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“When It’s a Man, It’s Flirting but When It’s a Woman, It’s Harassment”: Student and Institutional Perspectives on Campus-Based Sexual Harassment in Pakistan

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Abstract

Sexual harassment (SH) in higher education is a widespread yet underexamined issue in low- and middle-income countries. This study aimed to examine the experiences, perceptions, and institutional responses to campus-based SH in Pakistan from male and female students, faculty, and staff perspectives. We conducted a multi-site qualitative study across universities in Pakistan, including focus group discussions with students (n = 110) and interviews with institutional participants (n = 18). Data were analyzed using thematic analysis informed by prior research. Findings indicate that SH is both pervasive and normalized, shaped by interacting influences across societal, relational, and institutional levels. Patriarchal gender norms and honor-based expectations were identified as key drivers sustaining SH and discouraging disclosure. Disclosure carried high levels of social and familial consequences and perceived as carrying greater risk than benefit. Consequently, students relied on peer support, while distrust, retaliation fears, and inconsistent responses limited formal reporting. Campus-based SH is sustained through intersecting social mechanisms, including normative ambiguity, cultural and familial constraints, and peer network dynamics that shape victimization, perpetration, and disclosure. Addressing campus-based SH requires coordinated, gender-transformative strategies that engage gender and peer norms, strengthen institutional accountability and capacity, and leverage men's roles in prevention and response within university settings.

Introduction

Sexual harassment (SH) is broadly defined as unwelcome sexual conduct encompassing sexual coercion, unwanted sexual attention, and gender harassment; involving sexual advances, conditions of education contingent upon sexual cooperation, unwelcome sexual or romantic interest, and degrading behaviors directed at a particular gender. [1,2] Campus-based SH, SH in higher education institutions (HEIs), is highly prevalent worldwide and can manifest as verbal, non-verbal, physical, and technology-facilitated behaviors. [3–5] Studies conducted in high-income countries estimate 37% prevalence of campus-based SH; 44% among women and 17% among men. [6] In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), prevalence estimates range widely, from 14% to 73%, reflecting substantial variation across contexts, definitions, and study designs. [3]

Exposure to campus-based SH has enduring consequences for students' mental, social, and academic well-being, including long-term distress, financial insecurity, and diminished academic engagement. [7,8] It contributes to academic and social disengagement, negatively affecting academic performance, participation, and perceptions of the learning environment. [9] These consequences extend beyond individual harms and contribute to the reproduction of gender inequalities within higher education by limiting equitable participation, retention, advancement, and leadership opportunities. Women face pronounced consequences such as severe academic disruption and adverse physical and mental health outcomes, compared to their male peers. [10]

Campus-based SH is shaped by power imbalances, gender norms, and the normalization of gender-based violence (GBV); factors that vary substantially across settings. [4] Despite growing attention, campus-based SH remains underexamined in LMICs, with most research emerging only in the past decade. [7] Existing research on campus-based SH in LMICs has largely focused on female students, concentrated in African contexts, often within single-institution or department, leaving key gaps in understanding male students, institutional perspectives, response systems, and contextual dynamics. [11–13] Consequently, campus-based SH is often explored as an individual problem, rather than an institutional and structural issue. Addressing this gap requires an approach that examines broader relational, institutional, systemic, and normative contexts while accounting for individual experiences across diverse LMICs. [11] This approach is critical for understanding the mechanisms through which campus-based SH is produced, sustained, and contributes to the persistence of gender inequalities within HEIs.

Theoretical Framework

Guided by the Socioecological Framework, campus-based SH is understood as the product of interacting influences operating across multiple levels. [14] At the individual level, personal characteristics and prior experiences may shape vulnerability to experiencing or perpetrating SH. At the interpersonal level, peer norms, family dynamics, and social relationships influence attitudes and behaviors. At the institutional (community) level, organizational policies, and power hierarchies may either facilitate or prevent SH and shape responses to it. At the societal level, cultural norms, gender ideologies, and structural inequalities reinforce or challenge the conditions under which SH occurs. Together, these interacting levels shape how SH is experienced, enacted, and addressed within HEIs.

Campus-based SH in Pakistan

In Pakistan, SH is legally defined as unwelcome sexual advances, request for sexual favors, verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature, gender-based discrimination, or retaliatory behaviors that create a hostile environment. [15] Existing research on campus-based SH in Pakistan documents high levels of victimization, particularly among female students, with 65-90% reporting SH, with most experiencing sexual jokes, unwanted touching, and retaliation for rejecting advances. [16,17] Limited research on male students indicates that while men are often identified as perpetrators, they also report substantial victimization (32%), sometimes at higher rates than female students (19%). [18]

Research also reveals multi-level, gendered, relational, and institutional dynamics. Younger students, aged 18–23, face heightened vulnerability to campus-based SH in Pakistan. [19] Family dynamics often shape disclosure, as concerns about family honor, reputational damage, discourage reporting. [20] At the community and societal levels, gender inequality and victim-blaming are pervasive and shape disclosure and reporting, with 78% of students, predominantly male, attributing responsibility for SH victimization to female students. [21] While most female students (98%) expressed a desire to disclose victimization, 78%

reported hesitation due to lack of support and fears of repercussions. [16] These findings illustrate patriarchal norms that shift responsibility onto victims and deter reporting, despite willingness to disclose.

Most studies of campus-based SH in Pakistan remain narrow in scope and focus on female students in single-university or within individual departments. [16,17] Thus, perspectives of male students, faculty, and staff along with institutional dynamics, policies and responses remain underexplored, which can shape both the occurrence of campus-based SH and students' willingness to disclose, report, and seek support. These gaps obscure the full scope of campus-based SH and limit universities' capacity to develop evidence-based prevention and response strategies.

The present study addresses key gaps in existing campus-based SH research, guided by five research questions: (1) perceptions of campus-based SH; (2) scope, context, and patterning of campus-based SH; (3) barriers and facilitators shaping disclosure and reporting; (4) perceptions of institutional policies, reporting mechanisms, and responses; and (5) recommendations for strengthening prevention and response. To address these questions, we conducted a thematic analysis of qualitative data from male and female students and institutional participants across four universities in Pakistan, enabling a multi-site, multi-perspective examination of campus-based SH and institutional responses.

Method

2.1. Study design

We conducted thematic analysis informed by a modified grounded theory. Deductive domains were guided by prior literature and the socioecological framework, while inductive insights emerged through constant comparison, iterative refinement of data collection instruments, and identification of semantic and latent themes. [22–24]

2.2. Setting

Data were collected across four universities in Karachi, Pakistan (three private and one public), varying in size and student composition. As Sindh's largest and most diverse concentration of HEIs, with women comprising over one-third of enrollments, Karachi provides an important yet understudied setting for examining campus-based SH. [25]

2.3. Participant selection and recruitment

2.3.1 Institutional recruitment and liaisons

Universities were contacted through direct outreach by email and phone; those expressing interest were provided with detailed study information. Institutional participants were identified through academic publications and recommendations from institutional partners. A total of 19 HEIs across all provinces of Pakistan were contacted, and four HEIs in Karachi consented to participate. Several universities initially

expressed interest but did not respond after learning the study topic, reflecting the sensitivity of campus-based SH research and the importance of trust and established relationships for institutional recruitment. At each participating university, institutional liaisons facilitated introductions to prospective participants and supported recruitment logistics, enhancing institutional engagement and minimizing potential risks to students, such as institutional backlash.

2.3.2 Participant recruitment and eligibility

Institutional participants (faculty and staff) took part in interviews and, where needed, focus-group discussions (FGDs). Eligibility required at least one year of employment at the university and relevant experience in gender or GBV, through research, programmatic involvement, or institutional responsibilities (e.g., serving on disciplinary committees). Students were recruited with liaison support using purposive and snowball sampling and participated in FGDs. Student eligibility required participants to be ≥ 18 years and to have attended at least one on-campus class in the past year.

Recruitment materials outlined study purpose, voluntary participation, expected duration, and confidentiality, emphasizing research team's independence from university structures to reduce perceived risk and encourage participation. Students received modest, non-monetary compensation, while institutional participants were not compensated, per institutional policies and local norms.

2.4 Research team

The study was led by a doctoral-level researcher (first author), with methodological support from a second doctoral-level researcher and oversight from the senior author. The research team included four master's-level bilingual data collectors and trained transcribers, who were undergraduate students supervised by data collectors. Interviews with institutional participants were conducted by the first and senior authors (both women), while student FGDs were facilitated by gender-concordant data collectors (two women and two men). All team members received training in campus-based SH, qualitative methods, and ethical protocols. No prior relationships existed between data collectors and participants.

2.5. Instrument development

Semi-structured interview and FGD guides (Appendix A and B respectively) were developed for institutional and student participants, informed by prior research. Topics included perceptions of campus-based SH, institutional policies and procedures, and disclosure and reporting. Student FGDs began with an icebreaker exercise on SH perceptions, followed by the FGD. All instruments were available in English, Urdu, and bilingual formats, and were pilot-tested among the research team, and iteratively refined based on participant and team feedback, allowing for inductive insights and emerging themes to be integrated. Participant demographic characteristics (e.g., role, gender, institution, age, and department) were collected when feasible.

2.6 Data collection

Data were collected between August 2024 and October 2025. All data collection sessions were conducted in person; a virtual option was offered but not selected. Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes and FGDs up to 90 minutes; no repeat sessions were conducted. Per participant preference, sessions were conducted in English and/or Urdu, in private classrooms, offices, or conference rooms at each university. Sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent, transcribed verbatim, de-identified, and reviewed for accuracy.

Across four universities, a total of 128 participants took part, including 110 students (37 men and 73 women) and 18 institutional participants (7 faculty, 2 staff, and 9 in dual roles; 15 women and 3 men). Among institutional participants, eight interviews were conducted across three institutions, while two FGDs were held in a fourth institution based on participant preference. Fifteen single-gender student FGDs were conducted. While four FGDs per university were planned (two male and two female), only three were conducted in one institution due to student availability. Saturation was assessed through concurrent data collection and analysis, with no new codes emerging in later sessions, consistent with qualitative guidance on saturation. [26]

2.7. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using a combined deductive–inductive approach. Two researchers independently coded transcripts, resolving discrepancies through discussion and, when needed, adjudication by a third team member. The codebook was iteratively refined to include code names, type (inductive or deductive), definitions, and exemplar quotations. Data were organized in a framework matrix to support systematic comparison across participant groups. [27] The matrix incorporated deductive domains from the topic guides alongside emergent themes and analytic summaries. Themes were developed through iterative review of data, examining patterns across participant type (students vs. institutional), gender, and institutions.

Student FGDs were first analyzed within each university and by gender, then synthesized across institutions to compare gendered perspectives and protect institutional confidentiality. Final synthesis included comparisons across participant type (institutional and student) and by gender; including similarities, differences, and emergent themes. Member-checking of preliminary themes was conducted with selected participants to assess accuracy and resonance of interpretations. [28]

To enhance analytic rigor, reflexivity was integrated throughout the analysis with reflexive memos, regular discussions of researchers' positionality and how GBV experiences and social identities might shape interpretation, and weekly peer debriefing to refine analytic decisions. Additionally, team members, who were not involved in data collection or coding, reviewed themes, and challenged assumptions to minimize interpretive bias, while Pakistan-based team ensured preservation of contextual accuracy and nuance. For reporting, quotations were translated into English by bilingual team members and verified. Quotes are presented with identifiers indicating participant type and gender.

2.8 Ethical considerations

This study received ethical approvals from the National Bioethics Committee for research in Pakistan, relevant approvals from participating universities, and an exemption determination from [blinded university] Institutional Review Board under 45 CFR 46.104(d)(2)(ii). Per the Declaration of Helsinki, written and verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation. To protect confidentiality, transcriptions were de-identified to preserve participant and university anonymity, with aggregated findings reported. Given the topic's sensitivity, data collection followed trauma-informed principles; participants could skip questions, withdraw at any time, and received psychological referrals developed with a local psychologist. Data collection instruments were reviewed by mental health professionals to ensure appropriateness.

Result

Theme 1: Perceptions of campus-based SH

Participants described campus-based SH, its defining features, perceived boundaries, and areas of ambiguity. Across participant groups, SH was broadly understood as verbal (e.g., inappropriate comments), non-verbal (e.g., staring), physical, (e.g., intentional touch), or technology-facilitated behaviors (e.g., sharing images) that violate a person's consent, personal space, or boundaries and causes distress, fear, or discomfort. Central to these perceptions was the emphasis on harm, with SH described as any behavior that produces psychological or social distress.

Students emphasized distress, loss of autonomy, social vulnerability, and enduring impacts of SH (e.g., "*Loss which just stays with them for their whole lives,"* male student), describing trauma that fostered hypervigilance, discomfort in their own bodies, and loss of trust in others (e.g., *"You lose trust in that gender or that person"* female student). Across gender, students emphasized different forms of SH: male students highlighted coercion and exploitation, while female students emphasized body shaming and persistent staring. Overall, SH was understood as a range of inappropriate behaviors that produced pervasive discomfort.

1.1: Definitional ambiguity

Despite broad agreement on core aspects of SH, participants described ambiguity around its definition, particularly male students and institutional participants. Ambiguity arose in everyday interactions, interpersonal disputes, and blurred professional boundaries. For example, students often viewed after-hours personal contact from faculty or colleagues as exploitative, whereas some institutional participants considered it inappropriate but not SH. Institutional participants expressed concern that administrative or interpersonal disputes were sometimes framed as SH, raising concerns about reputational harm and victim-credibility. Similar tensions emerged in hierarchical relationships, with behaviors such as an older faculty patting a student's head considered as paternal (e.g., *"Teachers sometimes would touch their students because they think of their students as children,"* female institutional participant), while students viewed them as inappropriate.

Male students and institutional participants described uncertainty in mixed-gender interactions, expressing concern that consensual behaviors could be misinterpreted as SH. Some believed male victimization was minimized and considered a *"free trade,"* open exchange. However, similar actions by women are interpreted differently: *"You label it as flirting when it's a man, but when it happens to a woman, it's called harassment,"* (male student). Initiating conversations with female peers or taking leadership roles in group projects was sometimes perceived as inappropriate when performed by men but acceptable when performed by women. Conversely, female students described some of these interactions as intentional boundary-testing, intended to gauge women's reactions through ambiguous behavior (e.g., *"they don't feel wrong saying it, even if some men feel wrong, they know they want to tease women…they trying to see…how the woman would react,"* female student).

Institutional participants similarly described uncertainty around mixed-gender interactions (e.g., "*Now even giving a compliment is difficult because it gets labeled as SH, so you can't even compliment someone,*" female institutional participant), and confusion around women's expectations (e.g., "*Women expect that if they are dressed nicely, people will say, 'You look nice.' So, I think we also need to be clear about…what women actually appreciate and what is not acceptable, what is unethical, and what is wrong,"* female institutional participant).

Theme 2: Social and gender norms

SH was described as rooted in patriarchal social and gender norms, which were reinforced through early socialization and expectations around honor, contributing to the normalization of SH and non-disclosure. Social norms constrained women's autonomy while limiting men's accountability, as girls were raised under greater surveillance and boys' behavior was more readily excused (e.g., *"boys are like this,"* female institutional participant). Parental attention was often directed toward regulating girls' conduct rather than addressing boys' behavior (e.g., "*Mothers should focus even more on their sons than they do on their daughters...because in the end, the real culprits are often males,"* female student). These norms enabled harmful behavior to persist unchallenged (e.g., "*In Pakistan, we all know no one takes a stand for us, so the harassers move freely and keep doing this,"* female student).

Participants described familial and societal expectations around women's dress, conduct, mobility, and public presence that reinforced responsibility for preventing harm (e.g., "*Why did you wear this dress?"* female student). These expectations enabled character-based judgments, victim-blaming, and non-disclosure (e.g., *"If a girl goes out to work, society often labels her as improper,"* male student). This scrutiny extended across women's life course, with autonomy constrained by shifting male authority figures, ultimately shaping responses to SH (e.g., "*From the very beginning, girls are placed in environments where they're always under someone's authority, first their father, then their brother, and later their husband. They're never given a space where they can act independently. So, when they step out into the world and something wrong happens to them, it takes them time to speak up, because from the start, they've never been taught about their rights,"* male student).

Consequently, SH was framed as a *"woman's burden,"* requiring women to regulate their behavior to prevent SH and endure harm silently (e.g., "*What if people assume something is wrong with me? Maybe they'll say I deserved it,*" female student). Male participants similarly noted that these norms minimized male victimization, particularly among men who deviated from traditional masculinity, increasing vulnerability and self-blame (e.g., *"They might think my character is flawed or my way of talking is inappropriate. That's why I was targeted,"* male student).

Izzat (honor) was a key factor shaping character-based judgements and responses to SH, especially for women (e.g., "*family honor is prioritized above everything,"* female student) Disclosure was perceived as high risk due to concerns about family honor and reputational harm (e.g., "*Even mothers encourage silence,"* male student). Disclosure to families was particularly consequential, resulting in academic withdrawal, mobility restrictions, or forced marriage (e.g., "*If all this is happening while you're going to study, then just stay at home. Because in our society, if you're studying, you should ignore these things. Stay silent, if not, then you should just get married,"* female student). Participants described interconnected pressures that constrained disclosure: "*Girls often don't report harassment because they face three kinds of pressure: from the university, fearing the case might go viral and damage the institution's reputation, from their family, worried that it could lead to shame and affect future marriage prospects, and from society, the constant fear of what will people say,"* (male student).

Participants often linked these dynamics to limited understanding of consent, sexual and reproductive health, and appropriate mixed-gender interactions (e.g., "*People are not clearly taught what is appropriate and what isn't,*" male student). These topics were often described as taboo, shaped by cultural and religious norms that discourage open discussion, although participants viewed religious teachings as promoting respectful gendered behavior (e.g., *"That's why there's a command to lower your gaze because most of it begins through the eyes,"* male student). Thus, SH was often difficult to recognize and disclose. Institutional participants similarly described a broader culture of avoidance in which sensitive issues were avoided (e.g., *"Our policy in Pakistan is that put every bad thing [under] the carpet...and don't do anything [until] the carpet really starts [to] smell bad,"* male institutional participant).

Theme 3: Perceived causes

Campus-based SH was attributed to social and gender norms, particularly across women's conduct, along with normative mismatches, power imbalances, and digital environments that facilitate and sustain SH.

3.1. Dress and friendliness

Male students often attributed SH to women's dress and behavior, although these views were actively contested by other men. For example, one male student attributed SH to women's dress stating that *"they are aware they are showing their figure. Yet, if they face harassment, they blame society instead of reflecting on their own actions,"* while others rejected the use of women's dress as a marker of character

or respectability (e.g., "*Don't assume a woman in an abaya [full-length robe] is automatically more respectable"*). Some clarified that these explanations reflected perpetrators' perceptions rather than victim responsibility.

Some interpreted women's friendliness (e.g., smiling) as encouragement, suggesting that SH may depend on the degree of familiarity between individuals (e.g., *how much freedom you're giving someone, how close they are to you, how much casual interaction you're having with them. So, if later on it results in something like harassment, it depends on how much freedom you gave them.*" While these views were also contested, some male participants noted that casual mixed-gender interactions can blur distinctions between friendliness and flirtation.

Female students, however, emphasized that SH persists regardless of dress (e.g., *"I go to the market wearing a mask and full hijab [head-covering]—people still stare. What can you see in my eyes? Nothing!"* or friendliness (e.g., *"You're just being nice to someone, and it's mistaken for flirting."*). Some further suggested that modest dress can attract additional attention, with perpetrators staring while *"wondering what's underneath,"* Institutional participants described similar tensions, including instances where female students' clothing was reported to authorities by male students. Overall, participants stressed the universality of SH (e.g., "*Everyone is a victim...they don't even spare those who wear burqas [full-length robe],"* female student).

3.2 Class and normative mismatch

Participants described these tensions as shaped by class and normative differences across diverse campus environments. Students of conservative or socioeconomically diverse universities were perceived as having less exposure to mixed-gender interactions, as university was often their first co-educational setting, increasing the likelihood of misinterpreting behaviors (e.g., "*Those people who come from very closed doors…Their view of seeing a woman on campus or a man on campus is very different from those who come from a liberal family... their dressing, their dress code, the way they behave or talk, their sensitization of gender is very different,*" female institutional participant). Students similarly noted: "*People from rural areas see modern dressing for the first time and stare"* (male student).

In contrast, students from universities perceived as more "modern;" from higher socioeconomic or liberal households, were viewed as having greater exposure to mixed-gender interaction, where similar behaviors were considered normative. However, some participants believed this fostered the assumption that "modern" women are less vulnerable to SH: "*People don't realize that modernization and being a victim are two different things... If someone is modern, they assume they can't be a victim. But why can't they?*" (Female institutional participant). Others challenged class-based explanations, attributing SH instead to differences in education and upbringing.

3.3 Misuse of power

Misuse of power was consistently described as a central driver of campus-based SH, operating across formal and informal hierarchies: "*The student's life is in the professor's hand, the professor life is in the*

chairman's hand, the chairman's life is in the board of trustee's hand," (male student). Participants identified faculty, senior students, staff (e.g., drivers, guards, canteen-workers), and influential individuals as perpetrators, reflecting the belief that SH can be enacted by *"anyone who has the power"* (female institutional participant).

At the institutional level, authority was misused to create situations of vulnerability, including private meetings outside institutional settings or hours under the guise of academic discussion, inappropriate comments about students' appearance, and unsolicited social media requests with pressure to comply (e.g., "*I can discuss your paper your exam with you, but you can come to my office at this time…why not do it there?"* female student). Refusal of such advances was considered risky and, at times, resulted in retaliation through humiliation or threats to academic progression. Similarly, senior students were described as exploiting juniors through "*ragging,"* pressuring them into inappropriate tasks (e.g., *"Academic stress is very high… some students face issues with their grades and seek help from classmates...But instead of helping them, some people place demands on them,"* male student).

Informal forms of power contributed to SH. Male student and staff peer groups were perceived as reinforcing harmful behaviors through following, intimidation, and derogatory comments toward women (e.g., "*Mostly staff… mostly sit in groups…these incidents happen more,"* female student). These groups often used physical presence to assert dominance, leading women to avoid certain campus spaces. Male students also described peer dynamics as reinforcing harmful behaviors towards women, including those perceived as "*decent*," and suggested that male-dominated environments may increase SH. Influential individuals and outsiders were similarly viewed as difficult to hold accountable because of influence or anonymity.

3.4 Digital environments

Digital environments facilitated SH through increased access and opportunity, limited oversight, normalization of harmful behaviors, and reduced accountability (e.g., "*On chat you can do things because you will not get caught*," male student). Participants identified Western and Pakistani media, social media, and pornography as shaping attitudes toward women and sexual behavior, viewing these influences as promoting immodesty (e.g., "*it is spreading like a virus,"* (female institutional participant), normalizing SH (e.g., "*If society is doing this, it must be okay,"* male student), and encouraging imitation of harmful behaviors (e.g., "*they think this is real, and they try to commit the same thing,"* male student). Access to harmful content (e.g., pornography) amplified these dynamics (e.g., *"Things that used to stay behind a veil are now out in the open…perpetrators are drawn to it,"* male student) and reduced fear of consequences.

Digital spaces reinforced silence through fear of exposure, rapid content dissemination, and reputational harm. Participants described technology-facilitated SH following relationship breakdowns, including non-consensual sharing of images, and spreading rumors; viewed as *"character assassination"* (female institutional participant). Institutional participants further noted difficulties in pursuing online cases due to anonymity and contested interpretations of consent. Digital platforms blurred the boundaries between online and campus-based SH.

Theme 4: Experiences of campus-based SH

Participants described the forms, contexts, and perceived risk factors associated with campus-based SH, including vulnerable groups.

4.1 Epidemiology of Campus-based SH

Campus-based SH was described as frequent, particularly among women, with staring identified as the most common form, occurring *"every minute"* and often accompanied by misogynistic comments. Female students noted that these behaviors were widely tolerated, and therefore difficult to report: *"If you step out of here, just walk for 5 minutes, and you'll see about 10 to 15 people staring at you."* They described staring as pervasive across campus spaces (e.g., *"The workers here… they always stare… even at the canteen… even the male students, they also stare at you even if they have their girlfriends. You are really like occupied but still they are staring at you. Like bro, have some shame."*

Physical SH in universities was perceived as less common, particularly where surveillance was thought to deter perpetrators. However, boundary-testing behaviors, such as sexist jokes (e.g., *"Teachers come in and they say, "Oh she looks like…a name of a porn star,"* female student) and inappropriate touching by male peers were described as frequent yet minimized as humor or friendship. SH was described as affecting individuals across genders; however, women reported a broader range of gender-based harassment, including body shaming, inappropriate gestures, and coercive behaviors.

Campus-based SH occurred across a wide range of settings (e.g.," *Both closed and open areas, regardless of the place,"* male student). Some participants described isolated areas with limited surveillance (e.g., canteens, classrooms, or bathrooms), others highlighted crowded settings (e.g., auditoriums or events) where perpetrators take advantage of anonymity, peer presence, and reduced accountability. Some described SH across commuting (e.g., *"You just don't feel like leaving the house anymore,"* male student). A few described clinical settings, where male students were perceived as vulnerable due to frequent interaction with authority figures (e.g., patients) and limited autonomy to respond.

Technology-facilitated SH was also described as common, including unsolicited messaging, sharing of private content, rumor spreading, and intimidation. Participants noted that SH often begins online (e.g., "*Harassers are just looking for a window...first they start bothering someone through unwanted texts,"* female student). Most described these incidents following relationship dissolution (e.g., "*Whatever videos he has of her, he leaks them through the internet. He says no one can become greater than him,"* male student).

4.1.1 Vulnerability

Most participants agreed that SH is pervasive across sociodemographic groups, although women were described as more vulnerable, including students and faculty, who were often disrespected and

sexualized by men despite holding positions of authority. Participants noted that women who were younger, from rural backgrounds, perceived as attractive, or viewed as shy or friendly were at greater risk of SH (e.g., *"Who are more submissive and they will think this person is not gonna react, so they usually target that person,"* female student).

Male participants similarly emphasized that men's victimization was often minimized, leading to lower recognition. They described ethnicity-based harassment and heightened vulnerability among men who deviated from traditional expressions of masculinity. Younger students were overall considered vulnerable due to limited experience, awareness, and support, as well as greater exposure to ragging.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds were identified as vulnerable with greater barriers to disclosure (e.g., "*lower-income victims often stay silent, thinking, who will listen to me?"* male student). Institutional participants noted that socioeconomic position shaped recognition and reporting of SH, with similar experiences often interpreted and reported differently based on one's social status (e.g., *"It is also in all socio-income strata… similar thing happened to a janitor but didn't report it as harassment. Similar thing a doctor reported as harassment,"* female institutional participant).

Theme 5: Responses to campus-based SH

Participants described barriers to institutional reporting, responses across formal and informal channels, and peer and bystander intervention, which contributed to low formal reporting and a reliance on peers for support.

5.1. Barriers to Institutional Reporting

Institutional reporting was consistently shaped by fears of retaliation, victim-blaming, and institutional consequences. Participants described concerns of further harm (e.g., *"She reported me? Now I'll make sure she regrets it,"* female student) and being blamed (e.g., "*They will say it was the girl's fault because she wore such clothes,"* female student). Academic retaliation deterred reporting, with one female participant recounting being warned by a teaching assistant: *"If it happens again then complain, but it will affect your marks because teachers hold grudges. If you complain about them, obviously they come to know, and it's clear who would have complained."*

Broader fears of escalation were also reported (e.g., *"What if someone did an acid attack on you,"* female student). These risks extended online, where circulation of private content often led to severe distress and, in some cases, self-harm: "*When someone's private content goes viral… a few days later you hear that she or he has committed suicide… in trying to fight for their dignity, ends up harming themselves"* (male student).

5.2. Informal disclosure: Peers and bystanders

Given institutional barriers, peer networks became the primary avenue for disclosure and support, serving as the first, and sometimes only, point of response. Peers were described as providing emotional support, advice, and, at times, taking action against perpetrators. Male peers were perceived as influential in facilitating women's disclosure, as women faced greater barriers to speaking out (e.g., *"If a girl is facing something…it's very difficult for her to speak up. If she tells her friends, they'll likely all be girls too. If they come together as a group and raise their voice, that's a different matter, but individually, it's very rare,"* male student).

Although peer solidarity was common, some participants described responses to remain silent to *"save your image"* (female student) and reported disclosures being circulated as gossip. Male and female peer complicity, including laughter and silence in response to inappropriate behavior was seen to reinforce SH (e.g., *"They are complicit in it…. they defend them… even if they have good intentions,"* female student). Female students described these responses as avoiding escalation, with some noting that they would "*laugh it off… because they don't have any option.*"

Participants noted that peer intervention was shaped by relational loyalties, making intervention more likely when the victim was a friend and less likely when the perpetrator was part of one's social group. Bystander intervention was generally perceived as limited due to fear of retaliation, uncertainty about intent, and concern about consequences. Social media further reinforced passivity (e.g., *"Nowadays, instead of helping the victim, people make videos to upload on social media,"* female student). Female students often perceived male bystanders as disengaged (e.g., "*What's it to us?"*), while male students argued that men should take greater responsibility for intervening.

Where intervention occurred, men were perceived as having greater authority to intervene effectively, whereas women described greater risks to do so. One male student recounted confronting the perpetrator who asked, "*Is she your sister? What's it to you?"* to which he responded, *"She's not my sister, but she is someone's sister,"* after which they disengaged. In contrast, female students feared becoming targets (e.g., *"If I don't speak up today, I could be the victim tomorrow"*) and described being dismissed by perpetrators upon intervention.

5.3 Formal reporting and institutional response

Among the few cases of formal reporting, participants described difficulty navigating reporting systems, low trust in institutional responses (e.g., "*Why didn't you tell me? I don't trust you man,"* female student) and breaches of confidentiality (e.g., *"I was assured that my name wouldn't be revealed, but at the end of the semester, the guy came to me and said, "You gave our names!"* female student). Institutional participants noted that confidence in reporting was shaped not only by institutional factors but also by fear of family reactions (e.g., "*Girls don't share stories if their parents aren't supportive*"; *"Fear does not give you confidence and trust in the system,"* female institutional participants). Female institutional participants also described safety and reputation risks upon handling SH cases: "*My office was broken, and the door of one of my labs was damaged."*

Participants reported variability in outcomes, ranging from no action to expulsion of perpetrators, and victim-blaming during reporting (e.g., *"she was blaming me and the students,"* female student). Male participants from one university raised concerns about perceived bias in institutional responses, referring to the *"woman card;"* social power that privileged female complainants (e.g., "*Our campus heavily misuses the woman card").* These views reflected concerns about procedural fairness (e.g., "*Disciplinary committee admits privately...we always side with the girl without investigation")*. Some described it as *a "dangerous weapon"* used by women to influence outcomes (e.g., "*They won't care if she tore his clothes off, they'll just attack him. That's the power of the women card"*).

In some cases, institutions relied on informal resolution rather than formal action, particularly for ambiguous or contested incidents. For example, a case involving a gender-diverse student accused of violating personal boundaries was resolved through guidance rather than sanctions, reflecting efforts to balance inclusivity with institutional norms.

Theme 6: Institutional gaps and recommendations

Participants described gaps in institutional policies, reporting systems, capacity, and awareness, revealing a disconnect between provisions and practice while identifying opportunities for improvement.

6.1 Institutional policies and reporting systems

Most universities had standalone SH policies, and others embedded SH within broader codes of conduct; participants emphasized that policy presence alone did not ensure effective implementation. Reporting pathways included anonymous portals, SH or disciplinary committees, and written complaints, with anonymous reporting preferred. Sanctions included counseling, termination, and referral to disciplinary committees, although outcomes ranged from decisive action to informal resolution or no consequences.

Some institutional participants expressed confidence in well-defined *"zero-tolerance"* policies (e.g., *"If there are no consequences, no policies would work. And that's why our policies are very clear,"* female institution participant). Others highlighted limited national guidance for implementation (e.g., *"They give the policy and then go silent…They are not facilitating the mechanism…they just say, 'You implement this.' But what kind of facilities are you providing...to facilitate?"* female institutional participant).

Trust in reporting systems was a central concern, with students noting that identities were disclosed during formal processes, leading to withdrawal of cases. Many students relied on informal disclosures to trusted institutional figures rather than formal mechanisms, leaving responses dependent on personal discretion (e.g., "*Conversation ends up being verbal... creates room for 'Chinese whispers' effect,"* male student). Informal resolution was often used to accommodate victims' preferences or deescalate situations but contributed to limited transparency and accountability. Participants emphasized the need for clearer, reliable, and confidential reporting systems.

6.2 Institutional capacity and accountability

Participants highlighted substantial gaps between institutional commitments and institutions' ability to respond to campus-based SH. Procedural delays, fragmented responsibilities, and decentralized reporting structures often diffused accountability by shifting responsibility across departments (e.g., *"Why should we deal with it? If we get involved, it will reflect badly on us. Just send it to the other side and let them handle it."* female institutional participant). These structures produced unequal access, with cases reported to senior leadership often receiving greater attention than others.

Unequal accountability was particularly evident for perpetrators occupying positions of power, such as faculty members (e.g., *"If I report it, I'll fail or make an enemy of the teacher,"* female student) and influential individuals (e.g., *"This guy is some big shot's son, what can we even do?"* male student). Institutional participants noted that personal relationships, institutional politics, and fears of conflict could hinder action against institutionally affiliated perpetrators, while influential, external, and online perpetrators posed accountability challenges beyond institutional boundaries. As a result, sanctions were often perceived as insufficient, particularly for individuals with influence, reinforcing perceptions of impunity (e.g., *"Even if action is taken, I feel double-minded whether the victim will truly get justice,"* male student). Some participants proposed student or independent representatives on disciplinary committees to strengthen accountability, although others cautioned that these could reproduce existing power hierarchies.

Students questioned institutional reliance on regulating mixed-gender interactions, enforcing dress codes, restricting gathering spaces, and increasing surveillance. Such measures were perceived as insufficient (e.g., "*The camera captures it, but no action is taken,"* male student) and dress codes reinforced victim-blaming. Both students and institutional participants emphasized that these strategies focused on addressing opportunities for SH and were likely ineffective without broader normative change.

Institutional capacity limitations were most visible in handling complex or ambiguous cases, including intimate-partner violence (IPV), technology-facilitated SH, interpersonal conflicts framed as SH, and alleged false accusations. Institutional participants described limited training and uncertainty distinguishing intentional versus unintentional behaviors or interpersonal conflict from SH (e.g., *"I don't think there is any formal training of how to deal with sexual harassment"* female institutional participant). These constraints undermined confidence and complicated case assessment.

6.3 Awareness and communication

Many students reported little awareness of SH policies and reporting mechanisms, and even those aware described superficial understanding (e.g., *"I had no idea about any such policy, and no one ever informed us…I'm shocked!"* male student). Students noted that awareness initiatives were and often concentrated in female-dominated departments and existing institutional efforts (e.g., orientations) were insufficient for promoting meaningful engagement. Participants emphasized the importance of engaging

boys and men (e.g., *"We haven't worked on our boys enough"* female institutional participant), noting that awareness efforts focused only on women limited their impact (e.g., *"If only girls are present, boys won't realize that these incidents happen,"* female student).

Some institutional participants noted existing awareness initiatives, others questioned the need for additional initiatives (e.g., *"There is so much awareness on these things now because of social media… so…I don't see how that would benefit in any way."* female institutional participant). A few believed one awareness session was sufficient (e.g., *"What more training is needed"* male institutional participant).

Most participants recommended the need for sustained, institution-wide engagement, including expanded orientation programs and discussions addressing stigma, victim-blaming, consent, and sexual and reproductive health. Some students suggested that framing these discussions through religious teachings can increase acceptability (e.g., *"People take it negatively, but it's a science. Even Islamic teachings... discuss it in detail. If it were bad, they wouldn't talk about it,"* male student).

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first multi-university, multi-stakeholder qualitative study in Pakistan to examine campus-based SH across students, faculty, and staff, and among first in the broader South Asian context. By incorporating student and institutional perspectives across genders, this study extends prior work by offering a nuanced understanding of how campus-based SH is experienced, interpreted, and addressed. Drawing on the socioecological framework, this study examines how family, peer, institutional, and societal influences shape campus-based SH, identifying drivers, enabling conditions, and risk and protective factors relevant to prevention and response.

Consistent with prior research in Pakistan [17,19,20] and globally [3,6,7], our findings underscore the pervasive and normalized nature of campus-based SH, particularly for women, contributing to fears of social and institutional repercussions and adverse academic, social, and emotional outcomes. Patriarchal norms shift responsibility onto survivors while minimizing harm and limiting accountability for perpetrators, reflecting broader social, psychological, and feminist perspectives that conceptualize such norms as mechanisms through which gendered conduct and unequal power relations are reproduced across time and settings. [20,21,29] Participants described a desire for accountability, but perceived disclosure as carrying greater risks than benefits. [16] Concerns around family honor, reputation, stigma, and moral standing shaped disclosure decisions, while similar norms and fears influenced peer and bystander responses, credibility judgments, and institutional trust. [21] Thus, patriarchal norms operated across families, peers, and institutions, shaping experiences, willingness to report, and responses to campus-based SH.

Campus-based SH was also shaped by normative mismatches across students from diverse social and class backgrounds. In co-educational settings, differing exposure to mixed-gender interactions produced competing expectations regarding appropriate behavior. Similar dynamics have been observed in

comparable contexts such as Jordan, where expanding participation of women in HEIs challenges traditional gender roles and may provoke backlash aimed at reasserting male dominance. [30] These tensions were embedded within unequal gendered relations and suggest that universities are sites of rapid social change, where increasing participation of women and greater mixed-gender interaction challenge existing gender norms, creating tensions between traditional and emerging gender expectations that shape how interactions are interpreted and whose experiences are viewed as legitimate.

Similar to Christie's concept of the "ideal victim," individuals are more readily recognized as victims when they conform to expectations of passivity, respectability, and limited power. [31] Thus, women perceived as more "modern" often faced heightened scrutiny, with victimization reframed as provocation, while men's victimization was minimized, suggesting that individuals who deviate from dominant gendered expectations may be viewed as less credible and less deserving of recognition and support.

Given the risks associated with family and institutional disclosure, peer networks emerged as critical social infrastructures for responding to campus-based SH, often serving as the primary source of support and disclosure. While predominantly supportive, peers also served as key contexts through which gender norms, credibility judgments, and expectations of intervention were negotiated. These findings suggest that responses to campus-based SH are shaped not only by formal institutions but also by informal social relationships, underscoring the need for peer- and institution-level strategies that strengthen accountability, support survivors, and shift harmful norms.

Implications

Addressing campus-based SH requires interventions that extend beyond policy and reporting systems to address the social norms, peer dynamics, and institutional processes that shape victimization, disclosure, and response. Improving reporting mechanisms, confidentiality, accountability, and institutional trust should be complemented by sustained awareness initiatives that challenge stigma, victim-blaming, and ambiguity around consent. Interventions should leverage peer-based approaches and engage men and boys in awareness, peer support, and bystander intervention efforts. Prior evidence suggests that such approaches can disrupt harmful norms, reduce victimization and perpetration, and strengthen supportive responses. [32] Targeted training on technology-facilitated SH and IPV is needed to improve institutional capacity to recognize and respond to emerging forms of harm.

Universities are critical sites for intervention; however, our findings also underscore the influence of social norms that extend beyond campus settings. Multi-level prevention strategies spanning peer, institutional, family, and earlier socialization contexts may be particularly important. Interventions during childhood and adolescence, such as parenting and school-based programs, may strengthen abuse recognition, promote gender-equitable attitudes, challenge harmful masculine norms, reduce victimization and acceptance of violence, and improve peer support. [33–35] Gender-transformative

approaches that integrate abuse recognition, peer engagement, and normative change may be especially effective in contexts where awareness is limited, peers are primary sources of support, and formal reporting carries substantial risk.

Future research should continue to engage men and institutional stakeholders and evaluate prevention, policy, and response efforts to determine what works, for whom, and under what conditions. Longitudinal and multi-institutional studies remain critical for understanding how social and institutional dynamics shape campus-based SH over time.

Strengths and Limitations

This study has several strengths, including a multi-university design spanning public and private institutions and perspectives from students, faculty, and staff across genders. By incorporating men's perspectives and institutional contexts, it extends prior research beyond individual-level analyses to examine the broader social and structural dynamics of campus-based SH. Rigorous qualitative methods, including thematic analysis, reflexive team-based approaches with external reviewers, and member checking, enabled a nuanced examination of gendered experiences and tensions across participant groups. This study also has limitations. Data were collected from four universities in Karachi, limiting generalizability to other regions of Pakistan, including rural and gender-segregated institutions. Fewer male institutional participants may have influenced institutional perspectives. Additionally, the sensitivity of the topic may have affected participants' willingness to disclose experiences, introducing social desirability bias.

Conclusion

This study provides one of the first multi-university, multi-stakeholder qualitative examinations of campus-based SH in Pakistan, incorporating perspectives from students, faculty, and staff across genders. Findings suggest that campus-based SH is shaped by interacting social norms, family and peer dynamics, and institutional processes that influence victimization, disclosure, and responses. By highlighting the role of normative tensions, credibility judgments, and peer and institutional contexts, this study advances understanding of how SH is both sustained and contested within university settings. Addressing campus-based SH will require coordinated, gender-transformative approaches that extend beyond policy to engage peer norms, strengthen institutional capacity, improve trust in reporting systems, and leverage the role of men and peers in prevention and bystander intervention.

Abbreviations

GBV
Gender-based violence
LMICs
Low- and middle- income countries

SH
Sexual harassment

Declarations

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