Lived Experiences of Workplace Harassment: A Qualitative Study Among Female Employees

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Abstract
Workplace harassment continues as a widespread problem that harms female employees causing them both emotional and psychological distress. A phenomenological approach was utilized in this qualitative research to study workplace harassment experiences faced by female workers in District Mansehra. The researcher collected data through purposive sampling for conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with female employees who have faced workplace harassment. The research applied thematic analysis to uncover standard patterns and themes as per Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Four key themes emerged verbal harassment, fear of retaliation, emotional distress, and lack of organizational support. Findings reveal that verbal harassment is often trivialized, discouraging women from speaking out. Fear of retaliation prevents victims from reporting incidents, as workplace power dynamics favor perpetrators. Participants reported significant emotional and psychological distress, affecting both professional and personal lives. Moreover, a lack of organizational support perpetuates a culture of silence. Anti-harassment policies need to be strengthened through the implementation of impartial complaint systems which should incorporate psychology-based victim support mechanisms. Heavy investment in studies needs to happen to bring forward solutions which both enhance workplace equality and implement systemic changes that combat harassment across organizations effectively.

Keywords: Work Place, Unwanted Comments, Bullying, Job Insecurity, Anxiety

Introduction
Workplace harassment persists as a widespread phenomenon which impacts workers across numerous professions and specializes in industries resulting in harsh psychological and emotional and occupation impact on staff. Unwelcomed behaviors based on any protected characteristic including race, gender, age or religious identity fall within the definition of workplace harassment according to Liang (2024). Workplace harassment continues to exist because of structural inequalities and power differences between employees which also harms their psychological state and job capabilities. Research demonstrates that workplace harassment affects both individuals through personal damage as well as organizations by creating operational disruptions which raises

employee turnover and diminishes production levels and leads to legal consequences (Bijalwan et al., 2024). The development of workplace harassment prevention strategies requires knowledge about harassment experiences at work. People who encounter harassment tend to develop psychological problems such as anxiety and depression together with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These adverse effects occur because most victims refrain from speaking up about harassment and do not receive support from their organizations or feel threatened with retaliation. Systems of workplace harassment disproportionately target underrepresented practitioners such as women and racial minorities and LGBTQ+ employees as well as others who face structural disadvantages at work (Zhang et al.,2021). Workplace harassment requires immediate attention because it creates significant societal issues which affect work culture and policy development and leadership practices in organizations. Studies about workplace harassment enable researchers to find out how power elements along with cultural standards perpetuate harmful behaviors. The study delves into the actual situations faced by targets of workplace harassment in order to show how essential detailed work policies and cultural evolution are for guaranteeing protected work places.

Problem Statement
Workplace harassment continues as a persistent problem which affects female employees more severely and creates negative effects for their mental health as well their work quality and their professional development. The cultural and societal environment of District Mansehra acts to prevent victims from reporting incidents or seeking justice for their cases. Workplace harassment continues to exist because of insufficient implementation of workplace regulations and the fear of termination. Current research falls short in studying the actual experiences of female workplace employees to define harassment occurrences and their outcomes and methods for dealing with such situations. The research project focuses on obtaining primary accounts to deeply understand workplace harassment situations and create workplace policies for improved safety standards.

Objectives
1. To explore the nature and forms of workplace harassment experienced by female.
2. To investigate the impact of workplace harassment on female employees.
3. To identify coping strategies and support mechanisms adopted by female employees in response to workplace harassment.

Literature Review
Multiple academic fields including organizational behavior and sociology and psychology work cooperatively on studying workplace harassment at length. The research shows that workplace harassment exists in multiple forms based on how organizations function alongside leadership choices and community customs (Cortina & Areguin, 2021). This segment examines published research regarding the frequency and psychological aftermath and organization-level responses to harassment in the workplace from the perspective of employees' personal experiences.

Prevalence and Forms of Workplace Harassment
Multiple expressions of harassment at work include verbal attacks, physical threats, deliberate ostracism and sexual mistreatment (Vara-Horna et al., 2023) and according to their research workplace harassment affects large numbers of workers who endure harassment during their professional lives. Research shows that women along with minority workers receive worse treatment more frequently since they experience harassment based on their gender in combination with their racial identity (Roscigno 2007). Research dedicated to sexual harassment continues to be prominent because experts recognize its negative influence on personnel mental health and their professional advancement (Almasri et al., 2024). Psychological harassment together with bullying

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acts as major contributing factors to work-related mistreatment. The research from Willness et al. (2020) indicates that ongoing psychological harassment which includes constant criticism and social exclusion and professional ability disintegration leads to elevated stress and job dissatisfaction. Hierarchical structures at work create an even worse mistreatment problem since those at lower positions often lack authority to report misconduct (Burrell et al, 2024).

Psychological and Professional Consequences

Multiple research studies have extensively documented the psychological effects that occur when harassment takes place at workplace. Jacobs (2005) shows that victims experience an elevation of stress levels as well as higher anxiety levels and depression symptoms along with PTSD signs. The prolonged experience of workplace harassment leads victims to experience burnout in addition to experiencing decreases in self-esteem and poorer job performance (Iqbal, et al., 2025. Workplace harassment creates various negative outcomes for businesses as it leads employees to leave prematurely and miss work often and reduces their commitment to their organization which impacts company productivity (Nwokocha et al., 2025). The study conducted by Cortina et al. (2001) explored the phenomenon of secondary victimization which happens when workplace harassment victims endure further mental distress because of insufficient organizational support. Unwillingness to face potential professional revenge drives employees to stay quiet about workplace harassment instead of making HR complaints (Ballard & Easteal, 2018). When organizations fail to support victims properly they allow harassment to continue which produces a poorly functioning workplace culture.

Organizational Responses and Preventative Measures

Organizations maintain an essential responsibility to stop workplace harassment before it happens and handle cases when employees experience harassment. Multiple studies show that organizations can effectively minimize workplace harassment through implementing systems of proactive policy such as anti-harassment training and structured reporting channels together with firm leadership commitment (Shrestha & Adhikari, 2024). Many organizations demonstrate inadequate implementation of prevention measures which results in harassment being ignored or permitted in their workplace. An organization's leadership approach determines the extent of workplace harassment that occurs. Research shows transformational leadership approaches decrease workplace harassment since they focus on fostering inclusiveness together with respect and ethical workplace practices (Lee, 2012). Organizations under authoritarian or laissez-faire leadership develop increased rates of misconduct because their leaders fail to maintain accountability (Cao et al., 2023).

Methodology

The study investigated workplace harassment experiences faced by female employees in District Mansehra through qualitative research methods. This study employed phenomenological research design to study the full extent of the personal stories alongside emotional and practical barriers faced by harassed female employees. Data were collected through purposive sampling for conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with female employees who have faced workplace harassment. The researcher applied thematic analysis to uncover standard patterns and themes as per Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The research approach provided individuals space to freely express themselves as it delivered flexible response opportunities. A protected space with complete confidentiality provided participants the conditions they needed to speak truthfully. The volunteers provided permission for audio recordings during the interviews which researchers later transcribed completely for analytic purposes. The research maintained all ethical elements of informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality from initial consent through the entire research period.

Result and Discussion

This section presents the research findings, which are based on a thematic analysis of the study data. The following themes were extracted from the data, each of which is discussed in detail. The themes are followed by a comprehensive discussion and conclusion.

Verbal Harassment and Unwanted Comments

The female workforce predominantly encountered verbal harassment as a frequent and troubling form of discrimination at the workplace. The respondents reported being forced to endure unwelcome comments regarding their looks along with their personal and work capabilities. Victims of these inappropriate statements received comments embedded in seemingly innocuous joking manners from male colleagues or supervisors who exposed themselves as harassers despite their deceptive tactics.

Respondent shared:

"The supervisor frequently comments about my appearance to me. He stated on that particular day that I looked beautiful because the chosen outfit enhanced my appearance. I initially interpreted these comments as a kind gesture until he turned it into regular daily practice along with saying 'I always look forward to your presence in the office.' These unwelcome comments pushed me to alter my office wardrobe since I could not tolerate his remarks. But it didn't stop. The situation did not end when I tuned out his behavior since he continued to claim his actions were pure and innocent. I felt imprisoned because I lacked the opportunity to give a snarky response to my boss yet I refrained from giving him any indication that his behavior was welcome."

Women originally faced casual remarks about physical appearance that developed into inappropriate questions and vulgar jokes. Women faced this mistreatment without protest because they feared facing ridicule or ridicule.

Another Respondent added:

"My colleague initially told me I had a beautiful smile but his statements evolved toward personal remarks about my perfume and questioned whether I stay single. It's distracting.' He approached me one day to ask about my relationship status but then commented that 'women like you ought to be partnered.' He laughed at me when I attempted to end the conversation by calling his conduct inappropriate. The situation left me without any power because the office staff appeared unconcerned about his behavior."

The theme reveals that workplace verbal harassment has become a common practice which leaves victims feeling helpless. The concern about others viewing them as impolite or humorless or too sensitive persuades female workers to avoid reporting cases of inappropriate behavior.

Fear of Retaliation and Job Insecurity

The majority of women kept silent about harassment because they were scared it would result in job-related punishment ranging from unfavorable location transfers to subpar job reviews or dismissal.

Respondent narrated:

"A supervisor notified me after I reported a coworker's inappropriate conduct that he could shift me to an isolated branch. The supervisor recommended that I concentrate exclusively on my duties rather than raise problems unnecessarily. I had to remain silent about everything. The financial needs of my family rely on my current salary so I was unable to run the risk of job loss."

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Another respondent shared:
"One of my colleagues brought a complaint against our manager because she had proof through messages emails and voice recordings. The employee held concrete verification including messages together with emails along with voice recordings. When the staff member filed her complaint against the manager the business started evaluating her work and found faults to justify his continued employment. The organization detected flaws in each of her actions until she finally had to leave her position. This incident revealed to me that no amount of evidence would help since perpetrators received protected status from the system. The protection of those who because sexual harassment exists at the expense of those they harm."

All these organizations had chosen silence because they needed to. The employees maintained financial obligations so they had no alternative but to stay silent about harassment. The pervasive feeling of fear enables offenders to avoid accountability thus they continue their acts while victims experience defenselessness.

Emotional and Psychological Distress
Workplace harassment severely harmed the emotional and psychological health of women within their work environments. The workplace harassment led numerous participants to develop stress alongside anxiety which lowered their self-esteem and diminished their work abilities and personal quality of life. Female workers described their emotional exhaustion because of ongoing workplace harassment while simultaneously losing workplace motivation.

Respondent shared:
"Before workplace harassment I enjoyed my job but afterward I developed morning anxiety. Before stepping into work each morning I would stay in my car waiting for several minutes to get ready for yet another hard day. I doubted my abilities since work harassment took away my confidence making me think about quitting my job though I didn't have alternative employment. Pretending to be fine seemed the most difficult aspect since I didn't want to burden my family with my situation."

Another respondent shared:
"My emotions became turbulent and I grew emotionally exhausted because of persistent workplace harassment. Distractions pursuing me at home prevented me from concentrating on any activity. The changes in my behavior went unnoticed by my family yet I kept silent about the ordeal I was facing. The experience made me feel humiliated because my situation seemed to be my fault when actually I was going through a difficult period. The anxiety coupled with stress severely affected my physical well-being which resulted in numerous headaches and sleep difficulties plus weight loss. My psychological distress reached critical levels which forced me to consult medical help."

Workplace harassment exists as a substantial psychological health matter past its implications for the workplace. Many victims endure their suffering because they do not pursue help from support systems because of social discrimination or fear or because they lack help options.

Lack of Organizational Support
Workplace harassment victims encountered discouraging evidence of institutional neglect within their organizations. Many female staff members demonstrated that even after reporting harassment incidents management failed to address the issues effectively or showed indifference.

Respondent shared:
"During my report to HR about the issue they urged me to adjust my behavior while discouraging me from creating unnecessary attention to the situation. The representatives informed me 'Men

will be men' and added 'You should exercise caution.' My suffering remained ignored along with myself as the problem since management claimed I expected respect from my workplace."

Another respondent shared:
"The project exclusions began after I made complaints about harassment in my workplace. After standing up for myself my supervisor removed meaningful tasks from my role which made me realize he was showing me his disapproval for my audacity. I eventually left my job because I recognized there were no possibilities of advancement in that business."

The theme illustrates that organizational failing mechanisms allow harassment issues to continue uninterrupted. Organizations reshape harassment conditions negatively when both complaints and victim voices fail to receive appropriate acknowledgment. Organizations need to enforce strict policies while listening to employee concerns to take decisive measures against harassers for achieving actual workplace change.

Discussion
This study demonstrates that sexual harassment targets numerous female workers throughout District Mansehra. The elements of verbal harassment along with fear of retaliation combined with emotional distress and insufficient organizational support have been confirmed through existing studies on workplace harassment and gender-based discrimination in professional environments (Cao et al., 2023). The identified data highlights social and institutional elements which sustain harassment incidents while blocking victims from seeking fair treatment. Study participants documented verbal abuse as a regular occurrence which society views as insignificant abuse in the workplace. The findings show that offensive workplace conduct creates unpleasant work environments which deteriorate both job fulfillment and operational output for women. Women encounter challenges in reporting harassment through commenting because disguised offensive statements frequently receive positive responses from the workforce. Studies show that workplace harassment frequently intensifies when employers neglect to address early warning signs (Shrestha & Adhikari, 2024) according to research and investigation on the matter. The threat of being punished stood out as a principal reason why women did not report harassment incidents. Workplace structures favor perpetrators which explains why victims refrain from challenging their instances of harassment. The study showed that numerous female participants feared both job termination and professional decline because existing research demonstrates that harassment victims face various retaliatory actions ranging from professional exclusion to evaluation demotions and forced departures (Iqbal, et al., 2025). Thus, harassment continues without consequences because victims stay silent from the fear of professional and career repercussions. The psychological and emotional suffering of victims demonstrates the severe effect that workplace harassment has on their mental well-being. Other studies have confirmed this effect because workplace harassment produces higher levels of stress alongside depression and anxiety alongside PTSD symptoms. The research data about emotional exhaustion and reduced self-esteem and interpersonal withdrawal from reported harassment victims matches academic findings demonstrating workplace harassment continues outside the workplace to negatively influence personal wellness. Organizations need immediate psychological support systems because of the critical situation they face (Almasri et al., 2024). Widespread organizational failure to back harassment prevention measures in the workplace continues to be a severe problem. Workers experienced their complaints being minimized or ignored just as earlier research has shown in institutional betrayal cases of workplace harassment. Organizations tend to protect their reputation and maintain workplace peace above all else to permit harassment tolerance within their organizational culture (Lee, 2012). The failure of harassment policies occurs primarily because organizations lack effective implementation or proper enforcement along with discriminatory victim challenges (Liang, 2024).

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Conclusion

Female employees in District Mansehra reveal their experiences of harassment through which verbal abuse and threats and personal suffering reinforce the existence of an unfavorable work environment. The study solidifies established research about harassment at work so we need strong institutional changes along with better protective measures and fundamental cultural modifications to establish safer work environments. Workplaces must establish major anti-harassment rules and independent reporting systems and mental health assistance for all victims. Additional study should focus on creating workplace equity measures and identifying all systemic roadblocks which prevent women from filing harassment complaints. The advancement of inclusive harassment-free workplaces requires joint actions between staff members.

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