

Unsafe campuses

Shazia Nizamani | Published March 9, 2022



The writer is a lawyer.

IN recent years, cases of violence and sexual harassment against women and girls have increased considerably in the country. Cases have been reported from everywhere from homes to marketplaces, but there has been a marked trend of female students speaking out against harassment at public and private universities across the country.

Last month, Parveen, a nurse training at People's University of Medical and Health Sciences in Nawabshah, moved the court against university officials for sexual harassment and attempted murder. She alleged that three masked university officials entered her room and beat her, and also tried to strangle her. However, she managed to escape and save herself.

In September 2019, Nimrita, a dental student in her final year at Larkana's Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto Medical University, was found dead in her hostel room. The university administration declared the death to be suicide but the family claimed she was murdered. Two years later, in November 2021, another medical student, Nosheen, was also found dead in the same hostel. Parveen, in a video uploaded on social media detailing her ordeal, expressed fears that perhaps Nimrita and Nosheen did not commit suicide and met

circumstances similar to hers before their deaths. All three investigations, so far, have remained inconclusive.

Meanwhile, in August 2020, a young PhD student of molecular medicine at Karachi University, Nadia, reportedly committed suicide because she was allegedly being harassed by her supervisor.

The trend of not reporting sexual harassment may be changing.

Another scandal erupted in 2020 in the elite Lahore Grammar School, where four faculty members were let go after teenage students complained of receiving vulgar messages and pictures and being blackmailed by teachers. The same year, a professor at Gomal University was dismissed from service after having been found guilty of sexually harassing his students.

Shocking as they are, these cases are only the tip of the iceberg; there are many more which are disregarded by the relevant authorities — an attitude that is usually motivated by deep-rooted patriarchal and feudal values, that prevent the reporting of such incidents, and keep perpetrators from being punished for their crimes.

For example, in the Larkana cases, initial police investigations put down both students' deaths as suicide. However, the families contested this claim and insisted that they were murdered, or were made to take their own life on account of blackmail. It was only after pressure from families and rights activists mounted that the Sindh health minister ordered an investigation into the murder allegations of the students.

However, the archaic mindset that connects practically every social wrong to the woman's and family's so-called honour is also largely to blame. It manifests itself in victim-blaming by society and feelings of fear and shame that compel parents to silence their daughters to avoid the stigma attached to such cases. Many students even feel uncomfortable in sharing their experiences of harassment or abuse out of fear that their families might stop them from completing their studies.

However, the gradual surge in the reporting of sexual abuse cases and resistance from families, as in the case of the Larkana deaths, indicates that this trend might be changing as people (especially women) become more aware of their rights and the avenues they can take to seek justice.

Still, there is only so much that the media and social media campaigns can achieve without official and legal mechanisms in place to officially pursue such cases. Though the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010, requires all workplaces to set up sexual harassment committees, it does not specifically mention universities. But the Higher Education Commission in July 2020 issued detailed guidelines for all higher education institutions to immediately designate at least two focal persons, one of them a woman, to offer timely support to any potential victim. In case any complaint is brought forward by a student, the higher education institute has to set up an investigation committee. Sadly, most varsities fail to follow these guidelines.

Meanwhile, the appalling Balochistan University scandal two years ago, where officials were found to be secretly filming female students and blackmailing them, has highlighted the need for thriving student unions. Here, the Sindh

government must be lauded for reviving student unions in the province after a long gap of 38 years. Hopefully, this will pave the way for a forum for students to air their grievances, via representation in university syndicates and anti-harassment committees, leading to safer campuses for women.

The writer is a lawyer.

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I find the loss of precious lives of young women students very disheartening, disturbing and sad. The most distressing thing is that the loss of life has happened due to most heinous actions of well educated people at institutions of higher learning that are expected to be abodes of highest ethical standards.

Recommend 1

Abdul Rasheed

Mar 09, 2022 10:14am

Exemplary punishment should be awarded to the culprits by speedy Trial Courts, otherwise this menace will keep on increasing day by day.

Recommend 6

imdadAli

Mar 09, 2022 11:35am

reality based opinion, as in our society there is routine of women harassment at work places, some cases reported have been mentioned but some unreported cases are not on record. unless the dominance of

male is curtailed and equal rights are not given to the female, we will be unable to control these cases in the days to come.

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