[**Harassment crisis**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1654085/harassment-crisis)

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TWO events of harassment at two foremost private universities have yet again brought to the fore the crisis of harassment laws in Pakistan. The issues with these are: they define harassment very narrowly, are not followed properly in most cases, and are not taken seriously.

At IBA in Karachi, a student was expelled until an outcry across the board led to the university taking back its stern, archaic position on not allowing students to write about issues on campus on social media. This was an alarming action by a university headed by supposedly one of the most progressive Paki­s­­­­tani academics. Therein lies the crisis. Ins­te­­ad of taking action against the staff member who the student allegedly witnessed verbally harassing a female colleague, the student — on a merit scholarship — was exp­elled for violating IBA’s ‘code of conduct’. One wonders what the code says about employees harassing others and about whistleblowers seeking to make the campus safe for all.

At Lums in Lahore, one of the most senior public health academics contracted by the university to design its Covid-19 response plan said she was bullied and discriminated against for six out of 10 months of her contract, which then was not extended though the project was publicly attributed to her. A civil court had to issue a restraining order against Lums to bar it from using her name for the content. The handling of this case by Lums, like IBA, also points to the glaring issues with harassment laws and their implementation in Pakistan. Dr Samia Altaf’s complaint was apparently not heard at the appropriate forum, she was not guided appro­priately by the university, and an older employee — part of the university’s establishment — was allegedly protected despite serious allegations against him. She had to take the civil court route in order to claim damages for harassment owing to the law’s inadequacy.

Whereas the harassment policy by the Higher Education Commission is detailed, expansive and thoughtful in terms of covering harassment beyond that of a sexual nature, the Protection of Women Against Harassment at Workplace, 2010, law is lacking in that. So the legal instrument defining sexual harassment is narrow and restrictive, and the expansive HEC policy is not legally applicable and cannot provide protection in courts. The law also has been interpreted in a restrictive manner by the office of the ombudsperson against sexual harassment, as seen in singer Meesha Shafi’s complaint against Ali Zafar where the complaint is pending before the Supreme Court on the matter of jurisdiction without the merits of the case regarding harassment having been addressed for the past three years.

Zero tolerance towards harassment must be taught.

Several steps are needed to improve safety for women and other gender minorities in Pakistan who are routinely subjected to harassment at the workplace or elsewhere.

First, there needs to be accountability of workplaces not implementing the law, including not displaying the anti-harassment policy, not having a harassment complaints committee with at least one woman member, and setting up ad-hoc committees with conflicts of interest to hear complaints, which are actions that violate the 2010 law.

Second, there needs to be a detailed review of the Protection Against Harassment at the Workplace law by parliament and its ambit needs to be expanded to all workplaces, not excluding contractual parties, and including bullying and sex-based discrimination as part of it. The law should also take into account the financial and mental health toll that harassment takes on a survivor, as well as stipulate for non-extension of a contract as opposed to only firing as a consequence of filing a harassment complaint.

Third, whistleblowing in harassment cases must be protected. Whistleblowers should be celebrated for taking actions

to make society safer rather than being punished for speaking out. Re­­puta­tio­nal da­­­mage must be associated with harassers rather than whistleblowers and complainants.

All institutions and workplaces, and universities no less, need to nurture an environment where zero tolerance towards harassment is taught and practised. The Single National Curriculum at the school level should also take up this task. Repeated harassment incidents reported in the past few years at private schools in Lahore and at a university in Islamabad, and illegal surveillance at Balochistan University, should have served as a wake-up call. Still, it is never too late. The right to education and to equal treatment without discrimination is impacted by harassment.

Increased militarisation in society, normalising the portrayal of violence and harassment and toxic masculinity in the media, and irresponsible statements blaming and questioning survivors by political leaders all lead to an environment where harassers are emboldened and survivors are silenced. We must act urgently to end this menace.

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