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## COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR ACCOUNTABILITY ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

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# Women Politicians Navigating the 'Hostile Environment' in Pakistan\*

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**Abstract** Women in Pakistan operate within highly patriarchal contexts that promote their exclusion from public spaces; but those working in politics, the most public of spaces, defy these prevailing gender norms. This article examines women's experience of sexual harassment in the political 'workspace'. It presents data from interviews, press and television coverage, social media, and an online survey, to explore how women's presence in politics is resisted by their male counterparts through the use of sexual harassment. It highlights the sexual harassment men use against women in politics, arguing that key features of political parties' organisational culture function as predictors of harassment. Despite laws and mechanisms for processing complaints, women in politics are unable to push for effective accountability. The article argues for improved accountability mechanisms within political parties and Assemblies to combat sex discrimination and harassment, while acknowledging that the problem may only increase when women achieve more prominence as politicians.

**Keywords** gender empowerment, sexual harassment, accountability, women in politics, Pakistan, sexism, women's Caucus, quota seats.

## 1 Introduction

When a woman in Pakistan enters politics, she must be prepared to face public censure, workplace hostility, and risks to her safety. Some of these challenges are shared with all women who enter the workforce in Pakistan where the female labour force participation rate of 25 per cent is the second lowest in South Asia (World Bank 2018). These challenges are partially explained by patriarchy; women's agency is constrained to the private domain and they face social, cultural, and institutional obstacles when they seek to establish their presence in public spaces. Due to local conflicts after September 11th, militants and religious

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extremists have targeted women workers, voters, and some politicians for transgressing gender norms and engaging in the public domain.

Despite constitutional protections, women's entry into the political arena is still a subject of religious and ideological debate, encouraged by some male politicians when it works to their advantage. Women's engagement as voters, candidates, and holders of elected office is fiercely contested in some communities and right-wing groups. When they do enter the political space as candidates, their personal credibility and physical safety is subject to attack. If they are elected to local government or legislative bodies, their agency is circumscribed. All these experiences significantly weaken their effectiveness as political actors.

This article examines women's experience as politicians in Pakistan; it finds that they are subject to harassment and intimidation by virtue of their gender and for entering this arena. It also finds that they are subject to sexual harassment if and when they display some of the strengths that make them successful politicians. Like Berdahl's (2007) 'uppity women', who are successful in the workplace and subject to harassment because they violate gender roles and ideals, these politicians are censured for their refusal to be submissive, to shun public attention, and for raising their voices in the public domain. If sexual harassment is a mechanism 'to police the appropriate manner of "doing gender" in the workspace and to penalise non-conformity' (West and Zimmerman 1981, quoted in McLaughlin, Uggen and Blackstone 2012: 626), then politicians in Pakistan must be prepared for the penalties.

With the restoration and enhancement of a women's quota in legislative bodies, a series of progressive laws over the last decade has improved accountability mechanisms and protections in cases of rape, honour killings, domestic violence, and sexual harassment (Khan and Naqvi 2018). However, this article will show that women politicians have yet to see implementation of mandatory guidelines to control sexual harassment in their own workplaces: national and provincial Assemblies, local government, and political parties. Despite Pakistan's own #MeToo movement and media coverage of politicians' allegations, accountability remains an elusive goal.

Our analysis is based on a variety of sources. We conducted 32 key informant interviews, including with women politicians representing a range of parties and with civil society and external agencies who promote women's political participation. We combed through social media content and press sources to establish how women politicians are reported on and to identify specific instances of sexual harassment. Finally, we reviewed proceedings to better understand women politicians' experiences during Assembly sessions. In an online survey conducted just

before the 2018 elections, we asked women elected to all the Assemblies (Provincial, National, and Senate) about their experiences of sexual harassment, along with other questions regarding their empowerment and accountability as politicians.

## **2 Gender-based discrimination in the political arena**

As Schultz (2018) argues, sexual harassment is a type of gender-based discrimination. The political arena as a whole discriminates against women on the basis of gender in Pakistan. For example, suppression of the women's vote is a serious issue. The gender gap in votes polled is 11.1 million (ECP 2018). To vote, women need national identity cards; however, male relatives often deny them this right, arguing that 'it will give them a sense of entitlement' (PODA 2017). Women have traditionally been banned from voting in certain extremely conservative parts of the country, such as districts in the northwest, and some localities in southern Punjab. In 2015, during local government elections in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, there were 27,000 registered voters in the district of Upper Dir, but only one woman voted. Tribal and religious leaders, and local representatives of political parties, have a history of making agreements before polling to ban women from voting.

Women activists have filed cases with the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), petitioned the higher courts, and lobbied with political parties since the mid-1990s to put an end to this practice.<sup>4,5</sup> The government eventually responded to this pressure, and under the new 2017 electoral laws, if women's vote is less than 10 per cent of total votes polled in a constituency, the election is declared void (Majlis-e-Shoora 2017). This has somewhat reined in the practice of banning women from voting (Chaudhry 2018; W.A. Shah 2018).

Other factors prevent women from accessing public spaces to cast their vote – such as threats to their security posed in taking public transport or in the polling stations themselves. There is more insidious discouragement within the home against a woman setting aside her domestic responsibilities and going into the male/public sphere to cast her vote. Some women who do not vote, even in more educated urban settings, feel disengaged from politicians who appear unresponsive to their interests and unaccountable for failures to deliver (Cheema *et al.* 2019). Those who make it to the polling booth are also subject to pressure and manipulation by their families, polling agents, security personnel, and political party representatives to vote for certain candidates (Aware Girls 2013).

Women who run for office face persistent social and political barriers. In 1965, Fatima Jinnah, sister of the country's founding leader Mohammed Ali Jinnah, unsuccessfully fought elections against military ruler Ayub Khan. There was furious debate amongst religious scholars about women's right to run, which

undermined the potency of her candidacy (Shaheed, Zia and Warraich 2009: 28). General Zia ul-Haq launched a project of Islamising Pakistani laws and institutions during his military rule from 1977 to 1988. One of his advisory commissions recommended the head of state should only be a male Muslim, and no women should sit in the Assembly without their husbands' permission and unless they were over 50 (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987). It was widely believed that the purpose of this was to prevent Benazir Bhutto, leader of the opposition in exile, from contesting future elections. It led to a lingering doubt in wider society about a woman's fitness to hold office (Shaheed et al. 2009: 32).

Since the state began engaging in conflict with militant religious extremists after September 11th, attacks on women politicians have increased. The district of Dir, one of the most remote and conservative places in the conflict-affected northwest, has seen attacks on women local councillors and candidates. In the province of Punjab, a woman minister was shot dead for not wearing 'Muslim clothing' (DAWN 2007).<sup>6</sup> During the 2018 elections, a woman candidate for a provincial seat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) used pamphlets to canvas for votes in those areas where her personal appearances were impossible due to the risk to her safety (Khan 2018). A prominent woman member of the new ruling party Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) says, 'The psychology is that good women do not come out, that politics is not for a good woman'.<sup>7</sup>

Until the 2018 elections, historically, very few women have run as candidates on general seats, since they are rarely granted tickets.<sup>8</sup> Political parties believe a ticket given to women candidates is wasted because they are unable to campaign effectively. In the recent 2018 elections, more women contested for general seats than ever before, due to a new election rule requiring parties to grant them 5 per cent of tickets. Yet out of 464 women contesting, only eight won (Imran 2018; Wasim 2018). Almost the same number of women (six) won in 1999, with no affirmative action measures (Hanif 2009).

### **3 Elected women in a hostile work environment**

After a long campaign to overcome the hurdles of exclusion and lack of political voice, activists succeeded in getting a law passed to provide for a women's quota in all elected bodies.<sup>9</sup> These women are indirectly elected to each House, i.e. by fellow elected party members. Women on reserved seats are perceived to be male proxies because many are related to men of political influence, some of whom may have lost the elections, died, or been disqualified. This view may even apply to women successfully elected on a general seat, such as former Benazir Bhutto, whose father served as prime minister, and other elected women related to party leaders. But the advantage can sometimes become extreme vulnerability. One woman was elected to a general seat on a Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) ticket after her politician

**Table 1 Women parliamentarians (2013–18) reporting silencing**

House/Assembly	Yes		Total
	Number	%	
Senate	3	17	18
National	8	16	51
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	13	62	21
Balochistan	2	17	12
Sindh	10	36	28
Punjab	14	22	65
Gilgit-Baltistan	2	40	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>200</b>

Source Women Parliamentarians Survey (2018), authors' own.

husband was disqualified; when the couple separated, the party overrode her protestations and her husband forced her at gunpoint to relinquish her seat<sup>10</sup> (also see DAWN 2014).

Our interviews with women politicians and media tracking of their coverage provided qualitative insight into their experiences whilst engaging in political work, not only on the floor of their House or Assembly, but also in their interaction with voters, the media, and fellow party members. We used a quantitative survey tool, an online Women Parliamentarians Survey (WPS) with all 234 women seat-holders across the country, to explore four types of experiences: silencing, unwelcome messages/posts, direct verbal insults, and physical threats from male politicians. These experiences all contribute to creating an 'intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment'<sup>11</sup> that the law seeks to protect women from, as will be discussed later in this article.

### 3.1 Silencing

Men's silencing and exclusion of women limits their full participation as legislators at the provincial and national levels. Meraj Humayun, a reserved seat member of the KP Assembly, recalls the intimidating environment awaiting the novice legislators after their election in 2013.

*At the beginning we went around [the Assembly building] fearfully, men might mind if they see us – how do I draft a resolution, what is a bill? Some of us were semi-literate women who had never stepped out of houses to come to a place full of men. There are only two out of 560 employees in the Assembly [Secretariat] who are women. They are supposed to be our research assistants, but even they are hiding somewhere.<sup>12</sup>*

**Table 2 Women parliamentarians (2013–18) reporting verbal insults**

House/Assembly	Yes		Total
	Number	%	
Senate	0	0	18
National	6	12	51
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	4	19	21
Balochistan	0	0	12
Sindh	1	4	28
Punjab	9	14	65
Gilgit-Baltistan	1	20	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>200</b>

Source Women Parliamentarians Survey (2018), authors' own.

It took the women provincial legislators over a year to understand how the Assembly operates. Without support from the bureaucracy and any other functionaries, it was an overwhelming experience. 'It is a totally man's world. It has been so difficult to operate and make men understand.'<sup>13</sup> Another politician and former chair of the KP Commission on the Status of Women explains, 'We find it difficult to make our presence felt. We find it difficult to assert ourselves and find space for ourselves. Acceptance is a huge mind block in our society'.<sup>14</sup>

This hostile environment extends to the National Assembly, even though there is less segregation of the sexes in the capital, Islamabad, than in KP. When the first Parliamentary Caucus was formed in the National Assembly in 2008, there was no women's toilet in the building, and no room available for Caucus meetings (N. Shah 2018). Women 'have to bend over backwards to make their mark... They feel that no matter what we do we may get in trouble'.<sup>15</sup> Another perspective attributes this hostility to men's fear of women in the Assemblies, as a result of which women are not given the space to participate in formulating new laws – even the election laws which underwent substantial reform in 2017 (Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2018).

A quarter of women surveyed said that they have experienced silencing by male colleagues (see Table 1), with dramatic variation across provinces. The KP Assembly (62 per cent) and the Sindh Assembly (36 per cent) reported the highest levels, with women from the Balochistan Assembly the lowest (17 per cent) amongst the provinces (this excludes Gilgit-Baltistan due to its small size). Women from the National Assembly (NA) and Senate reported similarly lower levels of silencing. However, 11 women did not respond to this question.

**Table 3 Women parliamentarians (2013–18) reporting unwelcome texts/social media posts**

House/Assembly	Yes		Total
	Number	%	
Senate	1	6	18
National	6	12	51
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	9	43	21
Balochistan	1	8	12
Sindh	3	11	28
Punjab	25	38	65
Gilgit-Baltistan	1	20	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>200</b>

Source Women Parliamentarians Survey (2018), authors' own.

Given this context, the WPS findings are further revealing. When asked to identify their most valuable contribution to the House, the two values most cited by the women were regular attendance (72 per cent) and participation in debate (71 per cent). This can be interpreted as an expression of their tenacity in the face of exclusion and silencing.

### 3.2 Verbal sexual harassment

Verbal insults to women – normalised in everyday exchanges – become amplified when they are reported in the media, in effect presented before the nation as part of its political coverage. Activists noted a disturbing trend after 1997 of the increasing use of derogatory language towards women and retrogressive attitudes from amongst senior cabinet and parliamentary figures, which they said would encourage similar attitudes and language use in the media and by the public in general, as well as the flourishing of discriminatory customary practices (NGOCC 2000). Since then, women's entry into elected bodies has dramatically increased with the restoration of reserved seats in the Assemblies and Senate. With it, the verbal harassment continues.

Meraj Humayun recalls that they formed the Women's Caucus in the KP Assembly to provide women with the strength and confidence to withstand derision:

*In the beginning we constantly heard snide remarks from men, who told us we should be happy we found ourselves in the Assembly, we might as well get dressed up nicely and just turn up, nothing else. They tried to discourage us from participating. Even the Speaker was not giving us time, he was prejudiced and anti-women.*

Throughout the tenure of that Assembly, the attitude of male colleagues remained unchanged.<sup>16</sup>

The highest percentage of women (19 per cent) to report direct verbal insults from male colleagues was in the KP Assembly, followed by the Punjab Assembly (14 per cent) (see Table 2). Half, or six, of the Balochistan Assembly respondents claimed that they had never experienced verbal insults; however, another six did not respond. Women from the KP Assembly also reported the highest rate of unwelcome text messages from male colleagues (43 per cent), followed by 38 per cent in the Punjab Assembly (see Table 3). Overall, ten women chose not to respond to this question.

Women have come to expect insulting and denigrating comments from male politicians, including their own party members, during proceedings and in public encounters with the media. Shireen Mazari, the most senior woman member of PTI and reserved seat-holder in the National Assembly (2013–18) is a senior defence analyst. She protested to the Speaker against the language towards women used by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) (the then ruling party). The comments made were in reference to PTI rallies, which attract large numbers of young supporters, including women, and often feature live music with dancing. 'The dance moves of these women show which families they belong to', said a PML-N minister, in a reference to the cultural association between dance and prostitution. The Speaker of the National Assembly consistently objected to the wording of a resolution Mazari tried to pass in the House to condemn the language (Anis 2018). He asked her to amend the language used in the resolution three times, removing the name of PML-N leaders and also the party's name (*Pakistan Today* 2018a). The resolution eventually passed without mentioning the party's name (National Assembly of Pakistan 2018).

Slurs against women have been frequent and reported in detail by the electronic and press media. During proceedings and outside the Assemblies, male politicians pass lewd remarks and gender slurs, comment on women's apparel, make sexual passes, and even mock women with disabilities (AAJ News 2006; DAWN 2018; Chaudhry 2017a). The following press report concerns Mazari again:

The PTI whip was badgering the minister to explain, during Question Hour, what international standards of security were being observed at the Islamabad airport. 'In airports abroad, they also strip-search you. Is that the international standard she wants,' he responded, to peals of approving laughter from the treasury benches (Zaidi 2016).

More notoriously, in an earlier session, a ruling party minister called Mazari a 'tractor trolley'. Nafisa Shah was the only member of the Parliamentary Women's Caucus to demand a direct apology,

which the National Assembly was reluctant to pursue since he was a member of the ruling party (Ghumman 2016).

Even women wielding some power over the floor of the House are not immune to derision. The Deputy Speaker of the Sindh Assembly, although an active Caucus member and a well-regarded politician in the PPP, found her authority challenged and was disrespected by a leader from the Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P), even during her second tenure in this position (*Pakistan Today* 2018b).

The most renowned case of alleged sexual harassment of a woman politician involved the public allegation in 2017 by the PTI's Member of the National Assembly (MNA) reserved seat-holder Ayesha Gulalai that she received unwelcome text messages from her party leader Imran Khan, as well as at least one other senior male party functionary. She alleged that Khan began to send her inappropriate and obscene text messages in 2013, that other PTI women have received similar messages, and that the overall party culture was corrupt and anti-women (*Dunya News* 2017). Gulalai's allegation drew attention to the cultural hypocrisy which allowed Khan to endure as a public icon, despite having fathered an illegitimate child (*Samaa News* 2017), highlighting the inherent social misogyny which would have destroyed the career of a woman with the same history.

The backlash was harsh. Shireen Mazari claimed Gulalai's allegation arose because she was refused a ticket (Hayat 2017). Both the PTI women's wing and the Chief Minister of KP's aide threatened to send a *jirga*, or tribal council, to Gulalai's home if she did not apologise (*The Nation* 2017; *The Express Tribune* 2017). The PTI tried to force her to resign her seat, which she would not, then appealed to the Election Commission of Pakistan to remove her, which was denied as well.<sup>17,18</sup> PTI supporters dubbed Gulalai a 'hypocrite' for talking about women's dignity while her sister – a national squash champion – dressed like a boy and played a sport meant solely for men (Nasir 2017). They even pelted Gulalai with eggs and tomatoes many months after the allegation (*Dunya News* 2018). Although Imran Khan called upon his supporters to stop targeting Gulalai's sister, he refused to comply with a bipartisan NA Committee hastily set up to investigate the allegations, as called for under the law, and filed a defamation suit against her instead (Chaudhry 2017b).

A media frenzy erupted. The press questioned the timing of her allegation, four years after the alleged behaviour began (Mir 2017). She was accused of dishonouring her 'roots, tradition, culture... and every Pakhtun woman of Pakistan' (Khan 2017). Speculation that she made the accusation at the behest of the (then) ruling party (PML-N) grew (*Global Village Space* 2018). The only women politicians who spoke in her defence belonged to other parties, voicing their suspicions that women in the PTI

were badly treated (Rehman 2017). Gulalai herself appeared in countless television news shows, during which anchormen mockingly inquired if she made the allegations in order to get Imran Khan, then single, to marry her (Nasir 2017).

Over one year later, Gulalai's career was in tatters. She stood as an independent in the 2018 elections, winning only 138 votes. The man she accused of harassing her became the new prime minister. Meanwhile, no due process, within either Parliament or Khan's party, has been followed. There is no inquiry committee in place in Parliament to handle complaints involving elected legislators. The Women's Parliamentary Caucus gave statements against sexual harassment to the media during this episode, but did not raise the issue formally within the House (*Daily Times* 2017). Prominent women politicians urged Gulalai to follow due process and submit evidence of her harassment; however, she did not publicly release the messages.

In her final parliamentary appearance before the end of her tenure, Gulalai came to the House dressed like a traditional Pashtun man, wearing a turban on her head. She addressed the media in English, possibly to appeal to a foreign audience, explaining that her garb was to convey that as a member of the Waziri tribe she refused to compromise on her honour. She added that her tribe had the panther's quality of preying alone, just as she and her family were standing alone in a fight against a 'mafia group', i.e. the PTI.

### **3.3 Threats of violence**

Our interviews suggest that threats of violence have been used to prevent women Caucus members from departing from party positions, and the Gulalai case demonstrates how threats were used to intimidate her when she complained of harassment. One key informant recounted an incident in KP when a woman Member of the Provincial Assembly (MPA) said that the Caucus would not support the government on an issue. A senior provincial minister is alleged to have called the women from his party into a meeting and threatened to break their legs if they did not comply. This is cited as a reason for the subsequent silence of some woman MPAs for the rest of their tenure. Threats by some mainstream male politicians to transgender persons standing for election have been reported; the candidates were told to sell their tickets or be killed (Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2018; Haider 2018).

Thirteen women in our WPS did not answer when asked if they had ever experienced physical harassment from male colleagues (see Table 4). A full 11 women out of 200 (6 per cent) reported actual or threatened physical harassment from male colleagues. One Senator and four MNAs reported that they had been subject to this form of harassment, followed by three (5 per cent) of women in the KP Assembly. One woman from the Gilgit-Baltistan Assembly also reported that she had experienced it, with another member refraining from answering the question.

**Table 4 Women parliamentarians (2013–18) reporting physical harassment or threats**

House/Assembly	Yes		<b>Total</b>
	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>	
Senate	1	6	18
National	4	8	51
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	3	5	21
Balochistan	0	0	12
Sindh	1	3	28
Punjab	1	2	65
Gilgit-Baltistan	1	20	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>200</b>

Source Women Parliamentarians Survey (2018), authors' own.

#### 4 Accountability

Experiences of exclusion and silencing in the political environment are, for some women, normalised as an inevitable part of public life. In fact, women politicians often do their best to adhere to gender norms while in public or in the workplace to demonstrate that they pose no threat to men and thereby hope to avoid sexual harassment; thus many cover their heads in public who otherwise would not. Unfortunately, too much gender conforming only increases men's derision towards them for occupying 'charity' seats and appearing incompetent.

The first laws against sexual harassment in 2010 (National Assembly of Pakistan 2010a, 2010b) were the result of a carefully targeted activist campaign to build support amongst civil society, corporations, and politicians. The law defines the offence as 'insulting modesty' of a woman intentionally (through words, gestures, sounds, or exhibit of an object); making sexual advances or the demand for sexual favours intended to annoy, insult, intimidate, or threaten a person at the workplace; and creating 'an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment'. It is now punishable with imprisonment and a fine. Every workplace is required to establish its own committee to hear grievances, and the law details an inquiry procedure.

The complainant also has the option to turn to a federal and/or provincial ombudsman to hear complaints, conduct inquiries, and issue penalties. The Federal Ombudsman's office has heard 898 cases between 2011 and 2019,<sup>19</sup> but none of them were complaints from women politicians or party workers. The two functional provincial counterparts (Sindh and Punjab) also hear cases, but none from the political arena. Balochistan has not even

nominated an ombudsman for sexual harassment yet. KP, with possibly the most hostile work environment for women politicians, only nominated an ombudsman in 2019; thus no figures were available from that office.

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (National Assembly of Pakistan 2016) penalises the unauthorised transmission of private data and hate speech, but no data are available about politicians' use of this new law. The legislative Assemblies have grievance committees for their staff employees, but legislators do not fall within their ambit. The only signs of accountability for harassment within the Assemblies, as discussed above, have been in the form of a resolution condemning the incident, or the establishment of an inquiry committee that was rendered ineffectual. Thus, it is difficult, but not impossible, for women politicians to demand accountability for harassment within the existing legal framework.

Most politicians, but not all, belong to political parties; however, the parties are not legally bound to establish committees, as they are not technically 'workplaces'. (However, politicians' 'workplace' notionally extends into the public domain, where women face sexual harassment and physical attacks that would be covered by the penal code.) Parties use their own internal disciplinary or ethics committees to address any charges of sexual harassment, but do not share their data. Representatives told us that such cases are rare since 'men are courteous and hold women in high esteem, treating them like sisters'.<sup>20</sup>

The political party, as the *de facto* 'employer' of a woman politician, is dysfunctional like many other organisations in Pakistan. Parties lack internal accountability mechanisms, the concentration of power rests with the individual at the highest level, and most have undemocratic internal decision-making processes. Political parties in Pakistan, with few exceptions, are dominated by an (often) unelected single male leader who exercises decision-making authority subject to minimal input from all but a close committee of advisors, in which women's input is mainly to galvanise public votes and attend rallies.

Political parties in Pakistan have certain organisational features that enable a hostile work environment and a culture of sexual harassment (Sundaresan and Hemalatha 2013; Berdahl 2007). Almost all the decision makers in each party are men. Despite the existence of women's wings in most parties, they are not empowered at the highest decision-making levels. Party leaders, barring a few exceptions, are self-appointed or selected by the consensus of a few decision makers, not elected by their party members.<sup>21</sup> Their charisma (combined with a history of political victimisation) and the ability to attract votes are often their most valuable selling points. The distribution of tickets to stand for elections is decided through a non-transparent process, usually

in the domain of the party leader or a small group of decision makers. Loyalty to party leaders is highly valued, and betrayal or disloyalty is punished with expulsion. Senior women with an influence on decision-making enjoy a close personal relationship with the party leader/s. Finally, parties lack sound internal accountability procedures for the redressal of grievances.

This leaves the media as the most open terrain in which a complainant can make her case for accountability, but it renders her vulnerable to defamation suits and opprobrium if she does not provide evidence and/or follow-up using the legal remedies at her disposal.

## **5 Discussion**

The above findings demonstrate that women's reported sexual harassment in the political workspace continues with impunity. In Pakistan, where the consequence of sexually inappropriate behaviour is to bring disgrace to women and their families, and a collectivist cultural environment is linked with high avoidance/denial of harassment to protect norms of 'sexual silence' (Wasti and Cortina 2002), the problem is likely to be under-reported. Our qualitative findings reveal that women resent the exclusion, silencing, and verbal harassment endemic to their lives in politics. This includes the obstacles to their agency as voters and candidates which at times threaten their lives. Their coping strategies vary from avoidance of the arena altogether, acceptance, a mixed experience of Caucus support, and rare instances of confrontation.

The organisational culture of political parties described above has many features which serve as predictors of sexual harassment (Sundaresan and Hemalatha 2013). The field (of politics) is traditionally male-dominated, with most women present as representatives of their sex. The power differential between the sexes not only within Assemblies but within political parties is high, another predictor of harassment. As male politicians have little experience of working with women, they tend to rely on inappropriate and preconceived notions of gender roles within the Assemblies. The exclusion women experience reflects sociocultural norms, which encourage gender segregation and perpetuate their separate and unequal status. The verbal harassment women politicians report includes frequent urging to adhere to their traditional gender roles. Women experience the harassing behaviour, particularly the exclusion and verbal comments, as a normal consequence of entering this hostile environment.

Elevated power, such as that exercised by employers or political leaders, is associated with numerous traits including dominance, increased social skills, and charisma. Research demonstrates that individual power is also associated with disinhibited behaviour and those individuals with lower power, such as a woman in an organisation, tend to be more vigilant and sensitive to

threatening behaviour (Keltner, Gruenfeld and Anderson 2003). As Schultz (2018) argues, the structure of an organisation and women's lack of power within it makes possible a wide range of behaviours that discriminate against them on the basis of their gender, including sexual harassment.

Shireen Mazari's experience of being mocked in the National Assembly, even by members of her own party, and her struggle to have a resolution passed to condemn the rival party's use of derogatory language against her, highlighted male efforts to maintain the dominant work culture. Mazari herself is an example of Berdahl's (2007) 'uppity woman', who violates feminine ideals by exhibiting masculine personality characteristics and rising in the organisational hierarchy. Her success, in effect, leads to more frequent harassment. As an assertive defence analyst, she poses a threat to the male-dominated culture within her party, which explains both why they participate in her harassment and, after PTI won the 2018 election, why she was not sufficiently rewarded for her loyalty or capability. She was given charge of the Human Rights Ministry (considered a soft, unimportant area of governmental work) despite exhibiting little interest in this area and her obvious credentials in a more 'masculine' area of work.

The Ayesha Gulalai episode unfolded in a manner predicted by Sundaresh and Hemalatha's (2013) characterisation of organisational culture with high levels of sexual harassment. When Gulalai usurped gender role expectations by speaking out publicly against her harasser, she faced potential danger to her safety and that of her family. The power status of her harasser, a charismatic political leader, made legal or organisational accountability impossible, even before the elections.

The party and its followers gave little importance to the complaint, reinforcing the notion of women politicians as a minority 'out' group whose status is deeply conditioned by the male 'in' group which uses sexually harassing behaviour to intimidate women into remaining within their gender roles or forcing them to resign. The lack of support from party women, too, was key to maintaining the dominant work culture. In short, she faced the social opprobrium most feared by women who speak out about harassment (Wasti and Cortina 2002).

The organisational culture of political parties needs to change dramatically to enable the current hostile work environment for women politicians to transform into one which empowers them and implements accountability for harassment. Without this accountability, affirmative action measures run the risk of reinforcing gender inequality and sex roles, circumscribing women's agency in this most crucial of workplaces. As Schultz (2018) has argued, by addressing the structural conditions in the workplace that reinforce gender segregation and arbitrary authority, both of which persist in political parties, it will become

possible to remove the underlying causes of harassment and encourage more women to venture into this challenging arena.

Activists and women politicians from mainstream parties have articulated their demands to change the structural conditions of the political arena. They are lobbying for more affirmative action measures to increase women's voice at decision-making levels in political parties. They also want increased party resources to support the campaigns of women who run on general seats (Women's Parliamentary Caucus 2018). The long-standing demand by the women's movement, to change the mode of election to reserved seats from indirect to a direct, constituency-based vote, is also being discussed as a way to break the dependency of reserved seat-holders on their male colleagues.

### **Notes**

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- 1 Ayesha Khan, Director, Collective for Social Science Research, Pakistan.
- 2 Zonia Yousuf, Research Officer, Collective for Social Science Research, Pakistan.
- 3 Sana Naqvi, Research Assistant, Collective for Social Science Research, Pakistan.
- 4 S. Ayaz and S. Munir interviewed by Ayesha Khan and Sana Naqvi, 10 May 2018, Peshawar.
- 5 Interview through correspondence with T. Abdullah, 10 August 2018.
- 6 That year, Taliban militants assassinated Benazir Bhutto, although she was not targeted primarily because of her gender.
- 7 N. Toru, interviewed by Ayesha Khan, 1 June 2018, Islamabad.
- 8 The 2018 national and provincial elections returned only 19 women out of a total of 1,207 on general seats.
- 9 Local bodies reserve 33 per cent of seats for women, although provinces have subsequently varied their own laws and in some cases reduced the quota. The Provincial Assemblies, the National Assembly, and the Senate have a 17 per cent quota for women.
- 10 F. Babar, interviewed by Ayesha Khan, 29 March 2018, Islamabad.
- 11 Protection Against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act 2010 and Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2010.
- 12 M. Humayun, interviewed by Ayesha Khan, 30 May 2018, Islamabad.
- 13 M. Humayun, interviewed by Ayesha Khan, 30 May 2018, Islamabad.
- 14 N. Toru, interviewed by Ayesha Khan, 1 June 2018, Islamabad.

- 15 F. Babar, interviewed by Ayesha Khan, 29 March 2018, Islamabad.
- 16 M. Humayun, interviewed by Ayesha Khan, 30 May 2018, Islamabad.
- 17 S. Ayaz and S. Munir interviewed by Ayesha Khan and Sana Naqvi, 10 May 2018, Peshawar.
- 18 This helped to set a legal precedent that a party leader does not have the right to expel a member.
- 19 R. Shahzad, interviewed by Zonia Yousuf, 8 March 2019, Karachi.
- 20S. Agha interviewed by Sana Naqvi, 5 March 2019, Karachi.
- 21 One exception is Jamaat-i-Islami, whose leader is elected by all party members, including women. The PTI Constitution states that leaders may be elected through members voting by way of SMS or other technologies.

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