

## Beyond the Catcalls: Street Harassment as a Predictor of Social Anxiety and Self-Esteem among Working Women in Pakistan

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### ABSTRACT

The current research examined the connection of street harassment, social anxiety, and self-esteem in working women. The conceptualization of street harassment came to define it as complimentary/benign and hostile/threatening actions in the public. This study investigates the relationship between street harassment, social anxiety, and self-esteem among working women in Pakistan. Using a cross-sectional correlational design, data were collected from 250 employed women aged 18–40 across multiple urban centers. Measures included the Street Harassment Scale (SHS), Social Phobia Scale (SPS), and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE). Results revealed significant positive correlations between both complimentary/benign and hostile/threatening forms of street harassment and social anxiety, and significant negative correlations with self-esteem. Regression analyses confirmed that street harassment is a significant predictor of increased social anxiety and reduced self-esteem, with hostile harassment particularly impacting self-esteem. The findings underscore street harassment as a critical psychosocial stressor that adversely affects the mental well-being and self-worth of working women in Pakistan. The study highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions and policy measures to mitigate street harassment and support the psychological health of women in public and professional spheres.

### Introduction

Pakistan has in recent years found itself in the situation where harassment in working and social places has become a very common and a major problem. Out of the numerous categories, one of its most significant obstacles to the freedom in movement, security and psyche of women is the unsolicited verbal, non-verbal or physical behaviour of women in the streets. It is characterized in general as whistling, staring, sexual advances, stalking, vulgar comments, and other aggressive behaviors

of strangers in the streets, buses, markets, or other open areas (Anti-Street Harassment, 2014; Bowman, 1993; Kearl, 2014; Kissling, 1991). Notably, studies do not only indicate that street harassment is a severe issue of safety but also how it creates a permanent black eye on the self-respect, social functioning and well-being of women.

Pakistani working women exist in a challenging position of duties and insecurities. They as professionals and as ordinary citizens are likely to experience harassment in not only their work places but also on their daily commutations, on the transport lines and even walking down the streets among other common places. Even though laws like the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) and other laws in Pakistan are supposed to create a safer workplace, it is clear that many women continue to encounter harassment in both formal and informal environments (in most instances, uncontracted or informal labour). Pakistan is among the countries where women participation in labour force is low and the liberty of women movement in society is limited, which makes it an especially pressing situation to research how harassment affects the psychological health of working females (Khalil and Warner, 2025).

In most studies, street harassment has been linked to low self-esteem, anxiety, lower life satisfaction and poor self-concept. As an example, a study of 254 women of university age in Pakistan revealed that street harassment had a significant positive correlation with depression and a negative correlation with life satisfaction; life satisfaction completely mediated the relationship existing between street harassment and depression (Saeed and Malik, 2022). Although this research was conducted among younger females (16-24 yrs) the findings are relevant in the fact that harassment in the social places has mental health implications. A fellow study of Pakistani female students in the District of Kalat, Baluchistan also discovered that street harassment considerably lowered the confidence and self-respect of women and raised the feeling of anxiety and stress (Kakar and Akhtar, 2020).

Nevertheless, there is a paucity of research on working women in Pakistan that could also experience other stressors due to the combination of public-space harassment and demands at work. The existing workplace related literature indicates that females who are harassed in the workplace complain of greater anxiety, depression, stress as well as low self-esteem in comparison to those who are not harassed. As an example, a study of female health workers in Lahore showed a high rate of direct and indirect harassment (63–75% of sexual harassment) and that depression, anger, and phobia had a significant relationship with the experience of harassment (Rashid et al., 2023). Furthermore, a 2024 study by a university institution in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa found that institutional patriarchy, failure to implement policies and power dynamics, are the contributing factors to harassing female workers in higher education (Rahman, Iqbal, and Hussain, 2024). It is also recently demonstrated that workplace harassment in Pakistan has a severe impact on mental health and self-esteem of working women irrespective of their occupation (Khalid, 2024).

Due to these multi-layered exposures, women who are at work can be specifically susceptible to social anxiety that is defined as the pronounced fear of social situations in which the individual can be judged under an unfavorable light (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th ed.; American Psychiatric Association,

2013). Any woman who is harassed by someone (be it on the road, the street or even at work) will experience increasing levels of alertness, self-objectification (seeing oneself through the eyes of other people) and avoid going outside or interacting with others and thus worsen the social anxiety. Certain researchers demonstrate that repeated harassment on the street is also associated with self-surveillance and less engagement in the life on the street (Kearl, 2010; Leonardo, 1981). One of the studies on street harassment in Pakistan has reported that harassment leads to self-objectification and subsequently reduces self-esteem (Chaudhary, 2024).

Intersecting with both social anxiety and street harassment is self-esteem which is the individual assessment of his/her worth and capability (Susman, 2011). Low self-esteem can be both the outcome of harassment (through feelings of shame, self-blame or lack of agency) and be the reason to be more vulnerable to anxiety in the social context. There are examples of empirical studies that confirm a relationship between harassment and lower self-esteem and poorer mental health outcomes (Com, 2014; Sullivan, 2011). In the Pakistani workplace environment, victimized women had low self-esteem in contrast to non-victimized women (Shah, 2016).

Combining this, to working women in Pakistan the chain of influence is viable: street harassment (and its corresponding workplace harassment) leads to increased social anxiety (avoidance, fear of poor ratings in public/social/occupational relations) to reduced self-esteem (self-criticism, shame, feeling of low value) to psychological behavioral maladaptation and work involvement. However, as much as these connections are theorized and partly realized in the work of literature in youth or student, a gap exists in particular to working women, particularly in the socio-cultural context of Pakistan.

This research hence seeks to investigate the impacts of street harassment on the social anxiety and self-esteem of working women in Pakistan. The study will consider this population group since it will not limit itself to student or younger age groups but will be able to capture the experiences of women who are in the workforce and negotiate the public space and occupational realm. The study will also examine the relationship between patterns of harassment in the public space as independent or supplementary to workplace harassment on the one hand and social anxiety and self-esteem on the other hand. It is with this query that the study will make a contribution to the literature by establishing the relationship between the realms of street harassment, mental-health outcomes (social anxiety) and core self-constructs (self-esteem) in the Pakistani working-woman setting to provide policy, organizational practice and public-space safety measures.

## Hypothesis

**H1:** There will be a positive relationship between street harassment and social anxiety among working women in Pakistan.

**H2:** There will be a negative relationship between street harassment and self-esteem among working women in Pakistan.

**H3:** Street harassment will positively predict social anxiety among working women in Pakistan.

**H4:** Street harassment will negatively predict self-esteem among working women in Pakistan.

## Method

### Research Design

This study used cross-sectional correlational research design.

### Sample

A sample of 250 working women was taken from overall Pakistan. Age range consisted of 18-40 years old. Data was collected from Karachi, Islamabad, Wah Cantt, Taxila, Rawalpindi and Lahore by using purposive sampling.

### Measures

Measures comprised of demographic information including age, marital status, family system, and socioeconomic status.

### Street Harassment Scale (SHS)

Street harassment scale is a five point likert scale developed by Harmony B. Sullivan (2011). The reliability of scale as measured by Cronbach's alpha is 0.97. This screening tool is used to measure women's experiences of street harassment in public spaces.

### Social Phobia Scale (SPS)

Social Phobia Scale (SPS) developed by Mattick & Clarke (1998). It's a five point likert scale. It measures anxiety which is caused when someone is being observed or judged. The reliability of scale as measured by Cronbach's alpha is 0.90.

### Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE)

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) is developed by Morris Rosenberg (1989), a 4 point likert scale and has 10 items. This scale is used in the present study to measure self-esteem. The reliability of scale as measured by Cronbach's alpha is 0.84.

## Procedure

In present study, a systematic approach was followed to explore street harassment, social anxiety and self-esteem among working women. Data was collected considering ethical guidelines to participant's well-being and safety. Data was collected from 250 working women from Karachi, Islamabad, Wah Cantt, Taxila, Rawalpindi and Lahore by using purposive sampling. The targeted population included participant's age ranging from 18-40.

## Results

### Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of participants

| Sample Characteristics | n   | %    |
|------------------------|-----|------|
| Age                    |     |      |
| 18-28                  | 149 | 59.6 |
| 29-40                  | 101 | 40.4 |

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|                      |     |      |
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| Marital status       |     |      |
| Single               | 131 | 52.4 |
| Married              | 119 | 47.6 |
| Family system        |     |      |
| Joint                | 103 | 41.2 |
| Nuclear              | 147 | 58.8 |
| Socioeconomic status |     |      |
| Upper class          | 21  | 8.4  |
| Middle class         | 167 | 66.8 |
| Lower class          | 62  | 24.8 |

Note: n= participants 250, %= percentage

**Table 2**

Psychometric Properties of Street harassment, Social Phobia and Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale

| Scales                  | M     | SD    | Potential range | Actual range | $\alpha$ |
|-------------------------|-------|-------|-----------------|--------------|----------|
| Street Harassment       | 40.72 | 30.48 | 0–168           | 0–148        | .98      |
| CBS                     | 26.84 | 18.92 | 0–96            | 0–91         | .95      |
| HTS                     | 9.41  | 9.22  | 0–72            | 0–50         | .91      |
| Social Phobia Scale     | 33.12 | 16.89 | 0–80            | 0–80         | .95      |
| RSE Scale (Self-Esteem) | 28.04 | 6.21  | 10–40           | 10–40        | .93      |

Note. CBS=Complimentary benign subscale; HTS=Hostile Threatening subscale  
RSE=Rosenberg Self Esteem scale; M=mean; SD=standard deviation;  $\alpha$ =reliability

**Table 3**

Correlation for Street harassment, Social Anxiety and Self Esteem among Working Women

| Variable       | 1 | 2     | 3     | 4      |
|----------------|---|-------|-------|--------|
| CBS            | - | .82** | .71** | -.69** |
| HTS            |   | -     | .74** | -.77** |
| Social Anxiety |   |       | -     | -.76** |
| Self Esteem    |   |       |       | -      |

Note. CBS=Complimentary benign subscale; HTS=Hostile Threatening subscale  
RSE=Rosenberg Self Esteem scale, \*\* P<0.01, N=250

**Table 4**

Hierarchical Regression of Street Harassment predicting Social Anxiety among Working Women

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| Predictors | R <sup>2</sup> | SE B | $\beta$ | 95% CI |       |
|------------|----------------|------|---------|--------|-------|
|            |                |      |         | LL     | UL    |
|            | .28            |      |         |        |       |
| Constant   |                | 1.45 |         | 15.66  | 28.74 |
| CBS        |                | .09  | .41     | .33    | .66   |
| HTS        |                | .07  | .32     | .36    | .61   |

Note: CBS=Complimentary benign subscale; HTS=Hostile Threatening subscale  
RSE=Rosenberg Self Esteem scale, \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ , N=250

**Table 5**

Hierarchical Regression of Street Harassment predicting Self Esteem among Working Women

| Predictors | R <sup>2</sup> | SE B | $\beta$ | 95% CI |       |
|------------|----------------|------|---------|--------|-------|
|            |                |      |         | LL     | UL    |
|            | .13            |      |         |        |       |
| Constant   |                | .95  |         | 15.66  | 28.74 |
| CBS        |                | .05  | -.23    | -.21   | -.72  |
| HTS        |                | .18  | -.42    | -.43   | -.12  |

Note: CBS=Complimentary benign subscale; HTS=Hostile Threatening subscale  
RSE=Rosenberg Self Esteem scale, \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ , N=250

The findings are represented in Tables 1-5. Table 1 shows the demographic data of the participants, which showed that most of the participants were aged between 18-28 years (59.6%), a little bit more of them were single (52.4%), and the majority of them

were a nuclear family system (58.8). A significant percentage of the reported participants had middle socioeconomic status (66.8%), indicating that the sample was relatively homogeneous in terms of the economic background. Table 2 presents the psychometric characteristics of the measures of the studies that indicate high internal consistency of all scales with Cronbach alpha values of between 0.91-0.98 which depicts a high level of reliability. The average scores also indicate moderate scores of street harassment, social anxiety, and self-esteem in the sample.

The two measures of street harassment Complimentary Benign Subscale (CBS) and Hostile Threatening Subscale (HTS) were significantly and positively correlated with social anxiety, and significantly and negatively correlated with self-esteem as indicated in Table 3. Self-esteem was also significantly and negatively related with social anxiety, which proved the suggested relationships between the study variables. According to Table 4, street harassment was a major predictor of social anxiety, and the results show that 28 percent of the variation was due to the fact that both CBS and HTS were significant positive predictors. On the same note, Table 5 shows that street harassment had a significant predictive value on self-esteem, explaining 13% of the variation where high levels of both CBS and HTS related to low levels of self-esteem. Altogether, these results indicate that the greater the exposure to street harassment the greater the social anxiety and lower the self-esteem of working women.

## Discussion

The current research has analyzed the connection between female self-esteem, social anxiety, and street harassment. The results revealed that there existed a strong positive correlation between street harassment experiences (some of which were apparently complimentary, but also those that were overtly threatening) and social anxiety. This aligns with the recent findings, which state that repeated harassment in the general population encourages the fear of negative assessment, symptoms of physiological anxiety, and shunning social interaction (Holland et al., 2021; Nielsen et al., 2023). Further, street harassment was shown to be highly negatively correlated with self-esteem indicating that aggressive and objectifying remarks lower the esteem and self-respect of women. Results of regression analyses also indicated that hostile or threatening harassment was a significant predictor of low self-esteem, which is consistent with the modern literature indicating how degrading and identity-threatening these experiences are (Macmillan et al., 2022; Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). All in all, these findings emphasize street harassment as a viable social stressor factor that is contributing to social anxiety and low self-esteem in working women in Pakistan.

## Conclusion

Street harassment was significantly positively associated with social anxiety and significantly negatively associated with self-esteem among working women in Pakistan.

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