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An Investigation into Workplace Harassment and Its Impact on Performance and Attitudes of University Teachers and Students in Southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Shahida Bibi

PhD Scholar, Institute of Education & Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan.
Shahidakhan_marwat@hotmail.com

Dr. Fahmida Bibi

Supervisor/Assistant Professor, Institute of Education & Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan. fahmida@gu.edu.pk

Muhammad Hashim

PhD Scholar, Institute of Education & Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan.
hashimghazlani92@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigated the perceptions and impact of workplace harassment, specifically verbal abuse and discrimination, on the performance, skills, and attitudes of teachers and students in public sector universities located in the southern region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Employing a descriptive research design, the study used a stratified sampling technique to select a representative sample of 694 participants, including BS, MPhil, and PhD students, as well as faculty members from five universities. Data were collected using a structured 7-point Likert scale questionnaire and analysed through descriptive statistics, t-tests, ANOVA, and multiple regression using SPSS. The findings revealed that verbal abuse and discrimination were perceived as significant forms of workplace harassment across all academic levels and genders. While statistical analysis showed no significant gender-based differences in perceptions, a considerable number of respondents, especially students, reported being undecided about their experiences, suggesting a potential lack of awareness or uncertainty in identifying harassment. The study highlighted the urgent need for institutional reforms, including policy development, awareness programs, and confidential reporting mechanisms, to address the normalised and often unreported nature of harassment in academic settings. The findings underscore the importance of fostering a supportive and respectful educational environment to enhance the well-being and productivity of university stakeholders.

Keywords: workplace harassment, verbal abuse, discrimination, university teachers, students, performance, higher education, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Introduction

Workplace harassment, including bullying, discrimination, verbal abuse, and intimidation, has become a significant issue in academic institutions globally (Salin, 2021). In the context of higher education, such behaviours not only affect individual well-being but also severely undermine professional performance and institutional integrity. In Pakistan, university teachers are increasingly reporting experiences of workplace bullying and harassment, often resulting in



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psychological stress, reduced motivation, low job satisfaction, and impaired performance (Ali, Ahmad, & Mahmood, 2023).

A study conducted in Punjab found that bullying significantly affects teachers' performance, with female faculty and those with less experience being particularly vulnerable (Shah, 2023). The research highlighted psychological consequences such as depression, decreased confidence, and withdrawal from professional roles. Studies have shown a direct negative correlation between bullying and academic self-efficacy among university teachers (Khan & Aslam, 2022). The academic environment plays a vital role in how bullying affects performance, where unsupportive or toxic environments further intensify the negative effects. Similarly, it has been observed that workplace harassment not only impairs focus and academic productivity but also contributes to burnout and high staff turnover (Rehman, 2022). According to Nielsen et al. (2016), workplace harassment is a pervasive issue affecting numerous industries, and the academic sector is not exempt from its impacts.

In recent years, attention to workplace harassment in educational settings, particularly at the university level, has heightened due to increased awareness and advocacy efforts. Research has shown that harassment can have profound consequences on individuals' well-being, job satisfaction, and organisational climate. Although workplace harassment has been widely studied in organisational and educational settings, most of the existing research has focused on corporate sectors or generalised academic environments in major urban centres (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). In Pakistan, studies addressing workplace harassment in the higher education sector were relatively limited, and those that do exist primarily concentrate on the provinces of Punjab and Sindh, with very little attention given to the Southern region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Ali, Ahmad, & Mahmood, 2023).

While some studies highlighted the psychological and emotional consequences of harassment, such as stress, burnout, and anxiety (Rehman, 2022). There was a lack of empirical data specifically linking workplace harassment to measurable changes in teachers' work performance, such as teaching quality, academic engagement, and research output in public sector universities (Khan & Aslam, 2022).

Statement of the Problem

Workplace harassment has become an increasingly pressing issue in academic environments, affecting not only the psychological well-being of employees but also their professional performance. In universities, teachers were particularly vulnerable to various forms of harassment, including verbal abuse, discrimination, and bullying by students, peers, and administrators. These negative behaviours may result in emotional distress, decreased motivation, and a significant decline in work performance. Despite growing awareness, the problem remains under-addressed, especially in developing countries like Pakistan, where cultural barriers and institutional silence often prevent proper documentation and action.



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Objectives of the Study

The following objectives of the study were:

1. To find out different forms of workplace harassment (**Verbal Abuse, Discrimination, Bullying**) that the respondents encounter in universities.
2. To find out the impact of workplace harassment on university **teachers' work performance**.

Research Questions of the Study

There were following research questions of the study were:

1. What different forms of workplace harassment (verbal abuse, discrimination, and bullying) are experienced by university teachers and students?
2. What is the impact of workplace harassment on the work performance of university teachers?

Significance of the Study

This study may hold significant value as it explores the often-overlooked issue of workplace harassment within the higher education sector, particularly focusing on its impact on the performance, skills, and attitudes of university teachers and students. In the context of Pakistan's universities, where hierarchical structures, power imbalances, and cultural norms may suppress reporting and addressing harassment, it becomes crucial to shed light on the forms and consequences of such behaviour. The significance of investigating the impact of workplace harassment on the performance, skills, and attitude of teachers and students in universities in the southern region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa may lie in its potential to improve the higher education environment. By understanding how verbal abuse, discrimination, and bullying affect both teachers and students, policymakers, university administrators, and other stakeholders may develop strategies to create a safer and more supportive academic workplace.

Delimitations of the Study

Delimitations are the boundaries of the study. The following were the delimitations of the current study.

1. Gomal University of D.I.Khan.
2. University of Science and Technology Bannu.
3. Kohat University of Science and Technology, Kohat
4. Khushal Khan Khattak University, Karak.
5. The University of Lakki Marwat, Lakki.

Research Methodology of the Study

The following research methodology of the study:

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive research design to examine the impact of workplace harassment (verbal abuse, discrimination, and bullying) on the performance, skills, and attitude of teachers and students in universities in the southern region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Descriptive research is widely used in social sciences as it allows researchers to systematically observe and analyse



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existing conditions without manipulating variables (Creswell, 2013).

Population of the Study

Southern Districts	Universities	Faculties	Departments	Respondents								Total
				BS (2021-25)		M.Phil. (2023-25)		Ph.D. (2022-25)		Teachers		
				M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
D.I.Khan	PU D.I.K	Faculty of Social Sciences	Education	68	4	44	17	35	4	16	11	199
			English	51	9	29	17	28	7	13	6	160
			Botany	48	5	27	12	23	2	11	2	130
			Zoology	46	6	25	11	17	5	0	1	111
Bannu	JSTB Bannu	Faculty of Social Sciences	Education	42	14	19	0	28	5	8	6	122
			English	40	9	17	0	23	7	9	4	109
			Botany	44	8	6	1	0	0	7	1	67
			Zoology	48	9	18	0	0	0	9	3	87
Kohat	KUST Kohat	Faculty of Social Sciences	Education	59	4	28	0	22	1	16	8	138
			English	47	2	19	0	31	0	9	5	113
			Botany	38	9	21	0	0	0	7	2	77
			Zoology	49	0	0	3	0	0	9	3	64
Makki Marwat	JLM Lakki	Faculty of Social Sciences	Education	45	9	0	0	15	0	8	4	81
			English	39	8	11	0	14	0	8	5	85
			Botany	44	0	10	1	12	2	7	7	83
			Zoology	38	5	13	3	12	2	2	3	78
Karak	KKKU Karak	Faculty of Social Sciences	Education	47	4	22	0	14	0	7	4	98
			English	44	3	18	0	0	0	14	11	90
			Botany	38	1	12	1	10	0	2	2	66
			Zoology	39	1	9	0	0	1	1	2	53
Total				914	110	348	66	284	36	163	90	2011



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The following population of the study:

Sample of the Study

The following sample of the study:

Data Collection

Southern Districts	Universities	Faculties	Departments	Respondents								Total
				BS (2021-25)		M.Phil. (2023-25)		Ph.D. (2022-25)		Teachers		
				M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
D.I.Khan	F.U D.I.K	Faculty of Social Sciences	Education	27	4	11	7	5	4	16	18	92
			English	19	9	10	10	4	7	3	6	68
		Faculty of Sciences	Botany	29	5	3	8	13	2	1	2	63
			Zoology	15	6	12	8	3	5	0	1	50
Bannu	JSTB Bannu	Faculty of Social Sciences	Education	16	4	1	0	2	1	4	6	34
			English	17	4	2	0	3	2	4	4	36
		Faculty of Sciences	Botany	16	2	0	1	0	0	1	1	21
			Zoology	16	1	2	0	0	0	3	3	25
Kohat	KUST Kohat	Faculty of Social Sciences	Education	9	4	2	0	2	1	6	8	32
			English	11	2	2	0	1	0	4	5	25
		Faculty of Sciences	Botany	19	9	1	0	0	0	1	2	32
			Zoology	2	0	0	3	0	0	3	3	11
Lakki Marwat	JLM Lakki	Faculty of Social Sciences	Education	15	3	0	0	1	0	4	4	27
			English	9	2	1	0	1	0	3	5	21
		Faculty of Sciences	Botany	12	0	1	1	1	1	7	7	30
			Zoology	14	2	1	1	1	1	2	3	25
Karak	KKKU Karak	Faculty of Social Sciences	Education	20	1	1	0	1	0	2	4	29
			English	0	1	5	0	0	0	10	10	26
		Faculty of Sciences	Botany	8	1	1	1	1	0	2	2	16
			Zoology	24	1	2	0	0	1	1	2	31
Total				298	61	58	40	39	25	77	96	694

The data for this study were collected through both primary and



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secondary sources to ensure comprehensive coverage of the research objectives. Primary data was obtained using a structured 7-point Likert scale questionnaire, which was distributed to a stratified sample of students and teachers from five public sector universities located in the southern region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The distribution was conducted both physically and, where necessary, online, to maximize response rates and overcome logistical challenges. Before full-scale data collection, a pilot test was conducted to ensure the reliability and clarity of the questionnaire.

The primary data secondary data were gathered from various academic and professional sources to strengthen the theoretical foundation of the study. These sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, academic publications, government and institutional reports, books, theses, websites, magazines, and other credible online databases. The secondary data was primarily used in the literature review to contextualize workplace harassment in academic settings and to support the development of research instruments and conceptual frameworks. By combining primary empirical data with secondary literature-based insights, the study ensured both depth and credibility in its investigation of how workplace harassment affects the performance, skills, and attitudes of university students and teachers.

Data Analysis

In any research study, the application of appropriate statistical methods is essential for deriving valid and meaningful conclusions. In the present research, careful consideration was given to the selection of statistical techniques in alignment with the research objectives and the quantitative nature of the data collected. To begin with, all responses from the structured questionnaires were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The data was then systematically organised to facilitate accurate analysis. Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were first employed to summarise the key characteristics of the data and to provide a general overview of respondents' responses across different variables.

Following descriptive analysis, inferential statistical techniques were applied to test hypotheses and examine group differences. The Independent Samples t-test was used to compare the mean scores between two independent groups, particularly to assess gender-based differences and other binary comparisons. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to identify significant differences among three or more groups, such as across academic levels or departmental categories.

Multiple regression analysis was employed to determine the predictive impact of the independent variable, workplace harassment on the dependent variables, namely performance, skills, and attitudes of teachers and students. This technique allowed for the estimation of the degree to which workplace harassment influenced each outcome variable while controlling for other factors.



Table#1.1: Stakeholder Perceptions of Verbal Abuse as a Component of Workplace Harassment.

Stakeholders		Gender	A. Verbal Abuse														Total Respond
			SA		A		SWA		UD		SWD		DA		SDA		
			N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Teachers		M	24	31.2	5	6.5	7	9.1	15	19.5	6	7.8	16	20.8	4	5.2	77
		F	6	31.6	0	0.0	1	5.3	4	21.1	2	10.5	5	26.3	1	5.3	19
PhD Students		M	7	18.4	2	5.3	0	0.0	12	31.6	9	23.7	1	2.6	7	18.4	38
		F	2	8.0	1	4.0	0	0.0	9	36.0	6	24.0	3	12.0	4	16.0	25
M. Phil Students	Phil	M	9	15.8	11	19.3	0	0.0	12	21.1	7	12.3	10	17.5	8	14.0	57
		F	6	13.3	4	8.9	0	0.0	17	37.8	7	15.6	5	11.1	6	13.3	45
BS Students		M	45	17.2	7	2.7	5	1.9	103	39.3	22	8.4	32	12.2	48	18.3	298
		F	7	10.1	7	10.1	1	1.4	29	42.0	16	23.2	7	10.1	2	2.9	69

Table #1.1 presents stakeholder perceptions of verbal abuse in universities. Among male teachers, 31.2% strongly agreed and 6.5% agreed that they experienced verbal abuse, while 20.8% disagreed and 5.2% strongly disagreed. Female teachers showed similar trends, with 31.6% strongly agreeing and 26.3% disagreeing. For PhD students, 18.4% of males and 7.4% of females strongly agreed, while 18.4% of males and 14.8% of females strongly disagreed. Among MPhil students, 15.8% of males and 13.3% of females strongly agreed, with disagreement levels ranging from 17.5% to 13.3%. Male BS students reported 15.1% strong agreement and 16.1% strong disagreement, while female BS students showed lower agreement (10.1%) and disagreement (2.9%) levels. Undecided responses were relatively high across all groups, particularly among BS and MPhil students, as shown in Figure 1.1.

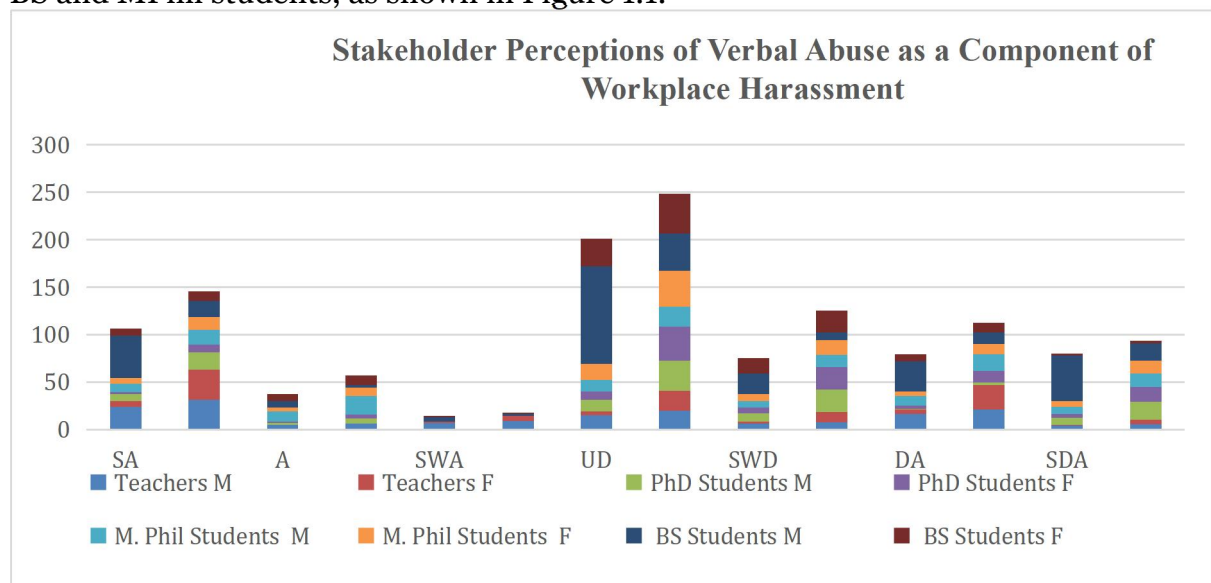


Fig.1.1: Stakeholder Perceptions of Verbal Abuse as a Component of Workplace Harassment



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Table#1.2 Comparison of Responses Regarding Stakeholder Perceptions of Verbal Abuse as a Component of Workplace Harassment"

Stakeholders	Gender	Verbal Abuse as a Component of Workplace Harassment: Results			Comparison.					
		N	Mean	S. D	Gender			Stakeholders		
					The t-test	significant difference using the t-tab	P-value	Stakeholders' differences: Using ANOVA		
								t-cal	t-tab	P-value
Teacher	F	19	4.51	2.07	0.555	1.96	0.5835	0.711	2.38	0.546
	M	77	4.21	2.12						
PhD	F	25	3.82	1.96	1.0133	1.96	0.3151			
	M	38	3.36	1.62						
M.phil	F	45	3.96	2.07	0.4148	1.96	0.6792			
	M	57	3.80	1.82						
BS	F	69	3.71	1.95	-1.1595	1.96	0.2494			
	M	298	4.00	1.49						

Based on the results of the independent sample t-test, no statistically significant gender-based differences were found in the perception of verbal abuse among university stakeholders. For teachers, PhD, MPhil, and BS students, the p-values were all greater than 0.05, indicating that both male and female respondents perceived verbal abuse at relatively similar levels. Therefore, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant difference in the perception of verbal abuse between male and female respondents within each group is accepted. This suggests that workplace harassment, specifically verbal abuse, is perceived consistently across genders within each academic category.

Table#1.3: Stakeholder Perceptions of Discrimination as a Component of Workplace Harassment.

Stakeholders	Gender	B. Discrimination														Total Respondents
		SA		A		SWA		UD		SWD		DA		SDA		
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Teachers	M	21	27.3	10	13.0	0	0.0	11	14.3	1	13.0	1	13.0	7	9.1	77
	F	4	21.1	3	15.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	21.1	7	36.8	1	5.3	19
PhD Students	M	10	26.3	1	2.6	0	0.0	9	23.7	9	23.7	2	5.3	7	18.4	38
	F	4	18.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	9	40.9	1	4.5	4	18.2	4	18.2	25



M. Phil Students	M	11	19.3	2	3.5	0	0.0	13	22.8	12	21.1	1	17.5	9	15.8	57
	F	9	20.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	18	40.0	8	17.8	4	8.9	6	13.3	45
BS Students	M	5	18.5	1	4.7	0	0.0	9	31.2	5	17.3	3	10.4	5	17.4	298
	F	1	23.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	29.0	2	31.9	9	13.0	2	2.9	69

Table #1.3 summarises perceptions of discrimination among university stakeholders. Among male teachers, 27.3% strongly agreed and 13.0% agreed that they experienced discrimination, while 23.4% disagreed and 9.1% strongly disagreed. Female teachers showed lower agreement, with 21.1% strongly agreeing and 36.9% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Among PhD students, 26.3% of males and 16.0% of females strongly agreed, while strong disagreement was reported by 18.4% and 16.0% respectively. In the MPhil group, 19.3% of males and 20.0% of females strongly agreed, with disagreement levels ranging from 17.5% to 13.3%. Male BS students reported 18.5% strong agreement and 17.4% strong disagreement. Female BS students showed similar disagreement (13.0%) but lower strong agreement (23.2%). Overall, a considerable proportion of stakeholders, especially students, remained undecided on experiencing discrimination as shown in fig.1.2.

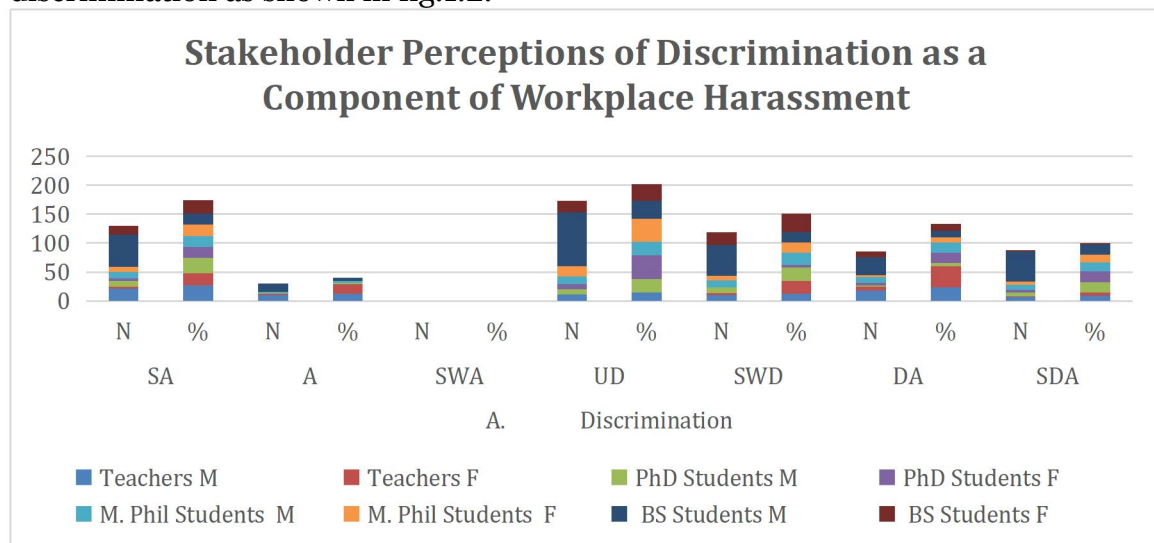


Fig. 1.2: Stakeholder Perceptions of Discrimination as a Component of Workplace Harassment

Table#1.4: Comparison of Stakeholder Perceptions of Discrimination as a Component of Workplace Harassment.

Teacher	Gender	Discrimination as a Component of Workplace Harassment: Results			Comparison.					
					Gender			Stakeholders		
					The significant difference using the t-test			Stakeholders' differences: Using ANOVA		
		N	Mean	S. D	t-cal	t-tab	P-value	F-cal	F-tab	P-value
Teacher	F	19	3.84	2.16	-	1.96	0.5103	-	1.96	0.510



	M	77	4.21	2.19	0.6669		
	F	25	3.60	1.97			
Phd	M	38	3.95	2.14	0.89	2.02	0.377
	F	45	3.84	1.87			
Mphil	M	57	3.61	2.02	0.5953	1.96	0.5531
	F	69	4.03	1.79			
BS	M	298	3.74	1.99	1.1866	1.96	0.2379
	F						

Table#1.4 indicated that the results of the independent sample t-test for the discrimination component of workplace harassment show that there is no statistically significant difference in perceptions between male and female respondents across all stakeholder groups. For teachers, PhD, MPhil, and BS students, the p-values are all greater than the standard threshold of 0.05, indicating that both genders perceive discrimination similarly within each category. Specifically, the p-values range from 0.2379 to 0.5531, and none of the calculated t-values exceed the tabulated values. Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted, confirming that gender does not play a significant role in shaping perceptions of discrimination among university stakeholders.

Discussions

The findings of this study revealed that verbal abuse was widely recognised as a significant component of workplace harassment among various university stakeholders, including teachers and students. The responses from Table #4.1 suggested that male teachers (31.2%) and female teachers (31.6%) strongly agreed that verbal abuse occurs in their professional environments, supporting previous research that verbal aggression is a common form of workplace mistreatment in academic institutions (Einarsen et al., 2020). The similarity in responses across genders implied that both male and female teachers are equally vulnerable to verbal mistreatment, contradicting earlier assumptions that women experience more workplace harassment (Salin & Hoel, 2020). A considerable proportion of PhD and MPhil students reported being undecided about experiencing verbal abuse, which may reflect confusion or uncertainty in defining or recognising verbal harassment (Branch et al., 2018). This uncertainty indicates the need for clearer institutional policies and awareness programs that help stakeholders identify and report abusive behaviour more confidently.

BS students showed the highest percentage of undecided responses (39.3% for males and 42.0% for females), which was consistent with the literature suggesting that younger students may struggle to distinguish between assertive communication and verbal abuse (Coyne et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the relatively high percentages of strong disagreement among BS students (18.3% male and 2.9% female) may reflect the normalisation of such behaviours or a lack of exposure due to their limited engagement with faculty as compared to research students and teachers. Table #4.2 supports the statistical interpretation that there is no significant gender-based difference in the perception of verbal



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abuse among stakeholders. This aligns with findings by Giorgi et al. (2016), who argue that while the experience of workplace harassment may be common, perceptions of such abuse do not differ significantly by gender when contextual and cultural factors are constant.

Regarding discrimination (Table 4.3), perceptions were more polarised. Among male teachers, 27.3% strongly agreed and 23.4% disagreed about facing discrimination. Female teachers, on the other hand, showed a higher tendency to disagree or strongly disagree (36.9%), perhaps indicating lower direct exposure or higher institutional support (Nielsen et al., 2017). However, the strong disagreement among female PhD and BS students (18.2% and 13.0% respectively) may point to either a lack of awareness or underreporting due to fear of retaliation or normalisation of biased practices in academia (Kabat-Farr & Cortina, 2019).

Interestingly, MPhil and BS students of both genders showed high percentages of undecided responses, reflecting either a lack of direct involvement in workplace-like settings or ambiguity in understanding institutional discrimination (Barling et al., 2019). This suggests the need for education and sensitisation at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels to enhance students' ability to recognise and report discriminatory practices. The t-test results in Table 4.4 once again confirm that there are no significant gender differences in perceptions of discrimination. This mirrors the results for verbal abuse and supports the broader literature that gendered differences in harassment perception are not always statistically significant, particularly in structured and formal academic settings (Cortina et al., 2018). However, this should not be interpreted as an absence of discrimination; instead, it highlights the complex, sometimes invisible, nature of these experiences, especially in cultures where hierarchical or patriarchal structures may conceal or normalise such behaviours (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020).

Conclusions

This study explored stakeholder perceptions of verbal abuse and discrimination as key components of workplace harassment in university settings. The findings revealed that verbal abuse was perceived as a prevalent issue across all stakeholder groups, including teachers, PhD, MPhil, and BS students. Although varying in intensity, the responses showed a consistent pattern, indicating that verbal harassment exists across genders and academic roles. A significant proportion of participants, especially students, were undecided in their responses, highlighting a potential lack of awareness or confusion about what constitutes verbal abuse and discrimination.

The study also found that while both male and female stakeholders acknowledged the presence of workplace discrimination, no statistically significant gender-based differences were observed in their perceptions. This suggests that experiences and awareness of workplace harassment may be more influenced by institutional culture and individual roles than by gender alone. The absence of significant differences between male and female respondents supported by t-test results, indicates a shared perception of workplace harassment. However, the persistence of undecided and mixed responses points to the need for clearer policies, training, and awareness initiatives to ensure all university stakeholders can recognise and respond effectively to instances of



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verbal abuse and discrimination.

The findings underscore the importance of creating safe, respectful, and inclusive academic environments. Universities must implement proactive strategies for addressing workplace harassment, including clear reporting mechanisms, support systems, and periodic monitoring of institutional culture. Without such efforts, the subtle and often normalized nature of verbal abuse and discrimination will continue to hinder well-being and productivity in academic settings.

Recommendations

There are following recommendations of the study:

1. Universities may formulate clear, comprehensive policies addressing verbal abuse and discrimination as forms of workplace harassment. These policies must be widely communicated and enforced across all departments to protect students, faculty, and staff.
2. Regular workshops and seminars should be organised to educate all stakeholders, especially students on recognising, reporting, and preventing verbal abuse and discrimination. Training should focus on both the legal framework and the psychological impact of such behaviours.
3. Institutions should provide accessible, anonymous, and confidential channels for victims or witnesses to report harassment without fear of retaliation. Dedicated committees should handle complaints promptly, fairly, and with appropriate disciplinary actions.
4. University leadership should foster an inclusive, respectful, and supportive environment by encouraging open dialogue, diversity, and mutual respect. Faculty and administration must lead by example in modeling appropriate behavior.
5. Especially for undergraduate and postgraduate students, content related to workplace ethics, human rights, and professional conduct should be incorporated into academic and orientation programs. This will help reduce the high number of “undecided” responses by improving understanding of harassment indicators.

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