

Pakistan: The hell of sexual harassment in the workplace

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In increasingly competitive Pakistani work situations, women continue to be targets for men with power.

In the eyes of many, the offices of Pakistan are filled with lecherous bosses. All too often, working women have tales of their perversions: the lesser ones include gaze and glance, the occasional grope, the unwanted text message, the innuendo; the bigger ones include invitations to meet outside the office, over lunch or dinner — with plum assignments, promotions, job security and professional reputations hanging in the balance.

Resignation is no guarantee of reprieve; there are reference letters to be obtained, future employment to be worried about. In an expensive, inflation-wracked and increasingly competitive Pakistani workplace, there are many women who continue to be targets for men with power.

The arithmetic of want and need is in display; divorced women, single mothers, the older and the unmarried are particularly vulnerable to harassment. In the words of one single mother who endured 10 years of harassment, the pursuit is constant, and any attempt to escape is punished further with denials of promotions and humiliation before colleagues. Co-workers, often witnesses, say nothing, eager to avoid a situation that could result in retaliation, a loss of their own positions. Sexual harassment from superiors is hence often coupled with isolation by colleagues who watch, witness and withdraw. The harassed are not only the persecuted but also the pariah.

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Legal protections

There is a law against all this in Pakistan. The Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010, which will be six years old, is a thorough document. The code of conduct included in it defines harassment as “any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favours or other verbal or written communication or physical conduct of a sexual nature, or sexually demeaning attitudes, causing interference with work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment, or the attempt to punish the complainant for refusal to comply with such a request or is made a condition for employment”.

It goes on to add that “the above is unacceptable behaviour in the organisation and at the workplace, including in any interaction or situation that is linked to official work or official activity outside the office”.

The abuse of authority, creating a hostile work environment, and retaliation are the three categories that mandate action against a harasser. Detailed stipulations are set out for the establishment of investigative committees, ombudspersons, etc, who are charged with resolving the issues raised. A range of penalties from censure to outright dismissal are postulated. All employers are required to

display the code of conduct prominently on their premises.

When the law was passed in 2010, it was feted as a success. It would take time for its provisions to change the culture of the workplace, the more circumspect said. Change comes slowly but a law is a first step; a legislative commitment supported by elected representatives' signals that the path ahead will be a different one, in this case one where the harassment of women in the workplace would not be permitted.

Not much has happened since then. Harassment is still rampant in the workplace (the majority of workplaces have little idea as to what the code of conduct is, let alone of the requirement to display it visibly in employee areas).

Women still regularly report being verbally harassed and even physically assaulted by their superiors who, making calculations regarding their need for a job, their desire to get ahead, their inability to refuse, unabashedly continue with such acts. In the face of unwanted advances, Pakistan's women continue to find themselves alone, unsure of where to take their complaints and how to protect themselves.

Even in the development sector, where the very agenda of many organisations is to empower women, similar problems persist. In one, a co-founder of an organisation faced so much harassment by a male colleague that she was ultimately forced out. New, more pliant women hired to take her position have since complained of similar problems. The man in question, however, remains untouched, undoubtedly displaying similarly harassing behaviour to new prey. Other men have come to his defence — perhaps recognising their own behaviour in those of others and eager to ensure that no one gets punished.

Misogyny is manufactured in two major flavours in Pakistan. The first is on the premises of religious obscurantists whose hankering for the reinstatement of a strictly segregated society sees the harassment-filled workplace as a grim substantiation of their warnings. Women should not be in the workplace at all, the male conscience is unable to police itself.

Daily doses of misogyny

The second, one that wrongly labels itself as liberal and progressive, imagines it to mean a licence to harass and harangue. A woman's willingness to put up and shut up is, in its mind, the product of this 'progressivism', its illogical mindset equating women in the public sphere with women sexually available to all men who may want them. The two flavours compete, their poisons infecting the working lives of women — doctors, lawyers, shopkeepers, bankers, teachers, professors and countless others — who are daily force-fed these bitter morsels of misogyny.

Laws alone cannot change society; the sexual harassment of women (and nearly everyone who reads this article either knows someone or is someone who has faced harassment) continues because it is considered permissible, something women 'ask' for when they leave their homes.

This belief is reflected all the time and everywhere in Pakistan, in soap operas that vilify working women as predators out to seduce innocent men, to workplace conversations in which men dissect the desirability of their female colleagues, their participation often a measure of a masculinity that fears competition from women. In the matter of sexual harassment in Pakistan's workplaces, there are the guilty and the very guilty, they are far too many men complicit, quiet, eager to embrace or enforce their right to harass.

Rafia Zakaria

The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

rafia.zakaria gmail.com

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* “The hell of harassment”. Published in Dawn, February 10th, 2016:

<http://www.dawn.com/news/1238495/the-hell-of-harassment>

* Rafia Zakaria is an attorney and human rights activist. She is a columnist for DAWN Pakistan and a regular contributor for Al Jazeera America, Dissent, Guernica and many other publications.

She is the author of The Upstairs Wife: An Intimate History of Pakistan (Beacon Press 2015). She tweets @rafiazakaria