

Sexual harassment cases in Pakistan's colleges continue to be buried

Saturday 1 September 2018, by [Labour Watch Pakistan](#) (Date first published: 9 August 2018).

Aug 9: The Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010 was passed eight years ago, but hardly any efforts can be seen on the ground for its implementation, including raising awareness among working women, especially those associated with the education sector.

In most cases women do not wish to file complaints against their harassers to avoid intimidation and vilification, fearing that taking such an action could result in their families forcing them to quit working.

There is not a single anti-harassment committee functioning at any of the public girls' secondary schools or women's colleges across Sindh where male faculties and staffers are employed.

In the absence of a body to protect the female workforce, a number of sexual harassment cases go unnoticed, as they do not report them to the provincial ombudsman or approach the court as well.

However, back in 2010 the education department had issued a circular ordering the transfer of all male staffers from government girls' schools and women's colleges across the province. The decision was taken after increased reports of sexual harassment at female educational institutions.

The law

The Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010 states that each organisation would constitute an inquiry committee within 30 days of the enactment of the law to investigate into relevant complaints.

The law states that the committee would include three members, one of whom must be a woman. But eight years on, public schools and colleges across Sindh are yet to see the law's implementation.

The main obstacles

"The authorities had clearly instructed all the heads of colleges to display posters and banners carrying anti-harassment laws at their respective institutions, but the order was ignored," said Prof Haseen Musarat of Zubaida Government Degree Girls College in Hyderabad.

She said that due to a shortage of working women, men have been appointed at women's colleges, which is one of the reasons behind sexual harassment cases.

One of the main obstacles to spreading awareness about harassment and about combating the problem is the continued practice of not reporting such incidents, she added.

Prof Shehr Bano Kaka, principal of the Government Degree Girls College Light House in Karachi,

said that though sexual harassment is a criminal offence, such incidents go unreported because proving an allegation is more difficult than lodging a complaint.

She suggested that the government form anti-harassment or internal complaint cells at colleges where male staffers are likely to interact with their female counterparts and students.

“Once I had announced via Facebook that I planned to form a separate organisation for female teachers and students, but the teachers did not take it seriously and even made fun of the idea.”

She said that if female teachers and students want to combat the discriminatory behaviour of men, they should voice their concerns together, adding that organisations dominated by men cannot solve the problems faced by female teachers and students.

Government Degree Girls College Gulzar-e-Hijri Principal Hamida Masood Shah said that in most cases families of the harassed refuse to take legal action against the harassers. “They try to bury the issue before it gets highlighted, which discourages the harassed to talk about their problems.”

She said that hundreds of sexual harassment cases are not reported because female students want to continue their education while female teachers do not want to lose society’s respect, but the fact is that they have been facing the worst kinds of behaviour at the hands of men for years.

The official version

Sindh College Education Secretary Lubna Salahuddin claimed that her department has recently not received any complaints of harassment from any female teachers or students anywhere in the province.

She said the department has ordered all regional directors of colleges to report such matters if a complaint is registered either in writing or verbally. However, she was not sure if her department has formed anti-harassment committees at colleges or at department level.

“I’ll look into the matter. Since I’m newly appointed, I’m not sure if the department has formed anti-harassment bodies,” she said, adding that female teachers usually complain about distance, furniture and infrastructure.

“Since I’ve taken charge as the college education secretary, no female worker at any of the public colleges across the province has lodged a complaint about sexual harassment.”

Know your rights

“People generally blame the victims, claiming that they wear improper dresses and deliberately attract the attention of men, which shows the ignorant mentality of our society,” said women’s rights activist Summiya Yousaf.

She said everyone, from young girls to old women, should know about their rights. “When they have proper awareness, they’d be in a better position to file their cases without worrying about producing any evidence.”

Naghma Iqtidar, another prominent rights advocate, said that our society has thousands of stories of harassment. “Even school-going girls face sexual humiliation, while teasing college girls is a fashion here.”

She said the authorities should strictly implement anti-harassment laws at educational institutions

instead of suggesting that colleges should stop co-education. "At educational institutes, harassers always target voiceless female students and teachers."

SPLA's concerns

Despite the fact that the Sindh Professors & Lecturers Association (SPLA) is the largest organisation of college teachers, there is very limited representation of female teachers in the body, as it has reserved only six seats for them.

"We have divided the province into three regions, and our manifesto states that the vice-president and the joint secretary must be women," said SPLA Central President Ferozuddin Siddiqui.

He confirmed that the SPLA receives reports of harassment from colleges, but the victims always wish to keep their identities hidden. "They don't take legal action because they wish to avoid negative attention. They also don't report their cases to avoid backlash from their own families."

No female organisation

There is no organisation that could represent thousands of female college teachers and students. According to the available data, more than 4,000 female teachers are employed at public secondary schools and colleges across the province.

However, these women are forced to approach male-dominated organisations if they wish for someone to address their issues, even though it is next to impossible for these bodies to properly represent them.

Female students

According to the data available on the college education department's website, Sindh has 239 degree colleges and 290 higher secondary schools for male and female students. At these institutions, the number of enrolled students stands at 123,446.

The percentage of female students enrolled at women's colleges is 42.6 per cent, those enrolled at girls' secondary schools is 31 per cent and those enrolled at co-educational institutes is 36.6 per cent.

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