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Victim-Blaming and the Construction of Gendered Power: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Dawn's Reporting of Female University Harassment in Pakistan

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Abstract
Much of public awareness of gender-based harassment is already formed by its portrayal in the media, especially in societies that have patriarchal values determining social attitudes and institutional practices. The number of incidents of harassment against female university students in Pakistan often make head news, leading to public discourses around morality, behaviour, institutional accountability, and women's access to educational environments. This study examines the ways in which the Pakistani media framings create female victims of harassment and the role that language can play in reinforcing or undermining gender power dynamics. Based on the three-dimensional approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) outlined by Norman Fairclough, with feminist approach to language and power, the study embarks on an analytical analysis of the instances of victim-blaming, agency, representation and institutional accountability in Pakistani media reporting. Special focus is on lexical selection, grammatical structures, transitivity, social actors, quotation, and responsibility distribution. The study examines English-language media coverage of harassment in university settings and how news narratives manage the gender moralities—between gender, morals, institutional power and women's educational rights. It contends that the analysis of media reporting should not only be considered as a mirror of social reality, but as a discursive process that inroduces social identities and power relations. The study adds to the discussion of Pakistani media discourse studies by highlighting the connections between victim blaming and representation of women agency within higher education settings.
***Keywords**: victim blaming, gendered power, critical discourse analysis, media representation, female harassment, Pakistani universities and feminist discourse analysis.*

Introduction
Universities are considered institutions of knowledge, intellectual development, social mobility and professional advancement in general. They are also social settings where gender relations, institutional hierarchies and cultural values are in play. University education for female students in Pakistan may entail dealing with the demands for learning as well as broader social perceptions and expectations about gender, morality, respectability and decent female conduct.

The issue of harassment of women in educational institutions is a significant social and institutional issue. But when harassment does become public, an issue that looms is the portrayal of female victims in the media. The media is not just a source of information on events. They develop specific modes of representation for people and social contexts, using headlines, words, structures, sources and story structure.

A big problem with gender-based reporting is victim blaming. Victim blaming is when blame for the harassment or the results of the harassment is placed, either directly or indirectly, on the victim. In such discourse, the attention can shift away from the actions of the alleged perpetrator and instead focus on the victim's clothing, behavior, character, social activities, or decisions.

In a patriarchy society these types of representations may perpetuate the notion that women should control their own behavior to prevent harassment. This expectation puts an unfair burden on female students and can have a negative impact on their freedom to participate in learning spaces.

Pakistani media is embedded in a complex social context where traditional notions of gender, religious and cultural norms, institutional power and modern concepts of women's rights collide. The incident of harassment in universities is thus an important site for examining the expression of competing ideologies in language in news reporting.

A contextual analysis, such as Critical Discourse Analysis, is suitable to analyse these processes because it looks at the interconnection between language, ideology and social power. An approach that is particularly relevant is Fairclough's (1992, 1995) linkage of the characteristics of texts to discursive practices and to social structures more broadly.

The present study delves into the construction of female university students in the media discourse in the context of harassment in Pakistan. It particularly focuses on the linguistic and ideological processes that can create, perpetuate, negotiate, and/or resist victim-blaming.

Statement of the Problem

While harassment in schools is a topic of conversation that is prevalent, the terminology used for reporting harassment deserves deeper critical analysis. Media discourse can repeat gender stereotypes by linking women victims to the issues of morality, personal conduct, family honor and social respectability.

Representations can help deflect the blame away from the responsibility of the alleged perpetrator and accountability of the school. They may also build up females as socially weak and vulnerable subjects that need to be judged in the public sphere to earn their trust and respect.

Previous studies conducted in Pakistan have explored topics such as gender representation, victim-blaming and the media coverage of sexual violence. Yet, what needs to be further examined is the construction of victim-blaming and gendered power in media constructs of harassment of university women specifically.

The relationship between linguistic representation, victim-blaming, and the reproduction or contestation of the gendered power in Pakistani media discourse on university harassment is thus the central issue that this study seeks to address.

Research Objectives

To explore the Pakistani media's portrayal of female university students when reporting on the harassment of women students.

2. To define and recognise strategies in language that contribute to or challenge victim-blaming.

3. To explore the allocation of agency and responsibility through the grammar and the representations of the social actors.
4. To examine the influence or critique of media texts on the understandings of women's behaviour and positions within society that are patriarchal.
5. To analyse the representation of institutional authority and accountability in the media coverage of harassment at universities.

Research Questions

- How are the female university students depicted in Pakistani news reporting on harassment?
- Discuss the linguistic and discursive strategies used to build and/or challenge victim-blaming.
- What are the roles of different social actors (victim, alleged perpetrator, institution) in the distribution of agency and responsibility through grammatical structures and representations of social actors?
- What representations of patriarchal gender ideologies are constructed and/or contested in the media?
- How does the institutional responsibility and accountability is built in the portrayal of harassment in Pakistani universities?

Literature Review

Media Representation and Gender

Representing media is not a neutral affair. News organizations choose events, develop stories, determine who to include, and organize information based on specific professional and institutional norms. These processes are factors in the representation of social groups and individuals.

News discourse can reinforce the ideological structures through the selection and organisation of information, as explained by Van Dijk (1991). The selection of some social actors and the absence of others can affect the interpretation of social events as well.

Gender representation is especially significant because women are often depicted in ways that are determined by social norms of what they look like, how they behave, their roles in family and society, and how they are treated. Representations of this kind can repeat inequities between men and women.

Yasmin and Sohail (2021) in their study on Gendered Reporting on Crime in Pakistani English newspapers offer relevant evidence of the phenomenon of asymmetrical representation, sensationalism and victim-blaming in newspaper discourse.

Understanding Victim-Blaming

The term 'victim-blaming' is used to describe placing blame on the victim or focusing on the things that caused the harm rather than the perpetrator.

The concept of blaming the victim (Ryan, 1971; see also, see the book by Richards and Richards, 1997) arose to try to account for the fact that inequalities can be legitimate when they are blamed on the disadvantaged people themselves.

Victim-blaming can be seen in gender-based harassment discussions in questions regarding women's attire, conduct, mobility, social interactions, or choices. These signposts can set an unconscious expectation on women to change their behaviour to avoid being harassed. This is especially dangerous in academic settings due to the risk of discouraging female students from reporting harassment or engaging in academic settings with confidence.

CDA and Media Language

Critical Discourse Analysis is an analysis of language that studies the role of language in the construction and maintenance of social inequalities. Fairclough (1992) suggests that discourse is a linguistic practice, a mode of social interaction and an element of larger social structures.

Fairclough's (1995) perspective allows media discourse to be analysed in three interrelated ways:

- Textual analysis.
- Discursive practice.
- Social practice.

At the text level, the vocabulary, grammar, transitivity, modality and cohesion are studied. They examine the creation, dissemination and reception of media texts at a discursive level. In the social practice level, they explore the ideology and institutions in which discourse takes place.

Gender, Language, and Power

Language plays significant role in the formation of gender or gender identity and in the social relationships. A feminist theoretical perspective of discourse analysis explores how language constructs inequities and how women can be marginalized thru representation.

Feminist critical discourse analysis is a analysis of the relationship between discourse, gender, ideology and power (Lazar, 2005). It offers a valuable insight into how seemingly mundane language decisions can perpetuate inequitable gender dynamics.

Representations of female harassment in Pakistan's media can be seen as a result of the conflict between the rights of women to attend school and conservative notions of women's behaviour and respectability.

Pakistani Media and Victim-Blaming

There are already some problematic trends identified in the reporting of violence against women in Pakistan through the research work done.

Zaman, Shah, and Hasnain (2023) explored how the Pakistani media has covered the issue of rape using Van Dijk's CDA model. They found that two aspects of the representation of media, namely deletion and the concealment of information, were important factors in their study.

A further study by Shah and Hasnain (2023) focussed on the Pakistanis news media and how information was being manipulated in the reporting of rape cases.

Ihsan and Irshad (2025) examined the way in which the media constructed a rape allegation against a college student in a three-dimensional CDA analysis. The study highlights the significance of analyzing the media discourse and its construction of events, its institutional reaction and its voice of victims' voices being marginalized.

Masood (2026) also analysed violence against women in Dawn using Corpus-assisted discourse analysis. The study revealed that there were differences between news reporting and commentary in terms of the depiction of perpetrators, women, agency, and victim-blaming.

This is a useful basis for these studies. However, the present study concentrates specifically on the construction of victim-blaming and gendered power in the language of harassment in the case of female university students.

Theoretical Framework

The three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by Fairclough (1992, 1995) is used as the main theoretical and analytical framework in this study. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis is another conceptual support, specifically Lazar's (2005) view.

Textual Dimension

The textual dimension is the study of the linguistic features of media reports. The analysis is based on the following:
- Lexical choices and evaluative expressions.
- Active and passive voice.
- Transitivity and agency.
- Identification of social actors by names.
- Modality and degrees of certainty.
- Headlines and framing.
- Descriptions of victims and alleged perpetrators.

Discursive Practice

This dimension explores the processes of the creation, dissemination and reception of media texts.

The analysis considers:
- Choice of newspaper sources.
- Institutional statements represented.

The presence or absence of female voices.

Sources: Police, university officials, witnesses and family members.

Standard forms of quotation and attribution.
- The differences between news and opinion articles.

Social Practice

The social aspect involves the interplay of media discourse with larger social and gender and power dynamics.

It considers:
- Patriarchal ideologies.
- Gender stereotypes.
- Women's educational participation.
- Institutional authority.
- Community norms about girls' respectability.
- Accountability of the media and gender justice.

Feminist Perspective

The feminist perspective will focus on investigating the media discourse which creates women as social actors and representations that can validate or question gender inequalities.

The perspectives allow the study focus on not only message that media reports convey, but also the role that language plays in the construction of social power relations.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research used in this study is qualitative research type, which uses critical discourse analysis (CDA). The qualitative approach is suitable for the research, as it examines the discursive practices of media discourse, the use of language in the media, and the meanings given to harassment allegations and female university students. The study is not concerned with the presence or absence of specific expressions but rather with the interpretation of how language creates social identities, allocates responsibility, and proposes and/or challenges gendered power relations.

The main analytical framework comes from Fairclough's (1992, 1995) three dimensional framework. Gender, ideology and power can be explored further by using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, specifically by using Lazar's (2005) viewpoint.

Data Sources

The empirical data is comprised of five selected texts taken from "Dawn" English language newspaper in Pakistan. These texts contain news articles and an editorial about claims of harassment by female students at the university.

The texts chosen have been related to two university contexts:

2. Islamia College University, November 2020.

2nd International Conference on Advances in Information Technology and Communication, 12 February - 4 March 2025 at University of Malakand.

The corpus is to run from November 2020 to March 2025. It is important to note that the five texts have been chosen as they offer relevant content to explore issues of representation of girls learners, allegations of harassment, institutional response and the power dynamics and relations between genders.

The texts chosen are:

"Protests by girl students against harassment by teachers at ICU" (12 November 2020).

2. Inquiry ordered regarding harassment of pupils at Islamia College University (13 November 2020).

3. "Silent no more" (editorial, 13 November 2020).

4. Outrage over harassment of Malakand varsity student (17 February 2025).

5. "Malakand university dismisses teacher for harassing student" (6 March 2025).

The newspaper was chosen due to the content of the article that has a high level of accessibility for national affairs, higher education and social problems. The study does not indicate that the five texts are the whole of the Pakistani media. Rather, they form a targeted set of documents to be analyzed qualitatively for exploration.

Sampling Technique

The media texts were selected by purposive sampling method as they were directly relevant to the harassment of female university students in Pakistan. These were chosen for the following reasons:

The text was about a harassment complaint brought forward by a female university student.

Information related to the complainant, alleged perpetrator or institutional response was included in the report.

Relevant descriptions, quotations and/or representations of female students and other social actors were presented in the text.

Material was provided to analyse agency and responsibility, gender representation or institutional accountability.

The text appeared during the specified research period.

Report text that was not related to university harassment or duplicate texts were not included. A final corpus comprised five texts. The corpus is small because the study is exploratory and qualitative, in which the focus is on close examination of the text and discourse rather than on the statistical generalisation.

Data Collection

The texts in the media that were chosen were obtained from the official website of the newspaper Dawn. The relevant reports were found with keywords like, "university harassment Pakistan," "female students harassment," "sexual harassment in universities," "campus harassment," "victim-blaming."

All texts were documented by its headline, publication date, genre, URL and relevance to the research question. The texts were read multiple times to uncover key linguistic features, social actors, source selection and institutional response for each text.

The analysis took into account the distinctions between news reporting and editorial commentary. This was significant because news reports usually include information and statements about sources, while editorials might be more explicit about institutional or social evaluations.

Data Analysis

The collected texts were analysed using the three dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis developed by Fairclough (1992, 1995).

Textual Analysis:** In the initial stage, the linguistic features of the selected texts were analyzed. Headlines, lexical selection, grammatical structures, passives, transitivity, modals, evaluative expressions and social actor names and representations were focused on. The aim was to explore: the representation of female students, alleged perpetrators and institutional authorities; and the allocation of agency and responsibility.

The second stage explored the organisation and presentation of information in the media texts. This included the use of sources, the prominence of the complainants and institutional representatives, the use of paraphrases and direct quotations, and the use of conflicting accounts. The analysis was completed with regard to the representation of female students as active speakers and participants or, rather, as the objects of discussion of other social actors.

Social practice: The third stage analysed the link between the chosen representations and wider social contexts. Special focus was placed on patriarchal presumptions, gender expectations, educational involvement of women, institutional authority, and social circumstances in the reporting of harassment. At this stage, the study looked at the possibility of the media discourse reproducing, negotiating or challenging gendered power relations.

The analysis was guided by six interrelated themes:

Blaming the victim and moralizing.

2. Female identity as a representation.
3. Agency and responsibility.
4. Silencing and marginalisation.
5. Institutional accountability.
6. Resistance and counter-discourse.

These categories were used as analytical tools but not pre-established categories. The five texts were read and compared repeatedly to develop interpretations. The analysis also kept the distinction between allegations and statements from the institutions, institutional investigation results, and confirmed findings.

Ethical Considerations

The study relies on publically available newspaper texts, and will not require first-hand interviews with the complainants or others involved. Potential vulnerable people's identities are not unnecessarily reproduced. Allegations are considered allegations, unless the selected report contains an institutional or judicial finding. Special attention is given to maintain separation between the complainant's statement, the statement of an institution, an active investigation, and a disciplinary decision. The study does not provide evidence of the legality of the events described.

Findings and Discussion

The five themes identified from the analysis of the five selected texts from November 2020 to March 2025 are construction of victim-blaming, representation of female students, linguistic distribution of agency and responsibility, institutional accountability and reproduction or challenge of patriarchal ideologies.

The results suggest that the media image of female university students is not uniform and simple. The chosen texts are chosen to represent women as complainants, protesters, and active participants calling for institutional action. Concurrently, they illustrate the ways in which institutional pronouncements and conflicting narratives can shape public perceptions of harassment claims. These patterns are discussed in the following sections using Fairclough's three dimensional model and a feminist view of language and power.

Construction of Victim-Blaming

Blame shifting is when there is a direct or indirect assignment of blame for harassment to the person being harmed. It can be expressed as a direct accusation or by making statements that challenge a complainant's conduct, honesty, integrity or personal choices. No clear, explicit accusations of female students causing their own harassment could be found in the analysis of the selected texts. Harassment per se is not linked to students' clothing, social behaviour, mobility or personal behaviour in the reports. It would be wrong to say that there is a consistent direct victim-blaming found in the texts that have been selected.

The report on the University of Malakand is an important example of competing representations, however. In his report dated 17 February 2025, Dawn reports the complainant's claims that a lecturer forced his way into the complainant's home and tried to abduct and sexually assault her. The report also features the university media cell's alternate version of the incident, which states that the accused had gone to the student's house with the intention of marrying her (Asad, 2025a).

These accounts differ in quality. The complainant's account of the incident is in terms of force, intimidation and harassment, while the university's account is in terms of an attempted marriage. These descriptions present different interpretations of the incident and can affect the reader's experience of the complainant's experience.

However, it's crucial that the university's alternate narrative is not immediately seen as direct victim-blaming. The report does not explicitly point to the student's cause of the incident. Instead, the conflicting accounts provide a glimpse into the impact that framing an allegation can have on the public architecture of a harassment case. It is important, therefore, to scrutinize and present institutional explanations, especially in conjunction with a complainant's description of alleged harm.

The results indicate that victim-blaming must be studied not just in direct accusations to women. The question of the distribution of credibility, organising of competing explanations, and framing of the action of complainant and alleged perpetrator in media narratives should also be taken into account.

Female students represented: 61.3%Female students represented (61.3%)

The second theme is on the representation of female students as social actors. The report, released on 12 November 2020, "Girl students of ICU protest 'harassment' by teachers", takes a collective view of female students with a focus on how they collectively protest harassment and call for institutional action.

The word "protest" is prominent in the headline, emphasizing student agency. The report details students protest against alleged harassment by teachers and demand action (2020a).

The students are not, therefore, just recipients of harm. They represent themselves as people who mobilise, communicate, assert and defy institutional structures.
The report also includes the students' requests for a focal person to deal with harassment complaints. Their criticism of the present committee suggests that they have a broader concern about the effectiveness of institutional complaints mechanisms than with any one event.
The representation is important because of its feminist connotation, which suggests that women are not passive, weak, and dependent. The students' voices and actions are heard and the need for justice and institutional change is highlighted. Their joint protest also proves that women students can collectively voice their protest and demand recognition of their rights through public expression, and they have also shown that they can influence the institutional practices through their protest.
This is further reinforced in the editorial, entitled 'Silent no more', published on 13 November 2020. It states as its title that silence is something that can be challenged. The editorial review describes this protest as an assertive response by female students, and suggests that there are effective institutional mechanisms that can help address harassment (Dawn, 2020b).
The editorial also relates harassment to other challenges for women as learners. It talks about family pressure and cultural attitude towards girls' education, which indicates if girls are scared of harassment, it will be considered as a social issue that will discourage female students to study higher level education.
The analysis suggests that sometimes the selected texts of the newspaper present female students as active and rights-bearing actors in society and not only as victims who need to be protected. In this portrayal, this is a move to question a discourse where women's only discussion is on a vulnerability and dependence basis.

Linguistic Construction of Agency

The third theme focuses on the distribution of agency and responsibility between participants in a complaint, alleged perpetrators and university authorities, as it is assigned by means of grammatical structures and lexical choices.
A series of action-oriented descriptions represents the complainant in the report "Harassment of Malakand varsity student sparks outrage". According to the report, she approached the police, filed an FIR and had accused the accused of allegedly making an unauthorised entry into her house. It also highlights his reluctance to comply with the supposed assault (Asad, 2025a).
The descriptions are crucial in that they make the complainant into a person who has acted or is seeking to act to protect themselves from what happened, rather than just a person who was acted upon. Her reporting and resistance build her up as a person who can make decisions and react to a so-called threat.
Meanwhile, the allegations in the report are to the complainant and FIR. The words "according to the FIR" and "she alleged" indicate that the account of the complainant is not the same as the facts which the newspaper has established independently. This type of attribution is considered good journalistic practice as it clarifies the value of the information as evidence.
Institutional sources are also included in the report. The university media cell paints a different picture, the university's public relations officer speaks about the administration's pledge for a safe educational setting. The various sources create a dialogic connection between the complaint and the response from the institution.

This report from 6 March 2025 has a different grammatical and narrative structure. The headline of this post points to the university as the subject of the disciplinary action, as indeed it was, "Malakand university dismisses teacher for harassing student" (Asad, 2025b). The report states that the university's anti-harassment committee found the allegations to be substantiated and the university's syndicate agreed to the recommendations and ended the lecturer's contract.

This is the difference between February and March that is significant. The earlier report foregrounds the allegation of the complainant and the competing institutional accounts while the later report foregrounds the disciplinary action taken by the university. The agency changes depending on the phase of the institutional process in the report.

These patterns illustrate how attention to the grammatical choices and the depiction of social actors is crucial, from the point of view of Fairclough's textual analysis. The choice of verbs for action, attribution words and phrases, and institutional subjects will shape the actors' apparent initiation of actions, the apparent voice of the verbs, and the apparent representation of responsibility.

Institutional Accountability

The fourth theme is about representing universities and institutional authorities. The chosen texts demonstrate that institutional accountability plays an integral role in the media coverage of harassment in higher education.

The report dated 12 November 2020, of Islamia College University, mentions students' criticism of the university's current harassment committee. The students reportedly called for a focal person, and they voiced complaints that the committee was not working on their issues effectively (Dawn, 2020a).

The editorial also requests the implementation of committees to deal with issues of harassment in school settings that are able to function as harassment committees. It advocates for good institutional mechanisms and reminds the Higher Education Commission of its duty to ensure that universities have in place appropriate practices and codes of conduct (*Dawn*, 2020b).

These are examples of how such representations move beyond individual misbehaviour to an institutional responsibility. The issue of harassment is not just a problem of alleged offenders; it's also a problem that needs a good complaint process, protection within the institution, and accountability.

The University of Malakand reports is another example. In the report dated 17 February 2025, both the allegations brought by the complainant and the statement by the University are recorded, and a provincial government inquiry committee was established (Asad, 2025a). The report thus introduces a number of institutional actors who respond to the incident.

A report was issued on 6 March 2025 containing information on the following institutional decision. It claims that the recommendations made by the anti-harassment committee had been accepted by the university syndicate and the lecturer dismissed upon completion of the institutional process, where the allegations were substantiated to be true (Asad, 2025b).

It is significant that the process of allegation, investigation, and disciplinary action is followed. It illustrates the fact that news reporting of the media can make institutional processes visible and attract attention to the responsibility of universities to act on complaints of harassment. But a decision of the institution does not equate to a criminal conviction before a court.

In addition, the analysis reveals that the voice of the institutions is important in the selected reports. The narrative encompasses statements by the university, public relations

representatives and government authorities. While these are important to report when describing what has happened within the institution, their salience raises questions about the experiences of complainants and how they relate to official explanations.

Thus the results indicate that institutional accountability is built by complaints reporting and the representation of the procedures used to address complaints. Media discourse can help hold institutions accountable, by making these procedures a public process and by scrutinising the effectiveness of action taken on complaints.

Patriarchal Ideologies and Gendered Power (two episodes).Patriarchal Ideologies and Gendered Power (two episodes).

The fifth theme looks at the way in which the texts examined in the study reflect and/or critique broader stereotypical understandings of women's respectability, the extent to which they are educational and the way in which they affect women's social position.

“Silent no more” is an important editorial in this context. It links harassment in educational institutions to larger social contexts which can limit women's educational opportunities. It addresses issues of family pressure, cultural norms related to girls' education, and the added challenges of reporting harassment for female students (Dawn 2020b).

The editors question the notion that women must remain silent to preserve the family or institutional "honor. The title “Silent no more” is a symbolic call to the culture of silence that surrounds harassment, putting it under the microscope. Representing protesting students also indicates that women can assert themselves against implicit or explicit expectations and seek to be recognised by the institution.

The Malakand report brings another link between gendered power and institutional power to the fore. The complainant's version of the incident and the university's response highlight the ways in which the meaning of an event might be distorted by conflicting sources of power. The institutional location is given space next to the complainant's allegation, emphasising the need to consider how official narratives have an impact on public opinion.

The March 2025 report, however, is an example of institutional disciplinary action taken after an investigation against a lecturer. This type of reporting can highlight the fact that complaints can have a formal impact within a university and help to break the cycle of normalisation of harassment.

The chosen texts thus represent in turn both the re-presentation and challenge of gendered power. Does not routinely point out that girls are to blame. Rather, they show how gender relations are negotiated in the representation of complainants, the power of institutions, and demands for accountability.

The overall conclusion of the findings is that media discourse can challenge the patriarchal assumption by putting a spotlight on women's complaints, validating women's agency, and emphasising institutional responsibility. While competing accounts are likely to be presented, they must be critically examined because the framing of an allegation can impact the credibility given to female complainants.

Discussion

The results show how language use, sourcing and institutional narratives influence the construction of the media image of harassment at universities. An examination of the five selected texts from the Dawn indicates that gendered power does not always manifest itself in the form of an explicit accusation of a female student. It can also take the form of competing accounts, the sharing of credibility, and the salience of complainants and institutional authorities.

The first finding of significance refers to the image of female students as active social actors. Protest report Islamia College University and editorial 'Silent no more' speak about women students as active persons challenging the harassment and calling for the institutions to take action. This discovery contradicts the image of women as victims and showcases their ability to organise, speak out and demand institutional change. It also elaborates on Lazar's (2005) feminist approach, focusing on the discourse, gender, ideology and power relationship.

The second is about the notion of the competing narrative. The University of Malakand report features the complainant's allegation and the possible explanation of the University media cell. These two accounts illustrate the variation of media discourse in the creation of different interpretations of the same incident. An institutional account does not necessarily imply a victim-blaming. It is important, however, given the framing and relative prominence of different accounts, that they are included because this can shape the interpretation of the complaint.

This discovery calls for a discussion of the differences between overt and more implicit victim-blaming discursive framings. Direct victim-blaming is when blame is explicitly given to the complainant. Indirect discursive effects can occur where the organisation of information, choice of source or contrasting explanations have an impact on the interpretation of the complainant's account. The present corpus does not justify the assertion that all competing narratives are necessarily victim-blaming, but does indicate that competing narratives do exist.

The third discovery relates to agency and grammatical representation. The February 2025 report highlights actionable descriptions of the complainant, such as her choice to contact the police and file a complaint with an FIR. These descriptions characterize her as an active participant, who is seeking legal protection. Rather, the university's decision to dismiss the lecturer comes to the fore in the March report. This shift in emphasis is representative of the varying distribution of agency at different moments or stages of the event reported.

The results obtained are congruent with the argument of Fairclough (1995) on the need to study a text at its textual, discursive and social levels. Textual level, vocabulary and grammatical structures build the social actors and actions. At the discursive practice level, the sources selected and presented in a specific arrangement affect the way the events are presented. These representations relate to broader gender relations, institutional structures, and social norms at the level of social practice.

The 4th finding relates to institutional accountability. The reports about Islamia College University and the University of Malakand do not give the impression that merely an individual response is needed, and that institutional procedures should be followed to solve the problem of harassment. The topic of harassment committees, inquiries, and disciplinary action puts the burden on universities to create safe educational environments. The reports also reveal the function of the institutional authorities as complainants, investigating and disciplining.

This is pertinent to the studies conducted in Pakistan earlier on media discourse. For instance, Zaman et al. (2023) explored the coverage of rape in Pakistan's news media and highlighted deletion and the hiding of information as key discursive elements. The focus of the present study is the university context of harassment, female students as social actors and institutional responses that appear in media stories. While the research projects have treated different types of gender-based violence, both have highlighted the significance of

critically analysing the language of the media in terms of its selection, organisation and presentation of information.

These conclusions also apply to the larger issue of patriarchal ideology. Media representations can have a role in how harassment complaints are understood and may impact on women's respectability, family honour and social conduct where such matters are publicly discussed. Discourse that challenges limiting discourses of gender is provided by the editorial's call for silence and the call to action of the female students. Likewise, any reported institutional disciplinary action could highlight the normalization of harassment by making it visible.

Therefore the study suggests that for responsible media reporting there has to be more than just providing differing statements from the various parties. It involves careful attribution, a clear separation of allegations and established findings, fair representation of complainants, protection of privacy and appropriate attention to institutional accountability. No complainant is automatically considered credible just because they are from a social class or institutional authority different from the reporter, but this is not to say that no consideration of source is to be made.

The study results overall indicate that the victim-blaming and gendered power dynamics in media discourse are multifaceted. The five selected texts do not provide evidence of consistent explicit victim-blaming. Rather they expose a mix of female agency, conflicting narratives, institutional power, and demands for accountability. The study therefore also makes a contribution to the understanding of the challenges and negotiations of gendered power relations in the problematic context of the higher education system in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the relationship between victim-blaming, media representation, and the development of a gendered power structure in Pakistani university settings. It examined five texts from Dawn newspaper which were selected using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis and a feminist approach from November 2020 to March 2025.

Five dominant patterns were identified through the analysis. Female students were represented as active social actors, who organised protest and requested institutional response, as the first.The first was the representation of female students as activists who organise protests and demand institutional response. Secondly, the texts chosen did not always reproduce explicit victim-blaming, but rather competing accounts and institutional explanations shaped the framing of harassment allegations. Third, the selection of words and grammar allocated agency to different parties of the complainants, alleged perpetrators, and university officials. Fourth, institutional investigations and disciplinary actions were the subject of much attention in the reports. Lastly, gender power relations were challenged and reflected in the representation of women's voices and institutional power in the texts.

The results show that the victim blaming is not to be interpreted exclusively as condemnatory statements directed at women. Media coverage of competing narratives, the allocation of credibility and the institutional media response need to be analysed as well. The analysis illustrates how the female student can be represented as an agent and bearer of rights and agency, rather than a mere victim.

The study also fills the gap in media discourse studies in Pakistan by specifically targeting the issue of harassment among female university students. It emphasizes the need to explore the intersection of language, gender and institutional power in the media.

Ultimately, accurate, fair, and responsible representation of the media requires protection of complainants' privacy, attention to institutional accountability, and accuracy. Students, particularly female students, should not have to accept harassment on campus and be liable for it when reporting it. This can be achieved through media discourse, which must view their agency and consider harassment as an institutional and social issue of concern.

Recommendations

Based on the results, the following recommendations are made:

Adoption of Gender-sensitised reporting guidelines: Pakistani media groups should establish and apply a clear reporting guideline for reporting harassment and other gender-based violence.

2. No victim blaming language should be used by journalists; and 3. No sexual language should be used that positions female students as perpetrators of the harassment. Reports should direct to the allegations of behaviour and the evidence supporting the allegations rather than an unnecessary discussion of a complainant's personal life.

3. Fair representation of complainants: Media outlets should ensure the space is appropriate for the accounts of female students with due regard to their identity, privacy and security.

4. Separation between allegations and findings: Journalists should differentiate between the various levels of findings and accusations, including police investigations, institutional enquiries, disciplinary action and judicial rulings. This distinction is important for the proper and ethical reporting.

5 Institutional accountability: Universities should have effective and independent harassment committees, complaints should be made easy to access, complaints should be fairly and timely investigated.

Journalism education and professional training should incorporate training in gender-sensitive reporting, media ethics and critical awareness of language that can reinforce gender stereotyping.

7. Critical media literacy: Higher education institutions should promote the investigation of the effect of the use of headlines, vocabulary, selection of sources and grammatical structures on the representation of gender-related issues.

Recommendation 8: Further academic research: The studies in the future should focus on a larger corpus of English and Urdu language newspapers to compare the representation of the female complainant, alleged perpetrator and institutional authorities by different media organisations.

The study has certain limitations.The study has some of its limitations.

There are some limitations in the present study. The empirical corpus is limited to five texts from one newspaper, Dawn, which is published in English. The results are, therefore, not generalizable to all Pakistani newspapers or the entire Pakistani media.

Secondly, the chosen texts are related to complaints of harassment within two university environments namely Islamia College University and University of Malakand. They are not exhaustive of all forms of harassment and all HEIs in Pakistan.

Thirdly, this study focuses on media representation, not on the actual experiences of complainants or whether each complaint is legally substantiated, or the extent of harassment in universities. This analysis is based on the published material of the chosen newspaper texts and does not actually confirm what happens in the texts.

Last but not least, a qualitative and interpretive approach is adopted in this study. It is not meant to measure the prevalence of the victim-blaming trend in the Pakistani media, but rather to explore linguistic, discursive, and discursive gendered constructions of power.

These are issues that can be explored in future studies by increasing the number of newspapers, comparing English and Urdu language reporting, and studying the way harassment is covered in different parts of the country and in various school and college types.

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