Street Harassment of Women in Lahore: Experiences, Consequences and Reporting Mechanism

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Urbanization, Women’s participation in education and work, and the patriarchal structure of Pakistani society are challenging women in urban communities, especially for their mobility. The present study aims to revolve around the experiences, consequences, and reactions of street harassment among young females of Urban Lahore. This study also aims to explore the perceptions of young females about public safety and comfort by exploring the reactions and reporting mechanism of young females to Street Harassment.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The research stance is interpretive consisting of 20 in-depth interviews of females between the ages of 18-35 years from Lahore. The sampling technique was snowball sampling and the data is transcribed and analyzed through thematic analysis.

Findings: The major findings of the present research show that the bus stops and terminals are the major places of street harassment and the perpetrators of street harassment come from all walks of life. Young females have social, emotional, and physical consequences of such kind of harassment. There are many social and cultural barriers, including patriarchal society and its socialization patterns, blaming the victims and considering it a harmless act which stops women to report it legally but they started to talk about it, especially in informal settings.

Implications/Originality/Value: Women need to have some support from their families and even from the passers in dealing with public or street harassment by not considering it a harmless act.

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Introduction
Rapid modernization and urbanization are challenging for contemporary cities and societies. It has led to changes in mobility and more specifically female mobility (Soraganvi, 2017). Thus, with changing traditional and cultivated roles of women, societies are confronting new and emerging interactions and roles of women globally and locally (Monqid, 2012). Women's participation, whether in education or the workforce is empowering them and bringing them out in public spheres more often. Henceforth the exchange, reciprocity, and interaction among both genders consequently ponder the importance of comfort, safety, security, and peace in domestic and public domains of life.

Protection, safety, and freedom of social mobility are the basic right of every human being, especially among the vulnerable groups (UN SDGs, 2015). However, in a collectivist and patriarchal structure of society like Pakistan, it is the biggest challenge and, in some cases, it is considered a fear or threat for a female to walk alone in a public sphere. Incidents of street Harassment and public places insecurity, distress, and fear of social mobility are very common among Pakistani females of all ages, social classes, and backgrounds. In Pakistan, almost every female at least once in her life faces the street or stranger harassment in every walk of life (Ahmad, Ahmad & Masood, 2020). The only condition or factor of facing street harassment is to be a woman, no matter what the social, economic, and cultural background is. Likewise, perpetrators of street harassment also come from all walks of life, they have different social classes, and educational levels, if any, and vary in age and maturity level, they could be an acquaintance or a total stranger, a local transport driver, colleague or even police officers who are considered as a protector of public (Hoque, 2013).

A survey conducted by Gallup in 2017 reveals the fact that almost every 1 woman among 4 in urban settlements of Pakistan faces street harassment while going the way to their homes, educational institutes, and markets (Imtiaz & Kamal, 2021). However, the same is happening in restaurants and parks. The vulnerability of women towards street harassment is the same for all ages and all geographical locations but the young girls (Ahmad, Ahmad & Masood, 2020). It is common in the streets of Pakistan and this regard usually victim has no option but to stay silent (Azeem, 2018). And staying silent is also associated with many the socio-psychological factors, which do have some connection with their social background.

Women in Pakistan are insecure is not something that requires more evidence than the daily broadcasts on news channels, publications, and social media. There has never been a more pressing need to tackle the subject of women's safety in public settings than now. With the rise in rape and harassment cases, the issue of women's safety and vulnerability in the strongly gendered public sphere demands more attention.

Violence in the four walls of the home against women is in the eyes of scholars and researchers but there is another more serious violence, street harassment, which is prevalent in public places and it even affects the mobility of a woman (Monqid, 2012). Although there appears to be an increase in violence against women this is not something new. It is simply obvious that women are more conscious of it now, and are finally standing up for themselves and many other females around them as well. Despite the rapid spread of such threatening and unsafe public places incidents, academic scholarships are dormant to highlight this issue which is essentially important for government, policymakers, human rights agencies, and social service institutions.

Street Harassment is considered an inhuman act and gender-based violence by men (Fileborn,
2022), especially in developing societies and South Asian countries which makes men more vulnerable to psycho-social problems and consequently can make them feel less dignified population within society. Article 1 of the Declaration of United Nations (1993, 48/104) defines gender-based violence against women as 'any act, that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. Gender abuse in public places degrades human dignity by making victims feel vulnerable both in psychological and physiological terms. (Ahmad, Ahmad & Masood, 2020).

In underprivileged societies all around the world, street harassment is one of the most common forms of social annoyance perpetrated against women. Street harassment is usually seen to take place, mainly, in broad daylight by people's surroundings or even in much crowded places (Dhillon and Bakaya, 2014). Moreover, in most situations, street harassment goes unseen and unreported since it has become a common part and even practice of public life. There are various reasons behind it, in some cases, it is perceived as a common practice that doesn't need much attention and reaction (Hlavka, 2014). In many cultures, it is being studied under the phenomena of the gendered, collective, and individualistic culture of the community.

Metropolitan cities have a higher risk of being unsafe for women in the South Asian context. Daylights, roads, and public transports are the main source of street harassment. In India, college-going girls face, a lack of confidence while confronting the harassers, they also have pressure from their families to discontinue their education if they would share the experience at home (Dhillon& Bakay, 2014). Although Lahore is a metropolitan city and yet it has many infrastructural issues.

Street harassment varies in its forms from inappropriate vulgar verbal comments, staring, inappropriate touching, winking, stalking, sexual remarks or gestures, and ogling at the victims which make them uncomfortable or fearful (Azeem, 2018; Ahmad et al., 2020; Qayyum et al., 2021; Fileborn, 2022). The present study aims to explore the perception and experiences of females, aging between 18-35 years, who use public transport in Lahore. The study also revolves around the reactions of young females while experiencing street harassment and identifying the reasons why street harassment is being unreported by them.

Objectives
- To explore the perceptions of young females about public safety and comfort
- To investigate the reasons, experiences, and outcomes of Street Harassment
- To explore the reactions and reporting mechanism of young females to Street Harassment

Literature Review
Street harassment shares the components of sexual harassment specifically unwanted sexual attention. It includes gestures, symbols, and whistles, staring and rubbing against women. The uniqueness of this term is that it includes the harassment by strangers unlikely the familiairs. Moreover, it is in the public domain including roads, streets, parks, restaurants, and any mode of public transport (Dhillon& Bakay, 2014).

The literature describes street harassment as a form of sexual harassment by words or verbal harassment under the term "eve-teasing" which means to pass a comment, or sing any song which can hit the dignity of a female in a public place socially and psychologically (Dhillon& Bakay, 2014; Anwar, Osterman& Bjorkqwist, 2019). It is an act of molestation of women by men in a public space or place. Street harassment is a sort of sexual aggressiveness that has devastating implications for women (Ahmad, Ahmad & Masood, 2020). A public place is an outdoor or indoor place/area which could be publically owned (parks) or privately owned (cafes) to which
the public has the right to access. (Stop Street Harassment Report, 2015).

Harassment is a sexual act that involves a person without consent considering the other one less powerful to react, respond, or refuse. This kind of Sexual violence includes rape, attempted rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, sexual coercion without physical force, and unwanted sexual contact (Basile et al., 2014). Harassment of women in public places is the depiction of unequal power distribution among men and women and it is historically proven. Davis (1994) defined and explained harassment as a form and type of "spiritual murder" which not only traumatizes the victim but also affects the liberty, life, and freedom of women. Moreover, it makes the victim silent and unable to express her sorrows (Osmond & Woodcock, 2015). Harassment affects the victims' behavioral, physical, and socio-psychological well-being, leading to a loss of faith in society (Houle et al, 2011; Ahmad, Ahmad & Masood, 2020).

Street harassment is a form of sexual harassment, that included sexual actions, gestures, speech, and hateful comments directed against a victim, his/her religion, race, standard, and or class. Public sexual harassment is described by British Army Sexual Harassment Report (2018) as 'unwanted physical, verbal or nonverbal conduct of sexual nature (Ahmad, Ahmad & Masood, 2020). The implications and consequences of street harassment have been explained both in psychological and social aspects. It is a form of attack and assault on a woman's psychic, physical, emotional, and mental abilities (Laniya, 2005).

Dhillon & Bakaya, (2014) have highlighted the factors including social, legal, and familial which can make a woman silent and stop them to share, register, and report the harassment. To understand, describe and explore the true means of street harassment it is important to narrate the experiences of women which certainly show the life of women in a city and the feelings of safety from their perspective.

Women all over the world have faced the consequences while reporting and reacting to street harassment in terms of threats and beating while confronting the perpetrators. In 2013, a girl in Florida was brutally beaten by the harasser while refusing him and confronting him. But he could not be stopped until the other male witness entered that premises. The influence of street harassment can bring negative consequences to routine life and gradually lower the personal and economic development of the victim. It is unreported until it is assaulted because it is considered to be a part of social life (Dhillon & Bakay, 2014).

Soraganvi (2017), in her study, illustrated that sexual harassment is common in India in streets, shopping plazas, markets, parks, restaurants, and in the workplace. This harassment is a depiction of gender discrimination in societal institutions because only the females face it because of their specific genders (Soraganvi, 2017). The new and emerging dynamics of women's roles have changed the mobility of women and made it more denounced to exclude them from public spheres while their access to male dominating public spheres makes them more vulnerable to the sexual coercion by men showing the ultimate power and freedom in society is for the man (Monqid, 2012).

**Methodology**

This research intends to add to the existing body of knowledge on sexual and street harassment perceptions, experiences, consequences, and reactions of females in public spaces within Pakistani society's context. The researchers investigated the phenomena under the interpretive paradigm based on the social construction of the phenomena while knowing and exploring the experiences, outcomes, and reactions towards street harassment in public places. For the said purpose the data were collected through in-depth interviews taken from 20 females aged 18-35 years from different socio-economic backgrounds including age, income, education, and locality
Street Harassment is everywhere
Street Harassment prevails everywhere no matter whether the country or community is developed or less developed. However, it varies from culture to culture and usually prevails in crowds, in public transport, and in workplaces in both developed and less-developed countries (Anwar, Osterman & Bjorkqwist, 2019). Moreover, unreported crime and violence increase the chance of its occurrence and multiply its consequence on women and sometimes make it contagious to their life zones in terms of anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues (Soraganvi, 2017).

A girl 23 years old, student, studying at a university told that harassment has been so common in her life either comments passing, singing a song, or grabbing a body that she even did not remember when the first time she was being harassed and she said I have accepted the other gender as a teaser and killer of the self-esteem that I am losing the trust on a man even. I feel whenever a man gets a chance he can disrespect or abuse you because he is most powerful in the interactions. Moreover, what is making the cities more unsafe, is the dead street life, insufficient interventions from neighbors and police, and acceptance of the harassment as a harmless crime.
Street Harassment is a common, understudy, and prevalent gender-based violence which is very common in public places, including any physical, verbal, or non-verbal harm or abuse which is unwelcome and unreciprocated (Anwar, Osterman & Bjorkqwist, 2019). One of the participants responded that:

The city and the life have more privileges for men than women, whether it is leisure, work or mobility, using the public transport is not the only source of street harassment, I being a woman face it when I am alone either I use public transport or I drive my car. The humiliating unwanted dirty comments kill the dignity of any woman just like me (Morqid, 2012). He also illustrated in his research that city and public spheres discriminate against men and women in their gender interactions.

**Perceptions of Street Harassment**

When a woman comes out from the boundaries of domestic roles and changes the gender hierarchy, a man cannot digest this and try to force the traditional power on the targeted woman by hurting her dignity and self-esteem. Gardner (1995) explains that stranger harassment is so inescapable that it has become a piece of the social fabric of public life and thus women who experience the harassment believe that no one will think anything important has happened. Women and girls from an exceptionally young age are taught to endure or stay quiet when they are being harassed.

One of the participants shared that for many years I have seen my cousins giggling and teasing the girls and discussing it in front of the family members where nobody stopped them. This silent acceptance of their harassing behavior promoted it and indirectly encouraged them more into the evil.

Another participant, 19 years old, shared that according to her, street harassment is not only about touching the bodies of females or teasing verbally in public places, it is their gaze that is terrifying as well. Their gaze gives chills to their bones, they feel that their bodies are being exposed and they feel insecure and threatened.

In some cases, occurrences of lascivious behavior are so sensitive that numerous casualties who experience such aggravations neglect to perceive or mark the issue and are even terrified of revealing it to other people (Ahmad, Ahmad & Masood, 2020). It also shows the place of women in the social fabric (Morqid, 2012).

The new and emerging dynamics of women's roles have changed the mobility of women and made it more denounced to exclude them from public spheres while their access on male dominating public spheres makes them more vulnerable to the sexual coercion by men showing the ultimate power and freedom in society is for the man (Morqid, 2012).

Women's bodies seen in the public sphere are considered to be a source of objectification of sex, no matter the age, dress, or religion. Saying Ma Sha Allah, Subhan Allah often breaks the integrity of a woman instead of appreciation, reported a 32 years old, girl working in a superstore.

A 23-year-old student shared her experience while passing through a market alone that I usually heard the comments of KALLO, Kali Murghi, such humiliating and distressing comments are not sexually hitting me but somewhere make me feel that I am a rejected person on the beauty standard of our society.
Another college student 18 years old shared her experience that while standing on a bus stand I usually see young boys and mostly men of age between 32-35 years passing comments like "lift chahay" and "Gurya sawari chahay". These comments have generated a feeling of fear and at times aggression among them.

**Patterns of Street Harassment**

Harassment is a sexual act that involves a person, without consent, considering the other one less powerful to react, respond or refuse. This kind of Sexual violence includes rape, attempted rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, sexual coercion without physical force, and unwanted sexual contact (Basile et al., 2014). It can be gender harassment by institutional violence, unwanted sexual attraction, or sexual coercion from individual to individual which includes staring, whistling, winks, catcalls, sexual jokes or comments, and unwanted body touch. Sexual coercion involves direct or indirect requests or threats to get sexual benefits. However, its expressions vary from culture to culture (Anwar, Osterman & Bjorkqwist, 2019).

One of the research participants, 25 years old MPhil Student, living in Lahore for her study and career purpose shared her experience that the moment I stepped into the city, one auto-rickshaw driver tried to touch me while entering the auto. This physical touch has captured my mind with a lot of insecurities and fears from the city and was keeping me in trouble for a long time. I started to feel humiliated and could not tell to anyone for many years.

Not only this, females from a very young age have experienced street harassment to a level that they felt numb for so many days and the horror of stepping out of their homes has prevailed for quite some days.

Another female student, 19 years, shared her experience that the first time she experienced street harassment was when she was between 13-14 years and she was on her way to school with her cousin. She was passing through the street of a residential area and a boy was sitting on his bike. The moment the girl passed by the bike, the boy snatched her scarf and tried to grab her neck, God knows for what purpose. To which she responded that she was shocked for a moment and after a few seconds she realized and tried to scream to which the boy ran away.

Unwanted comments, gestures, honking, wolf-whistling, catcalling, exposure, following, persistent sexual advances, and touching by strangers in public areas are sadly a very common phenomenon in Lahore, experienced by females irrespective of their age and dress. They are women and they are on the road; that is enough for them to be harassed. Many of the girls don’t open their mouths or share it with others because of the reason not to defame themselves and their family name (Azeem, 2018).

A 30 years old girl, working in an educational institute shared her experience that while on the bus someone was continuously blowing a whistle in her ears and whispering. In reaction, the man smiled and said Abhi to me ney Kuch Kiya he nahi ap ghabrana rahi hain. And the men on that transport were quiet on this incident.

Men consider it their right to tease a woman in the public sphere (Morqid, 2012). The patriarchal system promotes gender inequality and may allow men to wield dominance over women by debasing them physically and often it is perceived by male harassers as a source of entertainment and a source of releasing their aggression or frustration (Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014).

A 25 years old university-going student shared her experience that one time on the public bus a man, aged between 35-38, tried to inappropriately touch her to which she started shouting and confronted the perpetrator. To her shock the ladies on the bus tried to tell her that men are like...
this you need to calm down otherwise they may face other consequences of your out lash.

It is an act of molestation of women by men in a public space or place. Street harassment is a sort of sexual aggressiveness that has devastating implications for women (Ahmad, Ahmad & Masood, 2020). Other than a source of entertainment it is also seen as "harmless flirtation" and even a sense of entitlement felt by men over the bodies of women in general. The reaction of women is “disgust and fear” which is perceived by men as desire and fascination and this is what makes this whole situation heinous and traumatizing for the females. Ogling of women by men was commonly practiced in the sub-continent and the male perpetrators are from different socio-cultural, economical, sectorial, and educational levels, they had been doing the same for the source of entertainment (Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014).

Another respondent, 28 years old female told me that while waiting for my transport a 35 years old man reached there and was on a bike, he was trying to show his male organs which is so ridiculous act that I throw a water bottle at his face and he disappeared in a moment which showed he either used to do this so often or he belongs to that locality.

Harassment is violence that can be physical, verbal, or psychological (Morqid, 2012). Respondents of different ages highlighted that the psychological trauma that was brought as a result of street harassment was unexplainable. The fear of stepping out of the house again, talking to male members of the family, fear using any form of public transport, or even going to a crowded place like a market/bazaar.

Concomitants of Street Harassment
Distress, fear, disrespect, and continuous harassment result in timidness, lack of self-confidence, and disturbance in studies (Anwar, Osterman& Bjorkqwist, 2019). Fear and anger are the consequences among women who experience harassment more, low self-esteem unhappiness (Houle et al., 2011).

A 25 years old girl, shared that the harasser was so intense in the behavior that he came to her home many times while staying the whole night and he was very reputed in the town which put the girl in much trouble that after the continuous episodes of his harassment, she felt she lost her hunger and even though many times of the suicide. Feeling of shame, eating disorders, and depression are very common among victims when they go through such situations. Other than emotional harm caused by street harassment, physical harm such as pounding of the heart, numbness, or breathlessness has also been seen among the victims (Tran, 2005, Morqid,2012).

A 23-year-old girl shared her experience in the interview that her harasser's verbal remarks and gestures have put her to a point where she started to question her self-esteem. She mentioned one non-verbal gesture of her harasser of “whistle and wink” so terrifying that she even scanned her clothes for a moment that there might be something wrong with her clothes that might have provoked such action. This generated self-doubt in her personality for quite some time.

Reactions and Reporting Mechanism of Street Harassment
Dhillon & Bakaya, (2014) have highlighted the factors including social, legal, and familial which can make a woman silent and stop them to share, register, and report the harassment.

A 28 years old girl teaching in a private academy told her that harasser was a friend of his cousin and he used to chase her every time from a certain point to tease and give her bad gestures. In reaction, she changed the timing and route but it did work. I did not share it with my family because the harasser was my cousin’s friend and I was in doubt that no one would believe
In other cases, it creates fear that if a female takes a step against it, it might sabotage the reputation of that girl/women’s family because of the victim-blame culture that exists. Various labels could be attached to her, and could even put her life or future at stake (Hlavka, 2014). A respondent told that no interference from the by-passers to stop this act of harassment considering that it has no harm is multiplying the chances of its occurrence.

This is the woman who changes her routes and timings because the man is not needed in public places. The presence of a woman at a bus terminal or any public place should be like a corner place where she can hide herself to avoid the unwanted eyes and touches of strangers. This discrimination makes the places gender-specific as the public places are also a source of gender interaction (Soraganvi, 2017). Apart from changing their daily route, respondents have also mentioned other strategies like taking a family member along with them to the bus or riksha stop, using the same route but this time having safety tools like pepper spray, compass, or hard water bottle with them. Social custom and gender-sensitive socialization stop them to confront because of saving the tag of good women and blaming the victim (Anwar, Osterman & Bjorkqwist, 2019).

In Patriarchal societies, like Pakistan, women's harassment is considered an unimportant issue, by many people, and is usually unaddressed by academicians, researchers, and even family members. Women have been taught to adjust and compromise on the men's power and position in terms of harassment in public places. So mostly such harassment is unreported and is also considered a normal act in such societies. Street harassment is a kind of social pain and discrimination against women which becomes a source of multiple sufferings for the women and is usually unreported in a country like Pakistan. The consequences, reactions, and report about any kind of street harassment depends on the socio-cultural context of any society.

Even the remiss mentality of police towards such violations to impacts the choice to not report such incidents. And the most horrific reason why such a case goes unreported is because of the mindset of females and family members that this is what boys/men do and ignore the act. Depending on the sociocultural circumstances of the communities, this phenomenon manifests itself in various forms and degrees (Ahmad, Ahmad & Masood, 2020).

A respondent told that I usually do not share it with my male family members because of the fear of some unwanted mess or fight with the harassers because I know they belong to my locality.

**Perpetrators of Street Harassment**

In all cultures, the perpetrators of street harassment are usually men either strangers or the same passengers traveling in the same transport, drivers, and conductors (Anwar, Osterman & Bjorkqwist, 2019). Many of the respondents agreed that the harassers do not belong to a specific social class or group or profession they can be from all ages, social classes, and even professions.

One of the respondents said that it is not a matter of their education or social class it is a certain state of mind which pushes them to tease, humiliate and destroy the self-esteem of the other gender. She further elaborated that she faced this harassment on road by a teacher from a well-reputed institute and she tried to register a complaint about it after facing many hurdles and barriers from her family and friends. She involved police and legal authorities in it which brought the worse consequences to her education.

Apart from the state of mind, one of the respondents highlighted that perpetrator looks vulgar in their physical appearance as well. She also highlighted that just by looking at their face there is a feeling of disgust, hatred and aggression aroused.
People, space, and place have generated the discourse of safety, comfort, and belonging in terms of violence and crime. A patriarchal society is male-centric in its public and private domains of life which can make women more vulnerable to crime and any kind of abuse and violence (Soranganvi, 2017).

A 28 years old girl responded that while traveling on an auto a bike rider despite having his wife and kids with him was continuously showing her some bad symbols through facial gestures. She told me I felt so much pity for his family who belonged to him that I forgot how to react to this act. Laniya (2005) identified three broad categories of perpetrators of street harassment: predatory harassers: who “harass for sexual satisfaction”; dominance harassers: who “harass to reassert men’s power over women”; and strategic/territorial harassers: who “harass to protect ‘male’ environments” (p. 108).

Limitations
The present research focused on the experiences and perceptions of 20 young females using public transport. To explore the wider aspects of occurring phenomena is to inculcate more women in the research.

Recommendations
While young females mostly face this phenomenon more often yet another population of the society like school-going girls remain extensively victimized and do not even know how to face and cope with these cruel occurring patterns of the society. Future research can enhance the perspective of such girls.

Conclusion
Street harassment is a kind of harassment in which someone is harassed sexually and is involved without her consent. It is very common in patriarchal fabricated societies, especially in South Asian countries. It is an existing and prevailing phenomenon and many times it goes unreported and unaddressed. Every public place including markets, restaurants, shopping centers, parks, terminals, and waiting areas is a center point for teasing emotionally and physically to women by men, no matter what the age, occupation, or socioeconomic background is. The perpetrators belong to all walks of life bringing the consequences of street harassment on the mental and physical health of young females. The victims usually face many socio-cultural barriers in dealing with these incidents of harassment and do not report it legally considering it a common phenomenon. Yet the by-passers also do not involve in it considering it a normal thing or ignoring it as it is a part of the social fabric in a patriarchal society to objectify women as sexual objects and a source of entertainment. Or they consider it is not their responsibility or duty to jump into a situation that is not their concern in the first place.

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