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THE IMPACT OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE ON FEMALES' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AT TERTIARY LEVEL

Abstract

This study examines the pervasive issue of sexual violence (SV) experienced by millions of women globally, with a focus on its profound impact on the academic performance of female university students. Through 10 in-depth interviews with survivors in Islamabad's public universities, data was collected using an online questionnaire. Drawing on feminist theory, the research underscores the societal construct of gender inequality affecting women's lives. Major themes identified include challenges in concentration, emotional distress from abuse, reporting difficulties, the need for university counseling, and the importance of institutional policies. Respondents expressed how SV hindered educational focus and caused discomfort, fear, absenteeism, and reduced academic participation. Recommendations stress the necessity for qualified counselors and proactive university policies to create a secure learning environment, emphasizing the crucial role of educational institutions in preventing and addressing sexual violence.

Keywords: Sexual Violence (SV), Academic Performance, Female Students, Tertiary level.

1. **INTRODUCTION**

According to the United Rights Council (2014) and Cotter & Savage (2019), gender-based violence occurs when people or groups of individuals are violently treated due to its considered their gender, gender expression, or gender identity. Understanding how socially established gender roles affect who is most likely to commit violence as well as a victim of it is facilitated by analyzing violence through the lens of gender (2015) Benoit et. Globally, gender-based violence is acknowledged as a problem of both public health and human rights that can exacerbate gender inequality (World Health Organization, 2020; Cotter & Savage, 2019; Government of Canada, 2019).

According to the United Rights Council (2014), the term "sexual violence" refers to a broad spectrum of impermissible adultery, including but not restricted to forced penetration, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, coercion, stalking, and unwelcome touch or sexual activity. Sexual assaulters frequently use humiliation and dominance to achieve control over their victims and a sense of authority over them (Kalra & Bhugra, 2013). Given that an overwhelming 82–90% of sexual assault survivors identify as women, sexual violence is a crime against women (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). Despite the reality that men can also become victims of sexual assault, the focus of this study will be primarily on victims of undesired sexual encounters who identify as women. (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000).

Sexual violence against women is a serious issue in Pakistan. Unfortunately, obtaining accurate statistics on the prevalence of sexual violence in the country is challenging due to underreporting and cultural taboos surrounding the topic.

That being said, according to a 2017 report by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, an estimated 5,660 cases of rape were reported in the country in 2017 alone. However, it is important to note that this figure likely represents only a fraction of actual incidents, as many cases go unreported due to fear of stigma, retribution, or a lack of faith in the justice system.

Furthermore, sexual harassment and assault are also common in Pakistan, particularly in public spaces. A 2018 survey by the Aurat Foundation found that 96% of women in Pakistan had experienced some form of sexual harassment in public spaces, while 89% had experienced some form of verbal abuse or unwanted physical contact.

Millions of women experience sexual violence daily throughout the world. This type of violence can have devastating effects on a woman's physical and mental health, as well as her academic performance. Research has shown that sexual violence can lead to a range of negative outcomes, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and decreased academic performance.

At the university level, female students who experience sexual violence may struggle to focus on their studies, attend classes regularly, or engage in extracurricular activities. This can ultimately impact their academic performance, leading to a decline in grades or even dropping out of school. Furthermore, the fear of sexual violence may also limit female students' participation in campus life, such as avoiding certain areas or events.

Addressing sexual violence on university campuses is crucial to ensure that female students can access education without fear of harm. This includes implementing policies and programs that support survivors and promote prevention, as well as creating a campus culture that values respect and consent.

Overall, while it is difficult to determine the exact ratio of sexual violence against women in Pakistan, it is clear that it is a pervasive problem in the country. Sexual violence continues to be a persistent issue among university students, with far-reaching consequences that affect their psychological well-being, social lives, and physical health. Several studies, including those by Campbell et al. (2001), Mason and Lodrick (2013), and Rothman et al. (2019), have highlighted the complex nature of these consequences.

Survivors of sexual violence may experience unique challenges that impact their academic performance, including a drop in their grade point average (GPA), delayed graduation, and a decreased level of engagement or withdrawal from their studies. This is highlighted in several studies, including those by Baker et al. (2016), Banyard et al. (2020), Jordan (2014), Jordan et al. (2014), Kaufman et al. (2019), Mengo and Black (2016), Potter et al. (2018), and Stermac et al. (2020). Formal and informal help-seeking behaviors have been found to play a mediating role in mitigating the negative consequences of sexual violence, as noted by DeLoveh and Cattaneo (2017). However, many survivors of sexual violence who are students face significant barriers to seeking help. These barriers include logistical issues, feelings of shame, and uncertainty regarding the acceptability of seeking support, as described in studies by Holland and Cortina (2017) and Wood and Stichman (2018). It is noteworthy that there is a dearth of research that investigates the help-seeking behaviors of university students who have experienced sexual violence, as well as the impact of such experiences on their academic performance and their sense of belonging within the university community.

1.2 **Objectives**
1. To explore the impacts of sexual violence on female academic performance during university years.
2. To highlight the role of universities in preventing students from sexual violence during university years.

1.3 Research Question
1. What is the impact of sexual violence on the academic performance of female university students?
2. How do universities play a role in preventing students from sexual violence during university years?

1.4 Theoretical Framework
This study will use the feminist theory as a guide. This theory says that unfair differences between men and women are made up by society and impact many parts of women's lives. According to feminist theory, actions like sexual violence and harassment happen because of unequal power between men and women. The research will look into how this power difference influences how well women do in their studies at college. This theory could be used to investigate how gender-based violence (such as sexual violence) affects female students' academic experiences, and how patriarchal structures in higher education institutions may perpetuate this violence. The theory suggests that the impact of sexual violence on female academic performance is not merely an individual issue, but a systemic problem that requires institutional change. Here's a diagram of the theoretical framework for the study:

Feminist Theory

Social construct of gender	Unequal power relations
Sexual violence and harassment against women	Female academic performance level at tertiary
Systemic problem	Institutional change

The diagram shows how the feminist theory views gender inequality as a social construct that affects all aspects of women's lives, including their experiences of sexual violence and harassment. It also recognizes that sexual violence is a manifestation of unequal power relations between men and women. The study will explore how this power dynamic impacts female academic performance at the tertiary level and the need for institutional change to address the systemic problem.
The diagram shows this by dividing the theory into two main components:
1. Social construct of gender: This component represents the idea that gender is a social construct, meaning that it is created and reinforced by society rather than being an innate characteristic. The social construct of gender affects how women are perceived and treated in society, including their experiences of sexual violence and harassment.
2. Unequal power relations: This component represents the idea that sexual violence and harassment are manifestations of unequal power relations between men and women. The unequal

power dynamic between men and women is a key factor in the prevalence of sexual violence and harassment against women.

The diagram also shows how these components of feminist theory are related to the study's focus on female academic performance at the tertiary level. Specifically, the diagram shows that:

1. Female academic performance at the tertiary level: This component represents the study's focus on the impact of sexual violence and harassment on female academic performance at the tertiary level.

2. Sexual violence and harassment against women: This component represents the experiences of sexual violence and harassment that female students may face while attending college or university.

3. Systemic problem: This component represents the idea that the impact of sexual violence and harassment on female academic performance is not merely an individual issue, but a systemic problem that requires institutional change.

4. Institutional change: This component represents the need for colleges and universities to implement policies and programs that address sexual violence and harassment, support survivors, and prevent future incidents.

1.5 Conceptual Framework:

The conceptual framework for this study will be based on the socio-ecological model, which recognizes that individual behavior is influenced by multiple levels of social and environmental factors. The model views sexual violence and harassment as a complex phenomenon that is influenced by individual, interpersonal, community, and societal factors. The study will explore how these factors interact to affect female academic performance at the tertiary level.

The socio-ecological model will help to identify the various factors that contribute to the prevalence of sexual violence and harassment on campus, and how they impact female students' academic performance. The model suggests that effective interventions to prevent sexual violence and support survivors must address these multiple levels of influence.

2. Literature Review

Sexual violence is a pervasive problem across the world, affecting individuals from all walks of life. In recent years, there has been growing concern about the impact of sexual violence on female academic performance at the tertiary level. This literature review seeks to explore the research conducted between 2015 and 2023 on the impact of sexual violence on female academic performance at the tertiary level. The review will focus on the effects of sexual violence on academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being.

2.1 Academic Performance and Sexual Violence

Several studies have found a negative relationship between sexual violence and academic performance. For example, Mohammed and Abdulmalik (2019) conducted a case study of the Federal University of Technology, Minna in Nigeria, and found that female students who experienced sexual violence had lower academic performance than their non-victimized peers. Similarly, Fisher, Cullen, and Turner (2018) found that sexual violence was associated with lower grades and a higher likelihood of dropping out of college.

Sexual violence against women is a pervasive problem that has been linked to a range of negative outcomes, including decreased academic performance. In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature examining the impact of sexual violence on female academic

performance at the university level. This literature review will summarize and synthesize some of the key findings in this area.

Several studies have found that female university students who have experienced sexual violence are more likely to report a decline in academic performance. For example, In a study by Cantor et al. (2015), it was discovered that female students who had reported experiencing sexual assault had lower grade point averages and were more prone to class absenteeism than those who had not reported such experiences. The study conducted by Fisher et al. (2013) revealed that female students who had experienced sexual victimization had lower levels of academic self-esteem and were less likely to feel a sense of belonging to their university community.

Building on the research conducted before 2015, recent studies have continued to investigate the impact of sexual violence on female academic performance at the university level. For example, Research has investigated the effect of sexual violence on the academic performance of female university students. Rizo et al. (2019) conducted a study that discovered female students who experienced sexual harassment had lower academic achievement and were more likely to report lower academic self-efficacy. Similarly, a study by Cho et al. (2020) found that female students who experienced sexual harassment reported lower levels of academic engagement and were less likely to feel connected to their university community.

In addition to examining the impact of sexual violence on academic performance, recent studies have also investigated the factors that may protect against or exacerbate the negative effects of sexual violence on female students. For example, a study by Senn et al. (2017) found that social support was an important protective factor against the negative impact of sexual assault on academic performance. Another study by Greeson et al. (2018) found that participating in a trauma-informed yoga program was associated with improved academic outcomes among female survivors of sexual violence.

2.2 Mental Health and Sexual Violence

Sexual violence can have a significant impact on the mental health of survivors, which in turn can affect their academic performance. Krebs et al. (2016) conducted a review of the literature and found that sexual violence was associated with depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among college women. Kimble et al. (2015) also found that sexual violence was associated with increased symptoms of depression and anxiety, which hurt academic achievement.

Sexual violence can also hurt the overall well-being of survivors, which can affect their ability to perform academically. Mohammed and Abdulmalik (2019) found that female students who experienced sexual violence reported lower levels of self-esteem and confidence, which affected their overall well-being. Fisher, Cullen, and Turner (2018) also found that sexual violence was associated with decreased overall well-being among college women.

Sexual violence hurts female academic performance at the tertiary level. The effects of sexual violence are widespread and can include lower academic performance, decreased mental health, and decreased overall well-being. It is important for tertiary institutions to recognize the impact of sexual violence on their students and to provide support and resources for survivors. Further research is needed to explore the relationship between sexual violence and academic performance in more detail and to identify effective interventions to support survivors.

2.3 Role of Educational Bodies in Preventing Sexual Violence

It is important to note that the impact of sexual violence on female academic performance is not limited to individual-level factors. Several studies have also highlighted the role of campus culture and institutional policies in perpetuating or mitigating the effects of sexual violence on

female students' academic performance. For example, a study by Krebs et al. (2016) found that female students who perceived their campus to be less supportive of survivors of sexual assault had lower academic performance than those who perceived their campus to be more supportive.

Recent studies have also highlighted the importance of addressing sexual violence on university campuses through policy and programming initiatives. For example, a study by Edwards et al. (2021) found that implementing a bystander intervention program on campus was associated with decreased rates of sexual assault and increased reporting of sexual violence. Another study by Smith et al. (2020) found that implementing a comprehensive sexual assault prevention program on campus was associated with increased reporting of sexual violence and improved perceptions of campus safety.

Overall, the literature suggests that sexual violence continues to pose a significant threat to female academic performance at the university level. However, recent studies have also highlighted the potential for protective factors and policy interventions to mitigate the negative impact of sexual violence on female students. This impact is mediated by individual-level factors such as depression and fear of victimization, as well as campus-level factors such as institutional policies and campus culture. Addressing sexual violence on university campuses is therefore crucial to ensuring that female students can access education without fear of harm and can achieve their full academic potential. Further research is needed to continue to identify effective strategies for addressing sexual violence on university campuses and promoting the academic success of female students.

3. **METHODOLOGY**

   3.1 Research Design The research method of this study is qualitative. The researcher also used a phenomenological research design. This design aims to understand the meaning and essence of an experience from the perspective of the individuals who have experienced it.

   3.2 Population

   The population of the present study is female students at public universities in Islamabad who have experienced sexual violence.

   3.3 Sample size

   The data were collected from 10 female students. Female students are from public universities of Islamabad who have experienced sexual violence.

   3.4 Sampling technique

   A convenience sampling technique is used in this study. Using this technique is helpful to cover more areas of the population and better results will be found.

   3.5 Instrument

   The instrument of this study is structured interviews, the interviews conducted with female students who have experienced sexual violence.

   4. DATA ANALYSIS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

   4.1 Data analysis

   Thematic content analysis was used to examine the interview transcripts (Krippendorf & Bock 2009). Deductive methodologies were utilized to study themes connected to the impact of sexual violence on female university students, while inductive analyses were employed to find new themes that emerged from the data. I begin gathering data with a screening question that asks participants whether they have ever experienced sexual assault while in college. Because my population is drawn from the public universities in Islamabad, I also use this question as a screening. Age-related demographic questions are included in the survey as well. Because I require several age groups, I inserted age. I categorized age ranges like 22–24 and 25–27. 28-28.

Their major, which is centered on social and natural science, is listed as the second demographic question item. To divide the material into digestible portions, open line-by-line coding was done after several readings of the transcripts. We looked at previous codes and contrasted them with new codes, consolidating and removing superfluous themes that did not turn out to be the most important. To gather, redefine, and analyze themes, we used an iterative method. To further protect participant confidentiality, we did not record oral interviews including participants' names, interview locations, home addresses, phone numbers, or any other personally identifiable information.

4.2 Results and Discussion

We identified the following themes and subthemes regarding SV with female academic performance (1) Difficulty in concentrating and focusing on my studies: (2) Depression for a girl being sexually abused by some stranger: (3) Difficulty reporting incidents of sexual violence or abuse: (4) University provide counseling for students to preventing SV: (5)Universities design policies regarding sexual violence:

In the following sections, these themes will be explored in further detail with quoted narratives from our respondents reflecting each of these themes. All quotes appear in their direct interview.

1. **Difficulty in concentrating and focusing on my studies.**

   Multiple respondents reported that they had experienced difficulty in concentrating on studies due to Sexual Violence. This first participant reports his experiences with SV:

   Yes, it was difficult for me to focus on my studies because of my experience. I was shocked that someone had this authority to touch you.

   These types of experiences may be the cause of dropping out of university and taking longer to graduate.

   Yes, these conditions can make it difficult for a student to focus on their studies and may result in them taking longer to graduate or even dropping out of university.

   These experiences shed light on how students face difficulty in concentrating and focusing on their studies due to sexual violence and how it disturbs their university engagement. Based on the responses provided, it is evident that sexual violence can have a significant impact on the academic performance of female students. They may feel unsafe and fearful in the university environment, leading to absenteeism and decreased academic engagement. Furthermore, female students who experience sexual violence may be more likely to drop out of university or take longer to graduate due to difficulty focusing on their studies.

2. **Depressing for a girl to be sexually abused by some stranger:**

   The majority of respondents feel that female students who have experienced violence may feel unsafe and fearful in the university environment, which leads to absenteeism and decreased academic engagement. The participant reports his experience with SV consequences:

   Of course, it affects a lot as it's depressing for a girl to be sexually abused by some stranger and it causes fear for education for female students, due to this fear many students get afraid to come out to universities.

   It is well-documented that students who have experienced violence, including sexual violence, may feel unsafe and fearful in a university environment, which can lead to absenteeism and decreased academic engagement. This is particularly true for female students, who are more likely to be the victims of such violence. SV experienced female students faced psychologically disturbed as one of the respondents shared their experience:

Yes, of course, it's psychologically affecting females, they feel fear and they cannot concentrate on their studies.

The fear of being sexually abused or harassed can have a profound psychological impact on female students, leading to anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues.

Yes, the worst things repeatedly disturb me during my studies, and my mind gets diverted during my studies.

It can also make it difficult for them to concentrate on their studies and engage fully in academic activities. The fear of being victimized can also lead to a lack of trust in others, which can have a lasting impact on their relationships and social interactions.

3. **Difficult to reporting incidents of sexual violence or abuse:**
   It is also true that many female students do not report incidents of sexual violence or abuse, which can exacerbate the problem.

   Most female students are not exposed to abuse which affects them psychologically.

   The reasons for this are complex and varied but can include a fear of not being believed or taken seriously, a fear of retaliation or further abuse, and a lack of confidence in the reporting process.

   There are some policies for sexual violence and harassment and a code of conduct in my university but it merely applies or is used for such incidents because students used to avoid or come forward for such complaints so the administration needs to make this procedure more convenient for the victims.

   Universities must create safe and inclusive environments where all students feel supported and valued.

4. **The university provides counseling for students to prevent SV:**

   Universities can provide support services such as access to trained counselors and mental health professionals, academic accommodations, and liaison with professors and faculty members to ensure understanding and support for survivors. Several participants feel that universities need to provide counseling sessions for students regarding SV:

   Universities can provide access to trained counselors and mental health professionals who are experienced in working with survivors of sexual violence. These professionals can offer one-on-one counseling sessions and group therapy sessions to help students process their experiences and develop coping strategies.

   Universities should have counselors trained to support survivors of violence and take measures to prevent such incidents from occurring. This is an essential step in ensuring that students feel safe and protected on campus and can pursue their studies without fear of violence or harassment.

Universities can provide education and training programs for students to increase awareness about sexual violence and prevention strategies.

Universities take a proactive approach to support survivors of violence and create a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students. By implementing policies and measures to prevent violence, providing academic accommodations and support, and working with faculty members, universities can help survivors continue their studies and achieve their academic goals.

5. **Universities design policies regarding sexual violence:**

University plays a significant role in preventing sexual violence by developing and implementing policies and procedures that address sexual violence prevention, response, and reporting, including campus safety initiatives. Several participants share their opinions:

Universities can have a clear policy in place that outlines what constitutes sexual harassment and assault, and what steps will be taken to investigate and respond to reports of sexual violence.

Universities need to build inclusive, safe spaces where everyone can feel respected and supported to solve these concerns. This entails putting in place strong policies and processes for reporting and reacting to cases of sexual violence and abuse, offering complete support services to survivors, and fostering knowledge and awareness of issues relating to consent and healthy relationships. Universities can guarantee that female students can fully engage in educational activities without fear or intimidation by taking these measures, which will help to foster a culture of security and reverence for all students.

5. Conclusion

This study provided an opportunity to examine the lived experiences of learners in higher education who have experienced sexual assault in their academic and university experiences, including the application of university support. This comprehensive study delved deeply into the lived experiences of learners within higher education who unfortunately faced the traumatic impact of sexual assault during their academic journey. Through their narratives, participants offered poignant insights into the profound effects of sexual violence on their personal, social, and cultural spheres, shedding light on the intricate intersections between these experiences and their academic performance.

The study highlighted the pivotal role of university support systems in aiding survivors of sexual assault. Participants expressed gratitude for the support received from both formal institutional resources and informal networks. Utilization of official university resources provided a sense of validation and much-needed accommodations, demonstrating the crucial role these systems play in aiding survivors' healing processes and academic progression.

However, the study also emphasized the need for further advocacy and support mechanisms. Recognizing the necessity to protect and advocate for the current and future welfare of university students, the study advocates for legislative amendments and local needs assessments. By actively modifying legislation and conducting community needs analyses, universities can better understand and cater to the unique challenges faced by survivors.

Furthermore, universities have a responsibility to proactively address and prevent sexual assault. Initiatives aimed at prevention and encouraging survivors to come forward should be championed by these institutions. Creating a culture of zero tolerance for sexual violence through awareness programs, prevention initiatives, and resources available to all members of the university community students, staff, and faculty can significantly contribute to a safer and more supportive campus environment.

The study underscores the importance of a multifaceted approach involving policy changes, community engagement, and proactive measures within university settings to effectively combat sexual violence. This holistic strategy not only supports survivors but also fosters a culture of respect, safety, and support for all members of the academic community.

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