs may influence the interpretation and

implementation of SH policies at the workplace. There could exist a tension between traditional social values (gender relations and stereotypes) and the expected workplace behaviour which is regarded as compliance with anti-SH laws and policies. From a neo-institutional perspective, bringing views about modesty, inhibition, and shame to the workplace may have implications for organisational SH policies. In countries, such as MMC, where female employees have a more restrictive view about their private space and values (of modesty) than their Western counterparts, SH could be expected to be viewed differently. It could be expected that female employees in MMC would be sensitive to a greater range of behaviours such as the violation of their personal space (Syed 2008). Next, we describe the Pakistani context of the empirical study.

### **The Pakistani Context**

Pakistan is a male dominated society where women are considered as no more than secondary citizens (Ferdoos 2005). It is, therefore, evident that women spend the greatest part of their time inside the house and due to *purdah* (veil) do not have much exposure to male strangers. A confrontation with the 'male world' is therefore a traumatic experience they find difficult to face (Syed et al 2005; Shaheed 1990:26). Most women have never been alone in a bank, a government office, or even to a bookshop or hospital (Ferdoos 2005). The inability to interact with male strangers is closely intertwined with the *purdah*-system, which again is based on the absence of concepts for mixed social interaction, and the perception of relationships between *na-mahram* (non-blood related) men and women as predominantly sexual ones (Ferdoos 2005).

The occupational choices of women in Pakistan are limited due social and cultural constraints, inherent gender bias in the labour market, lack of supportive facilities such as child care, and transport in the formal sector of the labour market. Women's labour

power is considered inferior because of employers' predetermined notion of women's primary role as homemakers (Syed et al. 2005). As a result of discrimination against female labour, women are concentrated in the secondary sector of the labour market where jobs are low paid and there are limited opportunities for upward mobility. For example, the majority of urban female workers are employed in the service sector, followed by the manufacturing sector (Global Gender Report 2011). Similarly, in the public sector, the majority of women are working at basic pay scale grade 9 or below, while not a single woman is working in grade 22, which is the highest basic pay scale in Pakistan (Global Gender Report 2011)..

A particularly strong cultural value in Pakistan is female modesty. Syed, Ali and Winstanley (2005) explored the experiences of working women in MMCs from the perspective of Islamic female modesty such as covering head and inhibition. The study suggests that while female modesty occurs as a value in many cultures, it is a particularly well-defined and strong feature of Pakistani culture. Women face an emotional struggle due to their decision to work in a formal organisation as it infringes on moral values and societal norms (Syed 2008).

The environment associated with paid work in Pakistan, in general, is difficult and unsupportive for female employees (AASHA 2002). Women commonly face inappropriate behaviour and harassment on the streets, at the workplace and in public places. Women either face social constraints, or they are discouraged by a hostile work environment; therefore, they do not attempt to get employment. Those who do work, have to fight for their rights and get little support. The attitude of their male colleagues and the management is usually not conducive and does not encourage women to exercise their right to work and contribute to the economic development of the society (AASHA 2002). In such situations the issue of SH is of great importance for investigation.

Religion is an important element of institutional context in Pakistan. According to the country's constitution, Islam is the state's religion. The Objective Resolution, which has been described as 'the ground norm of Pakistan', was an introduction to the successive Constitutions of Islamic Republic of Pakistan, of 1956, 1962 and 1973 (Patel 1991). The Martial Law Regime, of President General Zia-ul-Haq, in 1985 made the Objective Resolution a substantive part of the Constitution. It declares that sovereignty over the entire universe belongs to Allah Almighty alone and is to be exercised by the people within the limits prescribed by God (Patel 1991). The Federal Shariat Court, on its own motion or through petition by a citizen or a government (Federal or provincial), may examine and determine as to whether or not a certain provision of law is repugnant to the Injunctions of Islam. Although not formally articulated in the constitution or labour laws until 2010, SH is prohibited according to Islamic *shariah*, however, there is no explicit provision to implement the law (Ali 2013).

A large number of women face SH at workplace (AASHA 2002). Those who start employment are often harassed, and society in general blame the women for the SH behaviour. Therefore SH is stigmatized and this makes it very difficult for the women to report or even talk about it (Ferdoos 2005).

Although SH is widespread in Pakistan (AASHA 2002), there is lack of research on this topic especially in the context of the workplace. One study by AASHA (Alliance against Sexual Harassment) provides some statistics on SH among predominately domestic workers. According to this report, nearly 80 per cent of the working women (working in the formal and informal sector) in the country are sexually harassed at workplaces (AASHA 2002). About 93 per cent of women employees working in the formal sector, in both private and public organisations, reported that they faced SH at the workplace (AASHA 2002). Victims faced both, quid pro quo and hostile environment SH. For example, most victims were asked

to go out by co-workers and employers, threatened when they refused to comply with sexual propositions by their bosses, and faced sexually suggestive comments. This can be categorised as ‘insinuation of interest’ theme which is consistent with the Turkish context (Toker & Sumer 2010).

The previous discussion suggests that Pakistan is a male-dominated society with some strong socio-cultural and Islamic religious practices. The remainder of this paper reports on how SH is perceived by employers and female employees at workplace under these conditions. It also reports on how such cultural factors influence the issue of SH in Pakistani organisations.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to obtain a clearer profile of SH in the workplace, an exploratory study was undertaken. The study investigated the perspectives of a small group of workers during December 2008 to February 2009. As SH is an extremely sensitive issue in MMCs generally, the methodology adopted in this study was qualitative and involved semi-structured interviews which enabled a personal, one-on-one contact and rapport.

Case studies are widely used in organisational research (Hartley 2004). They provide an analysis of the context and processes which illuminate the theoretical issues being studied. Case studies are a key way to understand the cultural and institutional context as an explanatory factor on the organisational phenomenon under study (Hartley 2004; Rousseau & Fried 2001). This means that case study analysis provides the opportunity to analyse the effects of context such as culture on the phenomenon under study – in this case, SH in organisations. Case studies can be done by using either quantitative or qualitative evidence (Yin 1981). We adopt a qualitative approach, including policy document analysis and semi-structured interviews with female employees and HR managers.

This approach allows us to trace SH perceptions at workplace through interpretations of participants' experiences. An interpretive approach focuses on the processes by which meanings are created and negotiated (Schwandt 1998). Due to dissatisfaction with the methods and procedures for producing scientific knowledge within positivistic research, there is currently strong growth in the use of interpretive approaches (Sandberg 2005). Proponents of interpretive approaches claim that quantitative methodological procedures and claims for objective knowledge have significant theoretical limitations for advancing our understanding of human and organisational phenomena (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 1999; Denzin & Lincoln 1994, 2000; Lincoln & Denzin 2003; Prasad & Prasad 2002). Interpretive approaches have provided new means of investigating previously unexplored questions, thus enabling management researchers to conduct research that has led to new forms of knowledge about management and organisation (Sandberg 2005).

The data were collected through policy document analysis and exploratory interviews with 30 female employees and six HR managers in six organisations in the service sector. These organisations were in the banking, education and telecommunication industries. Personal contacts were used to gain access to the organisations as this is considered a very effective way of gathering related information and it provides more freedom in Pakistani organisations. HR managers or other senior managers in each organisation were contacted through emails to obtain consent. The managers were then provided with another consent letter for circulation in the organisation in an attempt to get voluntary participation from female members of staff. A rigorous process of research ethic approval was conducted and in the event of participants facing stress due to interview, help was provided to assist with psychological issues. For this purpose, all female participants were given contact information of a counsellor/psychologist in their city. All participants were also provided with the contact number of the research office (of the researcher's institution) in case they wanted to make a

complaint. Participants were allowed to leave the interview at any time if they wanted to. In this way, the researcher made sure no undue pressure was imposed on the participants due to the sensitivity of the topic. In terms of policy document analysis, the researcher was able to access confidential policies on gender through the consent of HR managers. At the time when this research was conducted, there was no explicit law that considered SH as a crime, so case-study organisations had only partial policies on SH. Therefore, the analysis was based on the few SH policies which were received from HR managers. The policy analysis was focused on highlighting contradictions and issues such as weak implementation in the light of HR managers' and female employees' perspectives.

### **Sample**

Sampling ensured that the six selected organisations and 36 participants met each of the following criteria: formal organisations from service sector; organisations from private sector; organisations with formal or informal SH policies; organisations based in Lahore, Punjab; skilled employees holding at least bachelor's degree; one HR manager from each organisation; even representation of married and single females.

All organisations were based in Lahore which is the capital of Punjab, the largest province of Pakistan. It is the second largest city of Pakistan in terms of population ( 7.1 million, CIA 2013), and the workforce is relatively less segregated by gender as compared to some other big cities such as Peshawar, where female employment is very low due to strict patriarchal practices (Ferdoos 2005). While, only 25 years ago no women were employed in banks in Lahore (Nestvogel & Klein 1986), nowadays many banks have female employees (Ali 2013). Table 1 provides a general overview of six case study organisations.

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For the purpose of the current study, in addition to HR managers' interviews, it was deemed necessary to interview only female employees (to find out female perception of SH), for two main reasons. First, as discussed in the literature review, it is predominantly women who are subject to SH in the workplace (Fieldern 2010). Second, in countries in which SH is prevented indirectly under protective legislation, such as in Pakistan where the criminal legislation prohibits outraging the modesty of a woman, men are inevitably excluded from bringing complaints (McCann 2005). Further, it was anticipated that with such a focus, there would be some similarity across the socio-cultural issues and challenges faced by the subjects. For instance, interviewees were all females (excluding HR managers), Muslim by religion and geographically belonged to the same city (i.e. Lahore),

One reason for conducting interviews with professional women, holding at least a bachelor's degree, was to focus on permanent staff. In Pakistan, the majority of women working at low income or low skilled jobs are on contract, irregular or temporary employment bonds, and hence not fully covered under organisational policies such as SH (Ahmed & Ahmed, no date).

## **Analysis**

The data were analysed manually through repeated readings of the transcripts. Various techniques such as word repetitions, indigenous categories and key-words-in-context were used to highlight the common themes. Two experienced researchers independently coded sample of interviews and showed substantial agreement with the authors. However given the complexity of qualitative data and the range of disciplinary backgrounds and interests of qualitative researchers, considerable variations are expected. Indeed, Mauthner et al (1998)



have shown how researchers' original interpretations may shift when they revisit previously collected data. Nevertheless, the common emergent themes from female employees' interviews were analysed and categorised in two different levels – namely macro-national level issues and meso-organisational level issues. At the macro-national level, issues related to socio-cultural factors were identified and at the meso-organisational level the issues related to organisational policies were explored. The creation of two levels (macro and micro) was deemed necessary for the ease of understanding of complex qualitative data.

While discussing different themes that emerged as a result of this study, the researchers supported the analysis of each theme with various direct quotations from the actual interviews to add further validity to the themes. In the next sections, each quote is followed by a code to identify the participant concerned. For example, AF1 refers to the first female interviewed from organisation A. Similarly BHR refers to the HR manager of organisation B. This will help the reader make connections with the conclusions and add more transparency to the study.

## **FAINDINGS**

The findings of the study are divided into two main categories. The first part presents the findings based on the organisational perspective, which includes results from policy document analysis and HR managers' perspectives of SH. The second part is based on interviews with female employees from the six case-study organisations.

### ***Organisational policy analysis and managers' perspectives***

All HR managers in our sample claimed that their organizations had formal or informal EEO policies, including policies related to SH. Although all organisations expressed their concern about SH in the policy documents, it was revealed through policy analysis that five out of six

organisations in our sample did not have explicit provisions to deal with SH. For example, one of the telecommunications organisations (B) thus depicts its concern about SH in its code of practice:

*'We do not tolerate degrading treatments towards any employee, such as mental or sexual harassment or discriminatory gestures, language or physical contact that is sexual, coercive, threatening, abusive or exploitative.'* (Code of practice, Organisation B)

Similarly, another organisation (a service provider) states in its human rights policy that:

*'Organisation is committed to a working environment that is free of harassment. Harassment of any type will not be tolerated.'* (Policy document, Organisation D)

While such statements indicate that these organisations are committed to deal with SH at a policy level, this commitment is more like an 'empty shell' (Hoque & Noon 2004). Detailed analysis of policy documents suggested that there were no explicit procedures outlined regarding SH complaint and redress systems. Therefore, in reality, organisational approach to SH can be characterised as lip service.

Further analysis suggested that the managers were unable to explicitly identify specific actions and procedures related to SH because of partial policies on SH. This was evident when managers' perspectives contradicted with the actual practices of the organisations. For example, one HR manager (male) thus commented on the SH issue:

*'We are very strict in terms of sexual harassment issues. We have the best HR practices system. That is why we say that we are following the best practices of HR in our company.'* (HR, Organisation B)

However, when the same manager was asked about the specific actions against SH, he accepted his lack of awareness about the incidence of SH in the organisation:

*'There was one case where the girl left the job because of sexual harassment but we hired her back. Actually she got scared and she left the job but she did not let us know. Obviously how would we know?'* (HR, Organisation B)

The analysis of the narratives further suggests that the issue of individual bias exists within HR managers' practices, which may consequently influence managerial decisions. Such bias leads to negative consequences for SH at work. For example, a manager (male) revealed his perception that female employees have more issues in performing their jobs than male employees. According to an HR manager (organisation D), line managers complain about this problem as well. His perception of women's performance was a reflection of his biased attitude towards women at work. This was also related to socio-cultural influences where 'good' women are assumed to be home early before sunset. He noted:

*'At times I, handling a team of 12 employees with majority of females, feel there is a difference ... female staff are unable to take extra load of work due to I don't know their home, personal or other issues. I have worked in HR and a lot of line managers [also] complain that this is the problem with our female staff [that they cannot take extra load of work]. They have to leave at 6 sharp no matter what happens.'* (HR, Organisation D)

Another HR manager (male) from a bank expressed similar perceptions about differences in efficiency of male and female employees. He said:

*'Yes, it becomes problematic for line managers when it comes to assign equal/same tasks to male and female employees. However, we provide info to line managers how*

*to handle a team which is of diversified portfolio. Being the HR person/department if we come to know that a manager is violating code of conduct especially related to gender discrimination then we take action. In the past four years we have terminated numerous male managers because of such violation.* ' (HR, Organisation D)

One HR manager blamed the culture of Pakistani society and some women themselves for creating problems for working women. He noted:

*'The problem is not with the organisation or with the females. It is with the parents of men and men themselves who do not let educated females work outside. That mainly includes mothers-in-law which means it is a female only problem. The problem is not with the organisation, the problem is with the culture.'* (HR, Organisation C)

Four out of six HR managers did not hold professional qualification and knowledge of HR. Rarely did they speak about legislation showed much awareness of equality related issues. Lack of professional knowledge and understanding was evident in the interviews. For example, one HR manager working in the education sector, held a degree in medicine, and did not have any idea when asked about policy regarding termination of pregnant women while on maternity leave. It seemed most HR managers' expertise was based on their *experience* only.

Overall, interviews with managers and policy analysis suggest that organisations pay lip service to EEO and SH. In particular they lack explicit procedures regarding SH. Moreover, HR managers lack professional knowledge and have their own perceptions of SH based on cultural practices and individual stereotypes.

### ***Working women's experiences and perspectives***

The narratives of women in this study help identify a different set of issues related to SH. These issues exist at two levels, namely macro-national and meso-organisational.

At the macro-national level, socio-cultural and legal issues were evident. The study reveals that females tend to hide SH because of socio-cultural practices such as female modesty, shame and inhibition.

According to an unmarried female working in a private sector organisation:

*'...in our culture it [SH] is considered a shame to openly discuss especially for unmarried girls... Our culture is like that if something like this happens people will not say anything to the man but they will blame the girl to be the main culprit behind such issues.'* (Organisation D, F2)

Another female employee (unmarried, front desk officer), who was harassed in her previous job, possessed a similar view whereby she blamed culture and society for not taking the initiative to report SH at work. She observed:

*'We also know that our culture is like this, that if you talk about sexual harassment issue, then people will think that there must be some problem with the female, and that is why the male was attracted towards her....we [women] are already a victim and do not want to be a victim again'* (Organisation A, F2).

The cultural practices and norms of inhibition, modesty and shame, seem to play an important role in further aggravating the SH problem. For example, a woman's decision to work outside her house goes against local culture (Malik & Khalid 2008). Therefore when faced with SH at work, it can be assumed that a female would refrain from discussing the issue with her family members due to the fear of being accused of violating the local or religious norms of

modesty. The role of family and the practice of inhibition and modesty can be better understood from the following narrative of a female employee (single, accountant):

*'Some girls face discrimination first at home and then they face it outside. Sometimes not immediate family members but extended uncles/aunts do not let her do a job because they think of family honour such as where would she be going to? With whom would she be sitting and interacting? Then there are other concerns such as what if she is being proposed at work? It will be a shame.'* (Organisation B, F4)

At the meso-organisational level of analysis, the experiences of female employees may be related to interactions in the workplace. The findings of policy analysis in the previous section revealed that although there were general policies of SH in existence (which prohibit SH at workplace), the explicit procedures of handling SH issues were missing. This is evident from the experiences of female employees. For example, lack of awareness about SH policies was evident from the interviews with female employees. The narratives of the majority of females (24 out of 30) suggested that they were not aware of the precise procedures of SH redress in their workplace. Some participants suggested that in case of SH, their only course of action was to contact a senior employee or supervisor. For example, a victim (lecturer at a university) of SH revealed:

*'I took this action all by myself. I brought written complaint in front of senior authorities. Although I did not know what to do but I had to do something.'*  
(Organisation E, F1)

Even if victims find enough courage to lodge a formal complaint against SH, the outcome is often disappointing. For example, one of the participants, who faced SH and had the courage to complain, was disappointed by the outcome. She was being harassed by a male colleague who took her phone number from HR confidential data illegally and used to call her

(anonymously) at work and home. Due to Islamic modesty and cultural stereotypes, it is not considered respectable for a girl to receive such (anonymous) calls from males. She took action and reported the harassment first to a senior manager and then to an HR manager. She said:

*‘There was HR department with its own manager. I complained there but when there was no outcome from that department then what is the use/point of going anywhere else? Being a female it was so disappointing for me that I raised this (sensitive) issue but did not get any response.’* (Organisation A, F2)

The study further found that even in the presence of socio-cultural barriers and hostile environment, female employees sometimes used their agency (power) to deal with SH. For example, three of the participants revealed that they quit their job after being harassed. Two of them were not satisfied with the action taken against the offending colleagues, and the third did not feel comfortable after reporting the incident. One of the female participants in a senior position who used to receive text about her appearance from a male colleague immediately took action. She noted:

*‘Female employees can go and talk to authorities very confidently. In my case I went to a male supervisor and told him what has happened and I was very comfortable telling him all that.’* (Organisation B, F2)

The study also found that women who manage to take successful action against SH are likely to face victimisation in the workplace. For example, one participant revealed how her career growth was sabotaged because she complained against her superior. She said:

*‘This is what I call discrimination. I worked here for two years and now on the recommendation of that director, against whom I complained SH case, the university*

*authorities did not extend my employment contract while other juniors got extension. I do not know what will be my future. The contract is expiring in July so there are very strong chances that I will not be here anymore.’ (Organisation E, F1)*

Similarly, one participant revealed that even after complaining twice to the HR department about the SH issue, no appropriate action was taken and the male colleague kept working in the same position. Consequently, the female victim had to quit her job. She observed:

*‘I complained two times. They (HR department) did take action but it was very minor action and the guy did not receive equal punishment of his act. The action was not serious and the guy remained at the same job. So in the end I had to leave the job.’*  
(Organisation A, F2)

Overall, the participants’ accounts suggest that SH faced by women in Pakistan can be interpreted at a number of levels. At the macro-national level, socio-cultural factors such as modesty and shame create challenges for women to handle SH appropriately. At the meso-organisational level, women lacked awareness of explicit provision for the handling of SH grievances in organisational policies. From the policy document analysis, it was evident that although the organisations had a basic or general SH policy, five out of six organisations did not have explicit procedures to handle SH grievances.

Table 2 gives an overview of sample statistics of this study.

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INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

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## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper responds to calls for new research that explores cultural influences on SH issues (Merkin 2008; Cortina & Wasti 2005; DeSouza, Solberg & Elder 2007). Mainstream literature focuses either on behavioural or organisational context of SH (MacKinnon 1979; Till 1980; Fitzgerald et al. 1995, 1999), and ignores the significance of socio-cultural factors that may affect the SH at workplace. The present study has addressed this gap.

SH is considered a very sensitive topic in MMCs (Syed & Pio 2010) and remains under-investigated. The study contributes to the SH literature in MMCs by using neo-institutional theory to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the factors impacting SH and how it is redressed in organizations.<sup>1</sup> The paper has highlighted the contextual nature of SH and shown that culture plays an important role in shaping the issues and challenges of SH that women face in the workplace.

Analysis of documents on SH policies and practices and interviews with HR managers revealed that organisations are generally concerned about SH, however, they lack formal policies and procedures to deal with it. The government and organisations need to take strong actions in terms of implementing SH laws. ILO research indicates that workplace harassment policies should include four main components: 1) a clearly defined policy

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<sup>1</sup> In 2010, Pakistan parliament passed the *Protection against Harassment for Women at the Workplace (PHWW) Act 2010*, which makes it illegal to make any sound, exhibit an object, utter a word or demand sexual favours which can be considered as SH. The Act provides for penalties such as demotion, forced retirement, and removal from service and dismissal from service. The PHWW Act addresses three major elements related to SH at work. Firstly, the SH law requires employers to incorporate a code of conduct in their management policies. Secondly, the law requires employers to establish an inquiry committee comprising three members within an organisational structure to deal with complaints regarding SH. Finally, in circumstances where the complainant is not satisfied with the result of the committee, the employers need to provide for appellate authority such as ombudswoman to address appeals related to harassment. The PHWW is narrower than legislation in some other countries which include both men and women.

The qualitative study presented in this paper was conducted prior to the above legislation. While the exact impact of the new legislation will need to be mapped through further empirical research, the current study shows the multilevel and complex nature of sexual harassment facing Pakistani women at work.

statement 2) a complaints procedure that maintains confidentiality 3) progressive disciplinary rules and 4) a training and communication strategy (cite). In addition, any complaint procedure must ensure that the victim is protected from retaliation. The ILO framework may provide a useful model for practical steps to deal with SH at work.

This study shows that managers bring their cultural practices to the workplace and are influenced by their individual biases. HR managers did not accept this explicitly, but through the experiences of female employees it was evident that male HR managers practice gender bias at workplace in relation to SH issues. This particular finding is consistent with the previous research which explains the link between managerial decisions and gender discrimination at workplace (Weeden et al 2001; Reskin 2000).

The implementation of newly introduced SH law in Pakistan would need to consider such gender biases at managerial level, which may directly impede full implementation. The effectiveness of laws and policies will be constantly undermined if social attitudes, especially widespread cultural tendencies of ‘blaming the victim’ or gender bias in cases of SH, are not transformed. This requires, among other things, gender-sensitive training for those charged with protecting the rights of employee such as HR managers. Women cannot expect legal protection if the authorities already assume guilt or moral laxity on the part of women complainants.

The paper has shown that female experiences and issues related to SH are influenced by the culture, explicitly or implicitly, and are also influenced by managerial and organisational cultures. In their study on migrant Muslim women in Australia, Syed and Pio (2010) show that since single level conceptualisations of diversity management failed to address the complexities of gender, ethnicity and religion, a relational and multilevel construct of managing diversity is needed (Syed, 2008; Syed & Özbilgin, 2009). The present

study used a multi-level lens to investigate SH in MMCs. Through the multilevel lens, the study helped us to identify complexities of SH at workplace in MMCs. It suggests that female employees who face SH do not feel comfortable discussing this issue because of the cultural norms involving modesty and shame. It is strongly recommended that employers take a proactive approach and provide all women employees with training and counselling services that will prepare them to face potential situations of harassment. Women need to have the self-confidence to be able to distinguish - and report without fear- between casual, friendly comments and sexual intimidation and blackmail. Counselling services for those who have been subjected to harassment should also be made available. In an MMC, where the issue of SH is considered of very sensitive nature, it would be better if the trainers are of same gender i.e. women, so that female trainees feel more comfortable and can inquire about policies and laws in more detail.

The study further reveals that female employees are discouraged from taking action because of inappropriate procedures of redress regarding SH. Organisations pay only lip service to the policy and there are few clear procedures developed from the policy (Liff & Dale 1994; Hoque & Noon 2004). This is evident from female employees' experiences, where they suggest that they were not aware of what exact action they should take when lodging complaints against SH. Ideally, employees should be provided with regular training and material that contains information on: what constitutes SH; the effects of SH; what one can do about it in the immediate and/or longer term; what the provisions for protection are in the law or at the workplace; what support systems are in place, including who the relevant contact persons are and; how to file a complaint.

Victimisation is another aspect of SH at workplace in Pakistani organisations. Female employees who manage to take action against the issue face possible victimisation not only from their colleagues but also from the employer. Female victims of SH reported that

management do not take serious or appropriate actions against such complaints. This finding is consistent with previous studies which suggest that at times, managers subvert the EEO procedures that are developed (Tomlinson 2007; Liff & Dale 1994). It is considered necessary to take measures to prevent retaliation against victims. Even members of investigative bodies can be victimized, particularly where they do not receive wholehearted employer support. In order to counter all forms of retaliation, organisations need to introduce policies that state that the organisation will not tolerate the victimization of the complainant, the alleged harasser, or anyone else involved in the complaint process. No procedure will work unless female employees are assured of protection from victimisation. In this respect, the system of hiring and firing employees informally needs to be replaced. All employees should be provided with the appropriate documentation upon hiring including new legislation on SH and compliance with existing labour laws. Further, employers must be convinced that it is in their own interests to mete out fair treatment to their employees. This requires highlighting the relationship between low productivity, coercive management practices and SH.

In MMCs, additional tensions appear to exist around the strong cultural norms that constrain the participation of women in labour markets per se. Where women are employed and then suffer SH in the workplace, the motivation to seek redress is constrained by strong social sanctions and/or penalties imposed on those seeking to find their 'voice'. It is in this context that this study provides insights to cultural factors both at employees and employer levels.

Based on the results from this study, Figure 1 summarises the issue of SH in Pakistani organisations. It suggests that SH at workplace cannot be dealt adequately unless three major factors are considered, i.e., State laws, organisational barriers and socio-cultural barriers.

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 INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE  
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Although the study has provided a nuanced understanding of SH at work in Pakistan, there are some unavoidable limitations. First, due to the unique and small sample used in this study, results may not be generalisable. For example, the study was conducted in Lahore, Punjab, the cultural influences in other parts of Pakistan such as in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa may be different due to strong socio-cultural and demographic differences. Second, the sample was drawn from the private sector and the results may not reflect the phenomenon of SH in public sector.

Future scholars may wish to extend this study through an examination of areas such as SH issues in the public sector, similarity or dissimilarity of SH experiences across organizations and cultures, attitudes of Muslim women working in different sectors, and SH and perceptions of Muslim male employees at the workplace.

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Table 1: An overview of six case-study organisations, Pakistan

<b>Org.</b>	<b>Sector</b>	<b>SH policies</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Total employees</b>	<b>Female percentage</b>
A	Bank	Yes	Lahore	Private	100	10%
B	Telecommunication	Yes	Lahore	Private	250	25%
C	Telecommunication	Yes	Lahore	Private	300	20%
D	Bank	Yes	Lahore	Private	80	15%
E	Education	Yes	Lahore	Private	85	20%
F	Education	Yes	Lahore	Private	58	25%

Table 2: Sample statistics on Pakistani SH

<b>SH Incidents and Responses</b>	<b>Number of cases (female sample = 30)</b>
Experienced SH at work	25
Did take formal action	5
Did not take any action	20
Organizational Response: Strict Action (e.g. perpetrator suspended)	0
Organizational Response: Mild Action taken (e.g. simple warning/transfer)	2
Organizational Response: No action taken	3
Victims leave job due to SH	3
Victims who faced victimisation	4

**Figure 1:** A multi-level view on sexual harassment at work in Pakistani organisations

