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Bullying Research Progress Review: Women Academics in Pakistan's University Sector

Affiliation:

Roshana Kamran

Department of English, IQRA University, Karachi, Pakistan.

Email: roshana@iqra.edu.pk

Edgar Burns

University of Waikato, New Zealand.

Email: edgar.burns@waikato.ac.nz



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Bullying Research Progress Review: Women Academics in Pakistan's University Sector

Roshana Kamran *

Edgar Burns [†]

Abstract: Empirical research about academics being bullied in the Pakistan higher education (HE) sector has been an emerging field in the last decade. This small thread of important research has begun to explore the gendered experiences of women academics facing multiple forms of bullying and harassment against them. This scoping review identified 45 refereed articles based on 37 studies conducted over the past two decades that investigated bullying targeted at academic staff by colleagues and administrators. While these studies included both men and women participants who had been recipients of bullying conduct, this generalist focus has underplayed the gendered nature of bullying tactics. Bullying behaviors directed at academic women, and academic women's experiences of being targeted by such bullying conduct, have negative impacts on women academic's well-being, productivity, and careers. The present discussion of these empirical studies explores the limitations of both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. Positively there are opportunities for developing this small body of research and associated concepts that over time can support significant changes in telling the hidden obvious stories of Pakistani academic women. Articulating their stories will have flow-on benefits for non-academic women, for men, and more efficient and fairer administration of HE.

Keywords: Bullying; ostracism; higher education, incivility; harassment; Pakistan, women academics; tertiary sector; university administration.

Introduction

The international literature has documented bullying and harassment against women academics in the higher education (HE) sector in many national jurisdictions, even before looking into specific studies undertaken in any one country (Burns, Fogelgarn, & Billett, 2020). The 'culturalist thesis' proposed by D'Cruz, Noronha, Mendonca, and Bhatt (2021) aimed to integrate global research findings while also understanding bullying within the specifics of national and administrative jurisdictions. These authors affirm that 'work-place bullying, emotional abuse, and harassment... [have a] universal presence... across the globe' (Kazmi & Javaid, 2022). Importantly, their culturalist perspective resists homogenizing interpretations that experiences of being bullied, the mechanisms of bullying, and the higher education institutions (HEI) across the sector in which bullying flourishes,

*Department of English, IQRA University, Karachi, Pakistan. Email: roshana@iqra.edu.pk

[†]University of Waikato, New Zealand. Email: edgar.burns@waikato.ac.nz

are the same, or work in the same way, across different countries, genders, and cultures. Instead, these authors argue for the need to identify configurations of bullying, harassment, and incivility like other aspects of culture, that differ over time and place.

Most insights into the phenomenon [of bullying] come from Western inquiries conducted on Caucasian samples in the developed world, underscoring their limited generalizability and applicability to the Eastern and Global South societies. Indeed, while the field of workplace bullying has been researched internationally for about 25 years, studies from Asia have been undertaken for a little over 10 years. Yet deepening country-specific knowledge uniformly is especially important to inform and facilitate the design and execution of interventions customized to suit the context such that the (potential) effectiveness of action efforts is maximized. (p. 1)

D'Cruz et al. (2021)'s review of bullying and harassment research across a range of Asian cultures is complemented by Ahmad, Sohal, and Wolfram Cox (2020)'s discussion of 'workplace bullying' in Pakistan. They apply broad concepts of 'social cynicism' in considering the 'Muslim Work Ethic' in relation to the ill-treatment of staff (Ahmad & Owoyemi, 2012). For western social scientists trained on Weber's (2002) Protestant Ethic, offers a corrective perspective by bringing to the study of bullying the perspective of a different culture, time, country, and faith.

Westoby, Dyson, Cowdell, and Buescher (2021)'s recent review narrated national experiences of women in HE in the United Kingdom. The present scoping review collected empirical studies that investigated bullying directed against academic staff in Pakistan's HE sector. Mubarak (2019: 4-5) described bullying in national terms as not simply affecting HE, schools, but the administration of all kinds of organizations. Bullying against university teaching staff, especially women academics, was seen as emblematic of a cultural disposition to assert social power hierarchically in university administration:

Bullying is an issue which rarely gets the attention it deserves in Pakistan. The evidence of this is that literature or research pertaining to the issue is almost non-existent in the country. It is common knowledge that, usually, any complaints by victims are swept under the rug by administrative authorities. Most of the perpetrators get away with a slap on the wrist at best.

The cultural disposition that Mubarak (2019) says requires fuller investigation includes gendered roles, social class, economic power, and cultural patriarchal traditions in the Pakistani national context. Even the simple act of enabling women to participate educationally is frequently perceived as challenging and even undermining traditional beliefs about men and women, masculinity, and leadership. Empirical investigation of bullying and related poor conduct in Pakistan's HEI is a relatively new research area, though Pakistani scholars have been actively working across many organizational and sectoral contexts. The hidden obviousness of gender differences—that Pakistani women experience more bullying (even though it is also a problem for men)—is confirmed by authors such as Mujtaba and Reiss (2015). They observe that 'patriarchal values in society impact females' own perceptions of their abilities and aspirations'.

HE participation is shaped by the cultural context long before women become educators in universities. This comes about through social and cultural mechanisms that sociologist [Buchli \(2004\)](#) called ‘structuring structures’. At every career stage, these perspectives frame bullying and ostracism as situational processes in particular faculties or university departments, that at the same time draw on gendered cultural capital. These beliefs and attitudes reflect deep-seated processes of cultural creation and social practice ([Shorey, Chua, & Yap Seng, 2023](#)). Mistreatment of Pakistani women academics thus combines proximal causes as it emerges from the background cultural context that generates patriarchal and sexist expectations. That such norms are sometimes contested today has so far been insufficient to bring about administrative change in the education sector, even at the university level of HE ([Savigny, 2014](#)). Researchers’ willingness to publish about bullying that targets women provides an academic forum for further widening scholarship, benefitting HEIs, not only women. This, in turn, contributes insights into the international project of gender equity from Pakistan’s women academics who have been bullied.

Table 1
Keywords used to identify relevant literature in five databases

Search line	Search terms	EBSCO Academic	Scopus	WoS Core	Proquest Central	Psych INFO*
1	‘bullying’ or ‘bullied’ or ‘ostraci*’	26,462	24,245	18,566	414,876	12,877
AND						
2	‘academia’ or ‘higher education’ or ‘universit*’	13,074	547	10,753	32,282	10,522
AND						
3	‘Pakistan’	91	23	80	97	63
AND						
	Totals	91	23	80	97	63

Methods

This scoping review gathered data from electronic databases following [Arksey and O’Malley \(2005\)](#)’s protocol for reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses. The review stages included (1) formulating the research questions (stated in introductory section, above); (2) using an iterative process to identify relevant studies See Table 1 and Figure 1, below); (3) assessing the included studies in terms of characteristics and themes (See Tables 2 and 3, below); (4) finally, reporting and discussing the findings (See thematic analysis in the discussion section).

Identifying Relevant Studies

Five electronic scholarly databases were searched for relevant studies, using the following search criteria (during May-June 2022).

- Full-text English-language articles published in the years 2000-22
- Research articles published in academic peer-reviewed journals

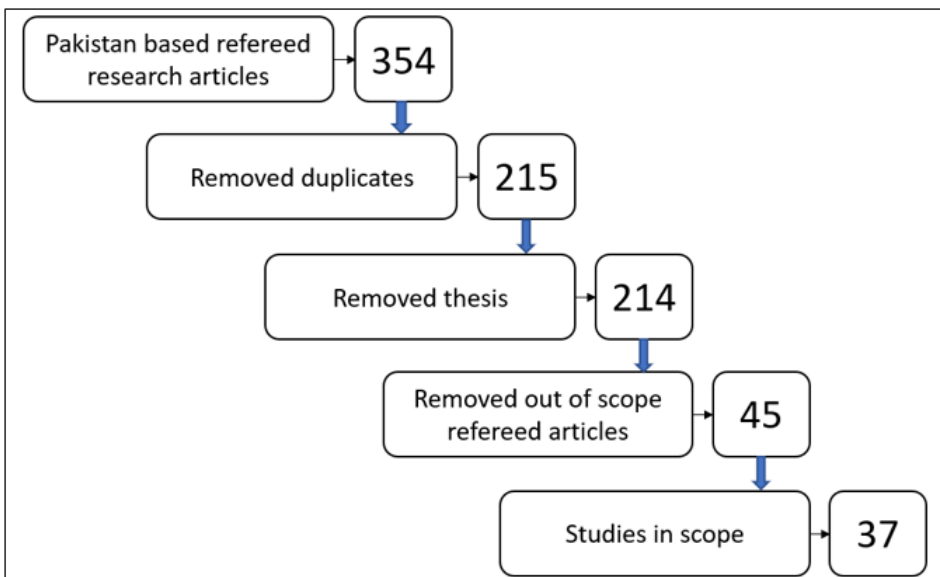
- The articles reported empirical studies in Pakistan
- Studies focused on bullying against academics in HE
- Excluded were newspapers, conference papers, blogs, books, dissertations

From initial testing search-term effectiveness, Table 1 presents word combinations used for database searches.

The final row of Table 1 shows the totals for the searches in each academic database. Together these total 354 potential articles. Figure 1 shows the subsequent selection steps. Duplicates (169) and one thesis (1) were removed, leaving refereed articles fitting the formal search terms ($n=214$). Articles with significant content focused outside the study questions were eliminated (e.g., about students, children, schools, administrative staff, adolescents, high schools, or multi-country studies). This left refereed articles in scope ($n=45$).

The final 45 refereed articles were examined and shown to be based on 37 different empirical studies. One study published six articles (Anjum, Ming, Siddiqi, & Rasool, 2018; Anjum, Muazzam, Manzoor, Visvizi, Pollock, & Nawaz, 2019; Anjum, Muazzam, Manzoor, Visvizi, & Nawaz, 2019). Three studies published two articles each: (Fatima, Bilal, & Imran, 2020; Fatima et al., 2017).

Figure 1
Refereed article selection from five databases for review



Data Analysis

We created a spreadsheet of the 37 studies, identifying the 45 refereed articles by study, and examined variables of interest within each to compare the empirical investigations. This showed key article variables: author/s, year, journal outlet, concepts explored, method/s used, and study region within Pakistan. Each author cross-checked the study's details for consistency.

Limitations

First, studies outside English-language journals were not included. Second, surveys at one point in time have limited insight into the experience of bullying over a long time duration. Third, self-report surveys used in the majority of quantitative studies risked recollection bias and the possibility of common method variation. Fourth, small qualitative sample sizes in several studies seeking depth of individual experience may be viewed from a quantitative perspective as having limited generalizability.

Results

A broad answer is now available to the first objective of this scoping review. Nearly fifty refereed articles (n=45) have been published from three dozen empirical studies (n=37). This important but slim research corpus has been additional to studies of the phenomenon of bullying in other spheres of business and public life. Other administrative domains where bullying has been investigated in Pakistan include the civil service, business corporations, schools, and health sector. Studies of school children and youth, cyber-bullying, and peer-to-peer bullying, complicate the recognition of the seriousness and widespread nature of bullying.

Less clear in the data in the present scope is an answer to this review's second question: How visible are women's experiences in empirical Pakistani studies about bullying against academics? Addressing this evidence can start cross-nationally. The ratio of men and women being bullied varies between countries. Internationally, [Zapf](#), [Escartín](#), [Einarsen](#), [Hoel](#), and [Vartia](#) (2010) suggested that bullying often takes place over long periods (months and years), citing studies reporting bullying episodes ranging from 16-60 months. From this international perspective, these authors:

carried out an analysis based on 80 samples of bullying victims... which reported gender distribution among victims. Weighted percentages with regard to sample size (total sample size n=14,119 victims; n=79 samples) showed that 65.8% of victims were women and 34.2% were men.

Research Approaches

The problem of being a target of bullying can be understood as greater for women than men in Pakistan, given the country's very low gender equality ranking at 154 out of 159

nations on the United Nations Human Development Index, 2020 (<https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI>). Under counting, under-reporting, the taboo nature of bullying and harassment situations, the absence of reporting mechanisms, and patterns of public discourse, all contribute to invisibilizing this problem and undermining well being in HE workplaces. The studies in this review make it clear that both men and women are the subject of bullying conduct in HE, some studies alleging situational and contextual factors, some personal factors, and others invoking cultural causes. Table 2 summarizes the methods used in these bullying research studies. Over eighty percent of the studies conducted quantitative surveys (n=31, 83.8%). Less than one-quarter of the studies were solely qualitative interviews (n=6, 16.2%). Most survey-based articles stated they used random sampling; four studies reported convenience sampling. Sample size in two-thirds of the quantitative studies (n=21) ranged from 200-400; seven studies had <200 participants and three studies had sample sizes above 400. Sample size for qualitative studies ranged from 6-37 participants; most using purposive sampling.

In some studies, researchers undertook separate qualitative and quantitative stages as part of their overall interest in investigating bullying directed at academics in HE, for example, (Bilal, Fatima, & Imran, 2020) survey and interview study. One study adopted a mixed-methods approach, using interviews and a survey, (Anwar, Sarwar, Awan, & Arif, 2011).

Table 2
Pakistan studies of bullying against academics (2000-22)

Research methods used	n	%
Survey/ questionnaire	30	81.1
Interview	6	16.2
Mixed-methods	1	2.7
Total	37	100

In these Pakistani studies, the majority of HE teachers reported being under moderate to severe stress. In some studies, women academics reported greater levels of workplace duress than men, but other studies reported no difference. The administrative context linked these results to gender expectations and roles placed on women between their home lives, workplace, and civil society. Studies indicating women faculty were more likely than men to experience work-related stress included (Anwar et al., 2011; Bilal et al., 2020; Fatima et al., 2017). In the quantitative studies gender was not treated as a significant factor for workplace bullying. According to Durrani and Nasir Ali Khan (2010) the:

[i]ssue of 'harassment' is still a sub rosa topic generally in Pakistani culture and society and particularly with reference to the HE, where it is not considered a recognized serious issue. People usually believe that sexual harassment is something that may be swept under the table. In the same way, women usually take it as a routine matter of their working lives.

Qualitative Studies

What did the articles report? Looking for answers or clues to how visible women's experiences of being bullied were as academics in Pakistani HE, we focused on qualitative studies. From prior research experience and preliminary viewing when selecting studies for this review, it was likely that these studies would provide greater detail and information about direct and indirect affects for women. Table 3 summarizes the main themes and findings in the seven studies that used qualitative interviews.

Table 3
Qualitative studies of bullying against Pakistani academics

Authors	Looking for academic women's experience	n
Bhatti and Ali (2020)	Women's leadership and discriminative practices; cultural norms limit women's participation; gender stereotyping and labeling, harassment and critical attitudes; family-profession 'balance' discursively constructed.	11
Bilal, Fatima, and Imran (2019)	Exclusionary work environment; detailed negative psychological impacts; collectivist culture tolerates ostracism. 'both genders are victims of ostracism'; 'psychological impacts... no gender differences were traced.'	25
Bilal, Fatima, Imran and Iqbal (2021)	Nature of victims (provocative or passive) and their experiences are prime factors in workplace ostracism; retaliation, contextual factors 'allow' ostracism; 17 men, 13 women.	30
Durrani and Khan (2010)	Women academics face sexual harassment, including psychological, and physical. But 'not recognized sexual harassment as a serious issue in Pakistani society'; 'nameless issue' confuses women too.	6
Fatima, Bilal, and Imran (2019)	Experiences of ostracized academics; 7 women, 13 men; inherently contextual impacts on behavioral outcomes, from availability of other jobs, peers, 'collectivist nation' with 'social relations highly valued'.	20
Saleem, Ali, Ashiq and Rehman (2021)	Women aware of physical and psychological workplace harassment and about legislation among university women library staff. Most staff did not participate; need organizational harassment committees.	35
Anwar, Sarwar, Awan, and Arif (2011)	'Male teaching staff... more deviant than the female teaching staff'; 26 men, 24 women, keyword gender; 'sexual harassment, aggression, bullying, and incivility, etc.'; catalogues of short definitions.	50

Discussion

Three themes are explored below. These reflect on perspectives and methodologies used in these studies, and suggest ways to progress this important field of research. Each theme emphasizes the place of women within the general findings of bullying targeting academics in Pakistani HE, to better explore the answer to the second research question. First, where are the accounts, the stories, of women academics being bullied by colleagues and administrators in their coercion, and cruelty, within games of status-power? Second, how can the nameless quality of the culturally hidden but obvious practices of bullying, much wider than the HE sector, be brought into this research purview to become part of

the stories, and ultimately the amelioration of this societal corrosion? Third, as part of this scholarly progress, what concepts can researchers develop to strengthen their ability to see through the cultural fog that surrounds this topic and could assist universities and the public sector enhance the lives of their work forces and their institutional effectiveness?

Seeking Women's Stories of Being Bullied

The few qualitative studies available offered the promise of documenting the hidden obviousness of women academic's experiences of being bullied (Israa & Suneel, 2018). 'Qualitative research allows the researcher to gather rich contextual insights into people's live experiences of policies, programs, and power dynamics'. Describing individual stories assumed the ability of interview studies to draw out fuller accounts of these complex experiences. However, taboos about discussing bullying intersected with the gendered rules of Pakistani culture. We hoped personal accounts might break through readers' consciousness, and create a more profound understanding than accumulation of means and percentages. But there is much work to be done. Quantitative surveys mostly failed to illuminate the human depth of hurt, trauma, and the economic damage, and convey the not-easily-measurable, but practically important, circumstances of being bullied. Table 3 lists the qualitative studies found in this scoping review. Sample sizes found of 20-40 academic participants are common for this type of exploratory research (Trotter II, 2012).

As Table 3 above showed, the emancipating gender possibilities of qualitative research were for the most part not realized in these studies, or only partly. One example might show the contours of this research dilemma. Bilal et al. (2020) state that 'less females (35%) as compared to males (65%) reported ostracism. This shows that both genders are victims of ostracism', and that in regard to 'psychological impacts... no gender differences were traced in terms of outcomes'. This raises a series of problems much wider than this individual piece of research.

First, such findings are countered by other studies pointing to greater stress and harassment experienced by academic women, noted earlier. If this was the only issue, this might simply be the process of working through research processes and outcomes. Second, notwithstanding these authors' concluding invitation for further research to be conducted, this kind of research offers no defense to quantitative objections about generalizability because of small numbers and locations. Third, the suggestion that a collectivist culture tolerates ostracism is, among other things, an implicit acknowledgement of the lack of a satisfactory account of women's experience of being bullied. Sympathetically, one might add, and the difficulty of the research task. Fourth, the proposed strength of qualitative methods is its ability to bring together the many interacting variables in the lived place and circumstances, rather than isolating them from the cultural construction of gender and local, individual bullying. Durrani and Nasir Ali Khan (2010) is a rare instance here of uniting these perspectives, in their study of bullying and harassment. Fifth, the offer of theoretical framing, in this case, phenomenology, did not bring out the distinctive experience of either men or women. It is possible that without detailed reflection, formal framing may continue to obscure the general social problem of bullying, and the

particular experiences of women (Cahill, 2007). Interviews tended to share the methodological issues more commonly associated with quantitative work, rather than gaining the depth derived from qualitative inquiry.

The complex interactions of bullying in an experiential narrative were surprisingly lacking. Internationally, some qualitative studies are able to explicate how social power is simultaneously gender power, but not the same thing. Individualizing frameworks mean that researchers simply do not have the tools to recognize the significance of gender or other structural patterns. For example, the following assertion completely inverts a sociological understanding, missing the fundamental importance of gender: 'Certain work environments permit employees to do ostracism-related activities because of surface-level features (gender, race) that deviated from existing norms' (Bilal et al., 2020). The thinking reflected in this kind of expression indicates a barrier to real progress in addressing bullying. Individual impacts of being bullied in HE included work-related contributions being neglected, unnecessary work monitoring, delaying responses by colleagues or seniors on critical topics, or being subjected to negative feedback (Ahmad, Kalim, & Kaleem, 2017). Giorgi observed that 'workplace bullying is a kind of organizational virus that may lead to a toxic work environment'.

This scarcity of qualitative research on workplace bullying and ostracism of academics in Pakistan HE settings offers great potential for expansion and development. The present shortfall of studies is not simply a failure of conceptualizing caught between individualizing conceptions and assumptions about cultural collectivism. It is also a call for integrating the evidence of everyday administration of academic institutions into accounts that give voice to the depth of women's experiences and making public this obvious problem hidden at the center of society. Unless these academic women's personal experiences are carefully brought to public attention, they remain unvoiced stories, untold; or to use a different metaphor of social critique, they remain invisible and unseen (Hatton, 2017). Unless the narrative of such adverse conduct is set out and the deep impacts on individual women, and women collectively, properly chronicled, it can be argued that culturally they did not happen. The corollary is there is no organizational pressure to change, (Durrani & Nasir Ali Khan, 2010) described one kind of bullying and harassment:

Most people, including women, either deny [sexual harassment's] existence or take it as a part of the normal routine of working life. . . . The academy in Pakistan inadvertently supports this policy by denying its presence in HEI.

It is this kind of more nuanced treatment of the context-cultural or organizational in which women find themselves enmeshed in universities, that lifts the quality of scholarly analysis. The particulars of individuals and group relationships are only part of the bullying situation, and the impacts of these framing expectations, motivations, and norms have to be inferred from what participants and respondents say and have done. This interpretative dimension of research desirably comes not simply from an article's background literature but from the data collected and studied in relation to the sociocultural setting. It is not fully articulable.

Culturally Invisible Stories of Women Being Bullied

In most of these quantitative and qualitative studies adding a gender variable was somewhat simplistically put forwards as identifying women's relationship to the issue of bullying that the surveys and interviews described. At best this can be only a first analytic step since it makes multiple assumptions that need to be questioned: First, the willingness of women participants to report bullying or harassment. And separately, individual women's ability to articulate the issues. However, these elements of agency are precisely what has been eclipsed by the personal hurt and damage to the well-being of having been the recipient and the target of bullying. Second, Pakistan's sociocultural norms of not speaking about workplace bullying, physical or psychological encroachment, or harassment, are redoubled as taboos against women speaking out, as somehow gender-inappropriate. Pragmatically, women themselves have typically internalized this cultural prohibition (Ali et al., 2011). This makes it a 'nameless issue' and raising it can be confusing for women as well as men (Durrani & Nasir Ali Khan, 2010). Third, even supposing a repeating research assessment of men and women's responses to being bullied was confirmed as the same (though the data trends opposite), the structural positioning of women in careers and domestically in Pakistan society means that more of them proportionately are impacted. Specifically, mid-level teaching academics are predominantly women.

These limitations undermined to varying degrees the explanatory value of any study that did not, as a minimum, self-consciously reflect on this invisible evidential problem (Anjum et al., 2018). Thus, statistical exactness in reporting results tended to assume that statistical significance bore a simple relationship to substantive significance but offered little insight into practices and beliefs that generated or allowed bullying to happen. In these studies, workplace bullying occurred within implicit culturally defined positional power imbalances needing more focus to be empirically useful. Among HE academics, downward bullying corresponded to Pakistan's hierarchical society, often reinforced by what in the nursing profession has come to be called 'horizontal violence' or 'lateral violence' meaning colleague ostracism and bullying (Becher & Visovsky, 2012).

Pakistan has strong traditional and patriarchal sociocultural belief systems within which women are supposed to focus on marriage, childrearing, and household duties. This constrains women from developing their professional skills for administrative positions and contributing to leadership roles. To overcome these multiple constraints, women in Pakistan's HE need resourcing to achieve and sustain leadership positions against this cultural backdrop (Bhatti & Ali, 2020; Shabroz & Hamid, 2019).

Anjum et al. (2018) asserted that not a single study has been conducted on the gendered nature of bullying in the HEIs of Pakistan. This is despite the sorry evidence of what can be readily observed:

Women employees were much more likely to identify bullying behaviors as severe, unlike their men counterparts. Further, a person-related form of bullying prevails more frequently among female employees. Overall, results indicate that bullying cannot be separated from gender and that such negative behaviors need to be seen in a gendered context.

The obviousness of the problem, the extent of the problem, and the severity of the

problem, have yet to significantly dent the hegemonic denial of bullying's universality within Pakistan culture, or enable public naming and speaking about it, even among university leaders and policy-makers.

Quantitative studies in this review struggled to get beyond essentialized, biological definitions, often repetitively using the words 'male' and 'female'. This mimics previous generations of Western men doing research; they found it difficult to get past pre-modern gender prescriptions and norms. Countries rapidly modernizing today also find it difficult to soften existing patterns of disrespect for women's intellect and competence beyond the domestic sphere. Studies in this review mostly emulated 'male'—'female' terminology from Western academic disciplines. Doing so tends to reinstate traditional binary thinking. Using this outdated Western terminology has the effect of continuing to reinforce existing Pakistani cultural patterns under the academic guise, of survey averages, percentages, scales, and models. This is academic neo-colonialism that could be shed (Ergin & Alkan, 2019).

The quite proper concern with statistical significance in quantitative studies only weakly addressed the substantive significance of gender inequality in these articles. It has been women who have carried the greater burden of being bullied via explicit and implicit assertions of patriarchal norms and adverse conduct in contemporary HE institutions. According to Anjum et al. (2018), the primary mechanisms of bullying in universities derive from administrative positions and job promotions; such bullying behaviors are general but more often than not directed at women, or more strongly directed at women (an understudied aspect). These authors state that in HE workplaces 'Women had more exposure to bullying as compared to men'.

For women, here again, exposure is a different measure to intensity, frequency, a mix of bullying and harassment, the status differential between target and perpetrator, formal versus social ostracism, gendered expectations, and other variables. Part of the puzzle in researching women's experiences of being bullied is that the studies documented personal and emotional costs for not just women but also for men as well. The victims in one study (Fatima et al., 2020):

revealed they suffer negative emotions, the participants reported that they felt a lack of inclusion in formal and informal organizational networks, they were not included in conversations and their opinions were not invited and appreciated. An interesting theme emerged that participants said that sometimes they were invited in formal meetings, but they were signaled clearly that they were unwanted. They are treated as they were non-existent by ignoring to invite their opinion. content...

In situations of experiencing bullying, women were more likely to leave their jobs than men (Anjum et al., 2018; Adil & Khan, 2020). Qualitative studies showed negative events and bullying periods were linked to life stories arising from local culture which structured situational interactions. Mujtaba and Reiss (2015) traced the lifetime context of such treatment for women well before becoming an academic:

There are many reasons why girls are disadvantaged in Pakistan's education system, some of which relate to poverty, others to cultural expectations,

and some to the quality of schooling... cultural[ly] it is not seen as important to educate girls, particularly as they get married and become part of another family... Though little has been written about the widespread sexual harassment of women in Pakistan... this is a fourth barrier toward women's participation in education and employment.

Most studies showed minimal capacity to tell the story of Pakistani HE bullying from the data presented. A significant opportunity exists for qualitative research to document bullying situations and cases. Personal, official, and cultural threads woven together might better fill this discursive gap by narrating these stories in human terms for a wider public. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the reduction in generalizability in qualitative studies increases the ability of this approach in a key respect. It enables the research to make explicit layers of denial and suppression of these human accounts when done successfully. Often the administrative configuration of bullying and harassment remained invisible in the studies despite the purpose of raising concern about impacts on the functioning of the HE sector from the unfair gender treatment of women. At least in the published qualitative outputs, excerpts of conversations and experiences of being bullied were starting to appear, building towards documenting and connecting the parts of the national bullying problem in HEIs.

Bullying Concepts and Forms of Bullying

A third area of interest in this new empirical field of HE bullying research is the collation of terms for conceptualizing bullying and harassing behavior. These ideas form the nucleus of this body of research, laying the foundation for further work. Table 4 presents a range of different terms used across both qualitative and quantitative studies in these articles interpreting researchers' study findings. Ostracism was a distinctive emphasis in the language describing bullying behaviors that target university academics. At present this relevant and distinctive term is not emphasized internationally as much as it might be in developing the field's lexicon of terms for describing bullying and harassment behaviors (Burns et al., 2020). From the qualitative accounts, important links with other international researchers could be developed.

Bilal et al. (2020) affirm that:

In general, the ostracized faculty... indicated that they were invited in formal meetings but they were not treated as per the social norms of the department. They were deprived of work-related advice, information, friendships, social and emotional support from peers. This kind of exclusion was more evident in female faculty, and stronger for the employees having a lower designation, i.e. lecturers.

And again, Bilal et al. (2020), even with the biological languaging, offer ambivalent explanations about whether there is or is not a women-men difference: 'In our findings, in contrast to the western context... ostracism was not directed only toward the females but impacted male faculty equally, though ostracized female faculty reported higher negative

emotions than male.’ In contrast, [Fatima et al. \(2020\)](#) point to women being more socially ostracized. The tensions between these opinions slows communication of research addressing bullying against women academics more cleanly and strongly:

More recently the concept of ostracism has been examined in academia when ([Zimmerman, Carter-Sowell, & Xu, 2016](#)) found female faculty to be more ostracized in university settings in terms of social ostracism. In Pakistan, two studies focused on the construct of workplace ostracism in HEIs where it was found to lead towards counterproductive behaviors and silence.

Many of the concepts used in the studies of bullying against academics in HE can also be found internationally; some of the ideas are derived from other jurisdictions (Table 4). The most consistently developed conceptualization in this literature is the concept of ostracism of the targeted academic person. The nuance in this Pakistani research work suggests a valuable contribution to the larger international field of bullying and well-being. The overlaps and distinctions conceptually and culturally of terms such as bullying, harassment, and ostracism, and the lived experience of being subject to these processes might bring together the individual and contextual art of the stories. A third of the articles (n=16, 35.6%) considered causes of workplace ostracism in HEIs. The main causes identified were: lack of active interest or involvement by organizational leaders, patriarchal culture, a ‘big man’ seth mindset, the national collective sociality of extended family and community networks, and a culture in which belonging is more important than confronting or objecting to adverse personal interactions ([Anjum, Muazzam, Manzoor, Visvizi, & Nawaz, 2019](#); [Anwar et al., 2011](#); [Khan, Siddiqui, Zhiqiang, Weijun, & Mingxing, 2021](#)).

Table 4
Explanatory concepts and bullying terms used in Pakistan empirical studies

Concept or phrase	Refereed article example
Workplace ostracism	Fatima et al. (2019).
Toxic culture; environment; atmosphere; work ethic; organizational climate	Anjum et al. (2018); Khan et al. (2021c); Qureshi et al. (2014); Khan et al. (2021a).
Incivility	Jawahar et al. (2021); Anjum et al. (2022).
Ostracism; ignoring; the silent treatment; social isolation	Bilal et al. (2021); Ali et al. (2011).
Co-worker ostracism; workplace ostracism	Fatima (2022); Fatima (2020); Fatima et al. (2019).
Bullying; workplace issues, harassment	Anjum et al. (2019); Saleem et al. (2021); Malik and Björkqvist (2019); Israa1 and Suneel (2018).
Ethical leadership	Khan et al. (2021a,b); Ahmad et al. (2019).
Mistreatment; emotional exhaustion; self-compassion	Anjum et al. (2020a,b).
Occupational stress	Malik (2017).
Turnover intention	Ali and Khan (2011); Bhatti and Ahmed (2021); Ahmad (2022).
Coping strategies	Muazzam (2020); Anjum et al. (2019).
Mobbing	Qureshi et al. (2015).
Provocative victims; submissive victims	Bilal et al. (2019).
Gender; resettlement; violence	Durrani and Khan (2010); Anjum and Muazzam (2018).
Fear of negative evaluation; belief in reciprocity	Khair and Fatima (2017).
Emotional damage; anxiety; emotional exhaustion	Mirza et al. (2020).

Long-term exposure to workplace ostracism was reported (n=15 articles, 33.3%) as having had negative impacts on the creative and productive performance of academic employees in the HE sector. In acute cases ostracism led to withdrawal from work, decrease in performance, and triggered job insecurity. Chronic exposure could lead to resignation from work (Ahmad et al., 2020). Bullying reduced job staff productivity and had adverse effects on the physical health of academics. According to Fatima et al. (2020) the hidden cost of failing to address workplace bullying in HE institutions became evident in instances when peers discontinued sharing information. Sometimes this was individually targeted; at other times a wider toxic culture existed.

The studies revealed ways that bullying against academic staff was practiced, for example, burdening faculty with heavy workloads, close deadlines, ignoring efforts made, and inconsiderate attitudes of supervisors. Some studies identified the cultural expectation that women were considered easy targets for bullying behavior (Anjum et al., 2018; Anwar et al., 2011; Saleem, Ali, Ashiq, & Rehman, 2021). Sometimes excluded academics were provided with crucial work-related information, but then made to feel unwelcome or non-existent by failing to subsequently solicit their viewpoint, or through incivility such as not extending greetings when individuals met one another. Other examples showed how work achievements might be disregarded, administrators might choose to engage in micro-managing, individuals being subjected to negative comments, or receiving personal criticism.

Other concepts in these studies stand out by their omission, such as the positive significance of educator wellness, particularly for women academics, an issue that is acknowledged in contemporary worldwide literature (Amaya, Donegan, Conner, Edwards, & Gipson, 2019). Since the vast majority of the active HE teaching workforce in Pakistan are women, but located in the lower ranks of the academic hierarchy, the neutrality of framing bullying research as a generic problem, misses the point that it is substantially about women's gender inequality, and this ingrained perspective contributes to maintaining gender inequality.

Undertaking the scoping review made it clear how widely the term ostracism had been used in Pakistani research to analyze bullying and incivil behaviors in many organizations, not solely in HE institutions. Ostracism deprived an individual of culturally expected social connections. In such circumstances, being accepted and affiliated with other individuals was not fulfilled, and a person's self-esteem was compromised. An ostracized individual felt lonely, worthless, and demotivated. Taking opportunities for scholarship in Pakistan to contribute to the international conversation can be seen in Ayoko (2022)'s recent article leading with Pakistani literature about ostracism in discussing bullying and psychological safety.

Speaking of Pakistan generally, influence over other people was less desired than feelings of belonging. Pakistani public discourse inhibits the ostracized individual from retaliating; instead, she or he suffers depression from this emotional setback. Prolonged exposure to such behavior sometimes resulted in resigning from the university as a last resort to get free from the punitive situation (Malik, Björkqvist, & Österman, 2017). In societies placing high value on social bonding, ostracizing behaviors are correspondingly highly threatening. Cohesive social group relationships mean that striving for social ap-

proval, in these studies may perversely generate opportunities for harassment, bullying, and incivility.

In some instances, ostracism was used positively if HE academics were able to gain skills to undermine later bullying behaviors. Significantly, a positive or negative resistance trajectory depended on when it was started; a greater focus in the initial stages by an individual to achieve a positive outcome tended to reduce over time (Fatima et al., 2020). Resourcing against adverse targeting by bullies emerged as another concept from these studies in the lack of support for women to attain senior academic and administrative positions in universities. The desired support to overcome obstacles would include assisting them in dealing with harassment and bullying, both implicitly and explicitly, aimed at them by an individual perpetrator, or via a 'group-think' of men's gendered perspective, either route effectively undermining women's career advancement:

It is clear that the dominant masculine discourses present in society often stereotype women as weak and unfit for leadership roles. Moreover, if a woman becomes strong and confident, she is stereotyped as 'being a male'. Previous leadership researches explicitly elaborate that gender stereotypes systematically favour men at top leadership positions.

In gender terms this invidious situation attempts to exclude and harass women one way or another, allowing no 'right' way to progress. Among the 45 articles based on bullying, ostracism, or incivility, only a few highlight the centrality of gender in such behavior. Yet studies like Anjum, Muazzam, Manzoor, Visvizi, Pollock, and Nawaz (2019) were clear in documenting how women academics:

are more bullied as compared to male teachers as females are supposed to be trained less, self-assertive, less aggressive, and less skilled to defend themselves as compared to men. Furthermore, men usually hold strategic positions more than women and they use their power to harass women.

A first inference administratively is that research closer to the subjective experience of being the target of bullying—the inequity of this, and its human and social cost—reveals more sharply the gendered experience that women more than men suffer from such abuse (Kazmi & Javaid, 2022). A second inference is that with one exception (Anwar et al., 2011), qualitative studies have only appeared in this literature since 2019, hopefully the start of a much-needed research reorientation in furthering both HE equity and university effectiveness. At the present moment in this research field, qualitative studies are urgently needed to provide multiple in-depth accounts of those who have been bullied; exploring and reporting the personal, organizational and cultural contexts often omitted or not fully utilized to interpret results.

Conclusion

Bullying research in Pakistani higher education faces a positive and much-needed future for the good of its academic workforce, especially women, and for the good running of

the country's social and economic development. The hope is it will expand and develop ideas from the evidence, comparing results from different studies. This scoping review assembled research about bullying culture prevalent in the academic environment of the university sector. These empirical studies documented multiple forms by which bullying is practiced in Pakistan HE, and women academics' coping mechanisms in attempting to survive incivil, ostracizing, and harassing behavior. At present there is an insufficient political and administrative willingness to curb bullying conduct. The review confirmed D'Cruz et al.'s observation, noted in the introduction, that Pakistan bullying research has a shorter history than research about bullying and harassment in Western HE situations and cultures.

Despite the fact that workplace bullying by colleagues and managers is a widespread and persistent problem in Pakistan, the evidence of this review is of only a modest programme of investigation by a small number of active and interested researchers. Limited research means less attention has been garnered for developing options, concepts, and policy settings that would create improved working conditions. HEIs have yet to demonstrate organizational intent to address issues of workplace bullying. Until expectations change, the insidious culture of bullying against those in less powerful positions will only change marginally if at all. This is particularly a problem for academic women who are the majority cohort occupying the lower echelons of academic organizations. Women exist in gendered caste-like exclusion from senior ranks and interpersonal respect in Pakistan HEIs.

Patterns of bullying directed against academic women in Pakistan include many naturalized but openly gendered bullying behaviors that detrimentally affect their lives and careers. We term this the hidden obviousness of gendered bullying behavior against women academic staff. Publicly telling stories of unwanted receipts and consequences of unprofessional bullying and harassing conduct is both a scholarly and equity task. Doing so will reveal the administrative damage and constraints to women's contribution to HE in Pakistan, and the potential future gains to be achieved. Failing to conceptualize bullying in gendered terms misses this hidden obviousness in HE organizational culture.

Findings of these studies underscored the need for several national-level innovations: first, developing broad-based institutional action ([Ahmad et al., 2017](#)) that is nationally mandated. Second, longitudinal research multi-level design is needed to expand the study of the issue of bullying from various perspectives ([Anjum et al., 2018](#); [Ahmad et al., 2020](#)). Third, government administrators, although themselves implicated in the national culture, should direct policy makers and university executives to develop much stronger and explicit anti-bullying policies and codes of conduct. These could include audit and enforcement regimes to curtail incivil behavior for front-line academic staff in Pakistan's tertiary education sector.

The concept of ostracism is a feature of this body of research. What mix of Pakistan culture, or simply an emerging research tradition, shapes this conceptual framing is an important consideration for adding value to future research. Both bullying behaviors and efforts of resistance to bullying showed oblique, almost furtive, strategies rather than face-to-face expressions of power, hostility, and avoidance. In elaborating and investigating the concept of ostracism as a bullying strategy, ideas about culturalist arguments,

patriarchal traditions, gender demeaning, and seth culture, are tools to bridge the international literature about bullying to the specifics of Pakistan's current situation. Typically, workplace bullying consists of a pattern of negative episodes that have a corroding impact on victims' social, workplace, and psychological wellbeing and confidence. Given the destructive consequences of bullying and ostracism in an expanding HE sector, there is an urgent need to address this deeply entrenched behavior in Pakistan's educational settings. It not only harms the mental health of many academics, but also the effective delivery of desired educational and economic outcomes for the country. Clearly the road from research findings to administrative and regulatory implementation is long. Pakistan has tripled the number of universities over the last two decades but little attention has been paid so far to implementing policies and practices that address and rein in the phenomenon of bullying.

Recommendations for Future Researchers

Based on the analysis of existing studies, it is evident that there is a limited capacity to effectively communicate the narrative of bullying in Pakistani higher education solely through the presented data. A noteworthy recommendation is to explore qualitative research as an invaluable avenue to document and articulate bullying situations and cases. By interweaving personal, official, and cultural narratives, qualitative research has the potential to bridge the existing discursive gap and present these stories in a human context for a broader audience. Contrary to common belief, the reduction in generalizability in qualitative studies can enhance the approach's effectiveness by explicitly exposing layers of denial and suppression surrounding these human accounts when executed successfully. Notably, the administrative aspects of bullying and harassment often remained obscured in the reviewed studies, despite the intended focus on highlighting concerns about the adverse effects on the functioning of the higher education sector arising from the unfair gender treatment of women. Therefore, undertaking qualitative research is recommended to offer a more comprehensive understanding and facilitate the necessary discourse on this critical issue.

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