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## **Pakistan: Women and security on campus - "Any attempt to cover-up this scandal or delay justice will only lead to more persecution and harassment"**

Monday 27 February 2012, by [AHMAD Ammara](#) (Date first published: 24 February 2012).

About two weeks back, the newspaper *Dawn* published a shocking report on widespread and systematic sexual harassment being committed in the International Islamic University, Islamabad against several female students and subordinates. An economics professor and librarian traded sexual favors for higher marks, and resorted to threats if the young women refused. Sahabzada Sajidur Rehman, acting President of the university, confirmed that lately a professor and librarian quit the institution after being accused of rape, and that "the situation is much worse than is apparent". And then he gives a rather absurd, sexist, almost Victorian statement that the university didn't take action because the rest of the women there will suffer from the bad name these cases will bring.

This semi-sexist, semi-protective attitude - I have experienced in almost all the institutes I attended. Most of them were all-girls', and the administration fantasized that they should protect the honor of their female students. And in the process, they took any extreme measure possible. At Kinnaird, they blocked cell phone use on campus for more than two years, locked the gates from 8 am to 1 pm in the afternoon and the rumor has it, some teachers even went to catch daters red-handed (Maya Khan style). All this was done under the delusion that the parents want it. Some parents might be seeking solace in this behavior, but most didn't and those women who got caught in an affair, the college did not take responsibility of course. The dichotomy is clear here, in order to protect the fairer sex, these colleges and schools oppress them and infringe on their personal freedom and growth.

The acting President of the Islamabad-based university should realize that it is the act of hiding these hideous sexual crimes that have actually marred the university's prestige even more. Now that the situation has aggravated and several women have been exploited, a national scandal has broken out and the matter has reached the Prime Minister.

There is an inherent problem in Pakistan's higher education system ever since the universities and colleges became autonomous and degree-awarding. The teachers control the grades, transcripts, test results etc, and there is seldom a re-evaluation. The prestige of teachers who are doctorates with plenty of experience (domestic and abroad) is very high and they become potentates of their small empires. No one dares to question the moral uprightness, interpersonal relations or even the past record of these campus starlets.

As a corollary, there are choking point in each institute, where a few people either have incredible power (are heads of departments, exam cell chiefs, deans of sciences or sports etc) or they have immense influence on their seniors (bootlickers of the powerful). The former is the faculty, but the latter can be anyone, from drivers, cleaners to librarians and fellow students.

Just imagine, you are a young girl, with two years left of your engineering and the head of the department gets a crush on you. He can flunk you in the exams, pesture other teachers to fail you, register a false cheating case and what not. You cannot go and question the teacher on your exam/test marking. Usually there is no committee or re-checker you can go to. Plus you have to come back to these critters for university and job references, transcripts and certificates. Possibly for a significant part of your working life! This critter could potentially inflict upon you a lot of damage and mental pressure. God forbid if you end up doing research too because then the ultimate bureaucratic delaying tactics will be utilized. One of my close friends, from Karachi University, has finished her doctorate research in International Relations and is waiting for her department head to sign the final approval. But he is consumed by a very different carnal (animal?) desire and won't sign anything before she succumbs. She is just waiting for his sanity to return, without letting her husband know.

Actually, when fishy things are happening, many people do sense it. And eventually, they get evidence too. It would be best to banish this sense of insecurity among the parents and students. Because eventually, if the university acquires the reputation of a brothel, parents will close these doors for their daughters.

One aspect though is particularly disturbing. A student body that protests against the suicide bombing on its campus and which is thriving with intellectual energy remains quiet about an issue that endangers their reputation and scholastic standing in the world. The fact that USA and many other countries have a better track record of catching sexual abusers is because their public response is very swift and severe. Take the classic example of the Penn State sex abuse scandal, when a former Pennsylvania State University football assistant, Sandusky, was accused of abusing at least 8 under-age boys. Eventually the coach was indicted, several high school officials were charged for perjury, and the university President and head football coach resigned. But the cases had to be pursued.

What is of course worrisome, in this Penn State case, is that it went on for decades despite its being located in a liberal/developed country. The sex abuse victim is often huddled in guilt, shame and future insecurity and therefore seldom comes out about it. Youngsters are also emotionally delicate. We need to give our youth the confidence in our education and legal system that it currently lacks.

I asked two of my friends studying in USA to comment on the situation. Ishrat Saleem, a masters candidate at Syracuse says that the law is so well-known there that it need not be taught but nonetheless an initial presentation about 24/7 advocacy centres was made. All women's bathrooms have contact details of the advocacy centre and advice the unfortunate female to report harassment immediately. Samir Anwar, a social media specialist at Carnegie Mellon University, says the Campus Police emailed them earlier in the semester about some hotlines as well as regular guidance sessions.

The mentality that rape brings the victim dishonor is archaic. A person who has been raped, is tormented enough and needs community help, psychological counseling, and legal justice - not societal pressure to keep silent about her ordeal. If the university honestly pursues the culprits and publicizes the fact that it ensured maximum penalty for the criminal, it will get due credit. As far as its good name is concerned, it has already been partially tarnished by the online evidence of sexual harassment inflicted by the librarian and his consequent resignation. Authorities must realize that if you are trying to hush up sexual harassment on your campus, you too are a party to the exploitation. Because in that case it is evident that when someone approached you in your capacity as an university official, you simply requested them to remain mum about it.

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harassment. Both the librarian and the professor should be legally punished, and prevented from regaining a job in the education sector again. One of them is now shamelessly serving in the National Agriculture Research Centre. The HEC needs to form strict policies for students and teachers regarding sexual harassment and these need to be made public, especially on the university premises. Furthermore, steps should be taken, like they are in foreign universities, to inform the students of their rights on campus and where they can go if the rights are violated. There are laws against workplace sexual harassment also; young women need to know this. Above all, the semi-godlike status of professors needs to be cut to size, and a system of checks and balances needs to emerge.

**Ammara Ahmad**

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