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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Victorious Youths Movement, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[12 August 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



The Inconvenient Truth of Rising Sexual Assault and Harassment of Women in Pakistan

When considering the incidents of sexual harassment in Pakistan the following figures are telling - Pakistan's Ministry of Human Rights in a written reply to the National Assembly revealed the shocking figure of more than 14,000 rape cases reported in Pakistan during the four years from 2018-21. In its written reply, the ministry said that 16,153 cases of sexual violence against women and workplace harassment were reported during the last four years. The Ministry's figures are based on the information received from the National Police Bureau and the real picture is far worse.

Women and girls in Pakistan face abuses including impunity for so-called "honour violence" against them, danger on the way to school, abuses in prison, denial of care in hospitals, and sexual harassment in the workplace. Worse yet, the police themselves have been implicated in rape in Pakistan.

A major type of violence against women that Pakistan is particularly struggling with is sexual harassment in the workplace. Sexual harassment, abuse and discrimination in Pakistan's workplaces, including universities, are pervasive, mostly unreported and ignored by senior managers.

A survey on the harassment of women at the workplace mentions that nearly 93 percent of women working in the public and private sectors are alleged to have been subjected to sexual harassment. Private sector organisations appeared to be involved in more cases of sexual harassment due to the lack of job security and the absence of regulatory mechanisms. The statistics from the Federal Ombudsman Secretariat for Protection Against Harassment (FOSPAH) show that the complaint rate for sexual harassment in the workplace has increased from 432 in 2019, to 535 in 2020. Moreover, the FOSPAH Annual report 2022 outlined the following figures; the total number of complaints between 2018 to 2022 were 2169, in the government sector there were 582 lodged by women and 148 by men. In the private sector there were 994 complaints from women and 445 by men.

According to Alliance Against Sexual Harassment (AASHA), the most active and forthright organisation addressing sexual harassment in Pakistan the problem of sexual assault and harassment knows no boundaries and no profession is immune. Unwelcome physical advances, unwanted sexual innuendos and knowing looks are routine, while more serious offences include indecent exposure, sexual molestation and violent attacks. Usually, such incidents are suppressed and often the victims are even blamed for bringing it upon themselves.

In Pakistan, the National Commission on the Status of Women found that 50 per cent of women they interviewed from the public sector had faced sexual harassment. To protect women in the workplace against this harm, and to enhance their safe participation in the workforce, parliament enacted the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act in 2010, which made it mandatory for all employers to form inquiry committees to investigate claims of sexual harassment. Not much has happened since the enactment. 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). When it comes to formal reporting, testimonies from women suggest most lack faith in Pakistan's legal process. Most women felt they would not be believed during investigations or when perpetrators had support in high places.

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.

Women in medicine have shared stories of a toxic culture of misogyny in Pakistan. Female students routinely endure catcalling, comments about their body size and gossip about their reputation. Some doctors said promotions were denied on the pretext that they were ‘less experienced’, not ‘as committed’ as male colleagues or because they didn’t succumb to sexual demands. Those who call out workplace misconduct are routinely portrayed as hysterical and malicious liars or whiners.

Women in Pakistan’s technology sector have spoken of how managers denigrate their worth and work; improper touching and comments, bullying; and bosses taking credit for their achievements. School teachers share their angst over promotions promised in return for sexual favours.

For women working in fields and brick kilns the problem is even more acute, with a staggering 95 percent having faced sexual harassment of some form (including rape and torture), many facing it on a regular basis. The harassers are usually landlords, munshis, contractors and co-workers. “Face or beauty does not matter,” says one field worker resignedly, “It is enough that you are a woman”.

The situation is no better for families forced to work in bonded labour. The owners and contractors openly tease and intimidate the women. It has become so common for women to be stripped then sexually molested in front of their men, that people have become numb to its cruelty – it doesn’t even raise eyebrows anymore.

On June 22, 2022 Punjab Home Minister Atta Tarar had declared an “emergency” amid rising incidents of sexual abuse against women and children, saying some four to five women were being raped daily across the province. However, despite the alarm raised by the ex-minister, the situation did not improve with regard to the safety of working women. Exactly a year later in June 2023, Dawn reported that Lahore police had registered eight cases of rape in 48 hours against suspects who used coercion, blackmail and lure of well-paid job to sexually assault the victims, including a staff nurse, a housemaid and a teenage girl.

Even legislative assemblies in which pro-women laws are sanctified are not safe from everyday sexism. Female politicians in Pakistan have talked about the constant attention to their appearance — they must not look too feminine since that’s not associated with leadership, nor too masculine since that’s not their lot. Being perceived as usurping power in a man’s world makes them fair game, they said.

Three times Member of the Provincial Assembly from Sindh, Pakistan Muslim League-F’s Nusrat Sehar Abbasi has often spoken about the frequent jeering and heckling by certain male legislators in the assembly halls and corridors. In 2017, PPP’s Imdad Pitafi invited her to come to his chamber for a ‘satisfactory response’ to a question she had asked, which prompted laughter from other MPAs. She even threatened to immolate herself if he did not resign, but no action was taken. In 2023 Nusrat Sehar Abbasi quit politics and moved to Canada. She told Dawn, “I was fed up with the constant whistling and bad language used by male legislators.”

If female legislators have to endure this in Pakistan imagine the abuse being hurled on ordinary women. If an assembly legislator had to threaten self immolation for an apology, do ordinary Pakistani women have to actually have to pour fuel and light the match?

Former prime minister Imran Khan blamed everyone but men for the rise in rape cases in 2021. The former cricket captain and Prime Minister was questioned by the Axios journalist Jonathan Swan about the ongoing “rape epidemic” in Pakistan and responded by saying: “If a woman is wearing very few clothes it will have an impact on the man unless they are robots. It’s common sense.”

In 2005, Gen Pervez Musharraf said women cried rape to get visas to Canada. In comments to the Washington Post President Musharraf had said, “You must understand the environment in Pakistan ... This has become a money-making concern. A lot of people say if you want to go abroad and get a visa for Canada or citizenship and be a millionaire, get yourself raped.” Amnesty International said it was outraged at the remarks and stated, “This callous and insulting statement requires a public apology from President Musharraf to the women of Pakistan and especially to victims of rape, sexual assault and other forms of violence.”

The list of misogynist comments from political and religious leaders, and their women supporters who defended these comments as ‘taken out of context’ is shameful.

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.

1.JMS_January_June2013_113-125.pdf

(qurtuba.edu.pk)https://qurtuba.edu.pk/jms/default_files/JMS/7_1/JMS_January_June2013_113-125.pdf

Breaking the Silence

(mwlusa.org)<http://www.mwlusa.org/topics/violence&harrassment/breakingsilence.htm#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20same%20AASHA%20survey%2C%2093%20percent%20of%20women%20working%20in%20both%20private%20and%20public%20sectors%20acknowledge%20being%20har>

a Alarming rise in rape incidents in Lahore - Pakistan -

DAWN.COM<https://www.dawn.com/news/1758902>

A substitute for respect (thenews.com.pk)<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/183843-A-substitute-for-respect>

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