



# The SAFE PROJECT

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## MESSAGE FROM THE TRAINERS



"A safe and inclusive learning environment is the foundation of academic excellence. The SAFE project is a crucial step toward institutional accountability, ensuring that universities not only educate but also protect and empower their students and faculty."

**Dr. Zulfiqar Ali Umrani**

**Director ORIC**

**Ziauddin University and Hospital**



"Empowering individuals with knowledge and awareness is the first step in combating harassment. Through the SAFE project, we are equipping students, faculty, and staff with the tools to recognize, report, and prevent harassment, fostering a culture of respect and safety in our universities."

**Ms. Rahima Tahir**

**Manager Linkages and Outreach**

**Ziauddin University and Hospital**

## ABBREVIATIONS

SAFE	Sexual Assault Free Environment
HEC	Higher Education Commission
FIA	Federal Investigation Agency
FOSPAH	Federal Ombudsperson Secretariat for Protection Against Harassment
ACU	Association of Commonwealth Universities

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The SAFE (Sexual Assault Free Environment) Project, launched by Ziauddin University in collaboration with Association of Common Wealth Universities (ACU), Martha Farrell Foundation, UNDP Pakistan and Sindh Higher Education Commission (Sindh HEC), aims to combat sexual harassment in higher education institutions. The project addresses gaps in policy enforcement, awareness, and reporting mechanisms to create safer and more inclusive academic spaces.

Despite the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010, many universities lack proper implementation frameworks, leading to underreporting and inadequate victim support. A survey conducted across 25 universities in Sindh, gathering 800 responses, revealed that verbal, visual, and cyber harassment were prevalent, with fear of retaliation and cultural stigma preventing victims from reporting cases.

Challenges included institutional resistance, cultural barriers, and weak enforcement of policies. Moving forward, the project aims to expand nationwide, integrate anti-harassment training into curricula, strengthen reporting mechanisms, and introduce digital platforms for secure complaint submission.

The SAFE project has laid the foundation for long-term institutional change, but continued commitment from universities, policymakers, and civil society is essential to ensuring harassment-free education in Pakistan.

## 1.0 PROJECT BACKGROUND

In Pakistan, sexual harassment is a significant social challenge, deeply rooted in societal norms and cultural taboos. Despite the enactment of the **Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010**, many educational institutions lack proper implementation frameworks, leading to underreporting of cases and limited awareness among students, staff, and faculty. Harassment is a pervasive issue in workplaces and educational institutions, deeply affecting individuals' safety, dignity, and mental health. High-profile cases have brought this problem into the spotlight, showcasing its prevalence and the systemic gaps in addressing it effectively. For instance, incidents at a **University in Bahawalpur**, where a **lecturer was arrested for sexual harassment in October 2024**, and various institutions **in Lahore, where harassment cases led to suicides**, emphasize the urgent need for institutional reforms. The **Federal Investigation Agency (FIA)** has been actively **investigating harassment cases in Lahore's top** educational institutions, highlighting the alarming scale of the issue. Such incidents reveal a culture of fear and silence among victims, which further compounds the problem.





awareness campaigns is essential to create safer environments in workplaces and educational institutions. Such measures are critical for fostering gender equality, empowering women, and unlocking Pakistan's full economic potential.

The **SAFE (Sexual Assault Free Environment)** project is a pivotal initiative at Ziauddin University, implemented in collaboration with, **the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), Martha Farrell Foundation, the United Nations Sustainability Unit (Sindh) and the Sindh Higher Education Commission (Sindh HEC)**. This project addresses the pressing issue of sexual harassment in higher education institutions (HEIs) across Pakistan. It aims to foster safe and respectful academic environments by raising awareness, creating robust reporting mechanisms, and developing evidence-based anti-harassment policies.

## 1.1 THE PROTECTION AGAINST HARASSMENT OF WOMEN AT THE WORKPLACE ACT 2010

The Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010, was enacted to create safe and dignified work environments for women across Pakistan. Recognizing the systemic barriers that prevent women from fully participating in the workforce, the law provides a legal framework for preventing, reporting, and addressing harassment in both public and private sector workplaces, including educational institutions.

### Key Provisions of the Act

The Act defines harassment as **any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favors, or verbal, written, or physical conduct of a sexual nature** that creates an **intimidating, hostile, or offensive** work environment. To ensure compliance, the law requires:

1. **Formation of Inquiry Committees** – Every workplace and educational institution must establish a **three-member inquiry committee**, including at least **one female member**, to handle harassment complaints.
2. **Clear Reporting Mechanisms** – Victims must have access to **confidential and secure** channels to report harassment.
3. **Display of Code of Conduct** – Organizations are required to **publicly display** an anti-harassment policy and educate employees and students about their rights.
4. **Penalties and Disciplinary Actions** – Those found guilty of harassment may face **warnings, fines, suspension, dismissal, or other disciplinary measures** as determined by the inquiry committee.
5. **Right to Appeal** – Victims and accused individuals have the right to appeal decisions through the **Ombudsperson for Harassment**, ensuring **fair legal recourse**.

## 1.2 THE ROLE OF FOSPAH IN COMBATING HARASSMENT

The Federal Ombudsperson Secretariat for Protection Against Harassment (FOSPAH) is the primary regulatory body in Pakistan responsible for enforcing anti-harassment laws in both workplaces and educational institutions. Established under the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010, FOSPAH ensures that public and private sector organizations comply with legal requirements to create safe, harassment-free environments. The organization serves as an independent authority that provides legal redress, monitors institutional compliance, and advocates for policy reforms to strengthen protections against harassment.

One of FOSPAH's key functions is handling harassment complaints. It provides victims with a confidential and accessible platform to report incidents when their institutions fail to act. Unlike workplace committees that may be influenced by internal biases, FOSPAH serves as an impartial legal body, ensuring that cases are processed swiftly and fairly. Victims can directly file complaints with FOSPAH, which has the authority to conduct hearings, summon witnesses, and review evidence. If harassment is proven, the Ombudsperson can impose fines, dismissals, and other disciplinary actions against perpetrators.

### 1.3 THE HEC POLICY ON ANTI-HARRASSMENT POLICY

The **Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan** has played a critical role in addressing sexual harassment in higher education institutions (HEIs). In alignment with the Protection **Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010**, the HEC introduced a **Policy on Protection Against Sexual Harassment** to ensure compliance within universities and other educational institutions. This policy aimed to provide guidelines for prevention, establish transparent reporting mechanisms, and create anti-harassment committees to address complaints effectively.

**The Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010** was a groundbreaking piece of legislation in Pakistan. It mandated the establishment of workplace environments free from harassment and ensured legal redress for victims. The Act was comprehensive in its scope, covering both public and private sectors, including HEIs.

However, despite its promise, the implementation of the Act in HEIs remained inconsistent. Many institutions lacked awareness or the will to form harassment committees or enforce preventive measures.

In **2022**, there were discussions and proposals to amend the 2010 Act to address emerging issues and strengthen its enforcement. Proposed amendments included broadening the definition of harassment, introducing stricter penalties, and improving institutional accountability. Unfortunately, these amendments were not passed, leaving gaps in the law and enforcement that continued to hinder the effectiveness of anti-harassment measures in Pakistan.

In **January 2024**, the Act was revisited and revised to address some of these shortcomings. The updated version aimed to enhance protections by emphasizing the need for awareness campaigns and stricter monitoring of compliance in HEIs. However, significant issues remained unaddressed.

#### 1.4 ROADMAP OF THE SAFE PROJECT

- Stakeholder Consultation- March 14, 2024
- Project planning and design of survey questionnaires- April – May, 2024
- Conducting of Survey – June- September, 2024
- Workshop- October 29, 2024
- Initiatives taken by other HEIs- November, 2024
- Final Colloquium- 19<sup>th</sup> December, 2024



realize their full potential in a secure and supportive environment. Ultimately, the project envisions a society where respect and equality are not just ideals but lived realities for all.

## 2.4 STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION SESSION

The Stakeholder Consultation on addressing harassment within higher education institutions in Sindh was conducted on **14th March 2025**. This significant event brought together **25 universities from across Sindh**, with key participants being the **chairpersons from the anti-harassment committees** of these institutions. Their involvement ensured that the session was not only well-informed but also focused on creating actionable solutions to combat harassment effectively.



The consultation featured **in-depth discussions on harassment issues** within academic environments, touching on the challenges students and staff face and exploring existing support mechanisms. A major part of the discussions revolved around **identifying gaps** in current anti-harassment policies and strategies, as well as exploring how universities can better foster a safe and inclusive environment for all. The attendees exchanged insights on best practices and ways to improve awareness and responsiveness to harassment incidents.

Additionally, the session focused on **project planning and the design of survey questionnaires** aimed at understanding the scope of harassment in these institutions. The questionnaires were designed to gather crucial data from students and staff regarding their experiences and perceptions of harassment, which would then inform the development of more effective policies and interventions.



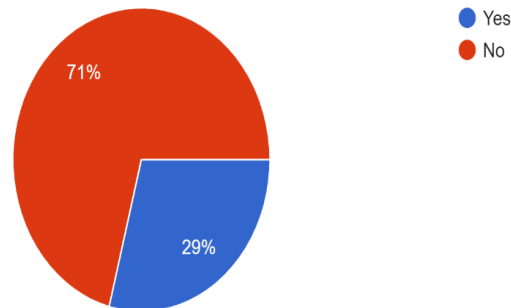
The event was instrumental in building stronger connections between universities in Sindh, encouraging them to collaborate on solutions for a safer and more supportive academic landscape. The outcomes of this consultation are expected to shape future anti-harassment initiatives and policies, ensuring that harassment is addressed with the seriousness and urgency it demands.

## 2.5 RESPONSES FROM THE SURVEY

A total of **800 responses** were collected from **25 universities across Sindh** as part of the SAFE project. These responses were gathered from a diverse group of participants, including students, faculty, and other staff members, providing valuable insights into the prevalence and nature of harassment in educational institutions. The data collected forms the basis for understanding the challenges faced and the measures needed to create safer environments. The detailed responses are outlined below.

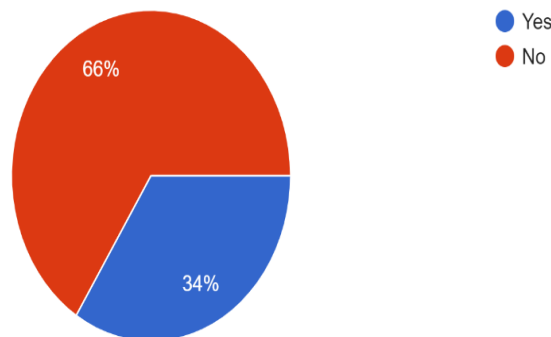
Did the university take any actions to address the reported incidents of sexual harassment?

31 responses



Have you received any training or information on sexual harassment policies at the university?

50 responses





The responses gathered through the SAFE project provide a comprehensive understanding of the prevalence, forms, and institutional shortcomings in addressing sexual harassment in educational settings. Among the reported types of harassment, **verbal harassment** was the most frequently cited, reflecting the normalized culture of derogatory remarks and unwelcome comments within the universities. **Visual harassment**, including inappropriate gestures or exposure to explicit content, was the second most reported, followed by **cyber harassment**, highlighting the increasing role of digital platforms in perpetuating harassment. While instances of **physical harassment** were fewer, their severity cannot be understated, as they have profound psychological and emotional impacts on victims.

The feedback revealed a significant gap in awareness, with many employees and students expressing limited knowledge of the existing policies or mechanisms to report harassment. Respondents strongly advocated for comprehensive and regular **awareness and training programs** tailored to all stakeholders, including students, faculty, and administrative staff. Suggestions ranged from **mandatory training sessions** and **interactive workshops** to **educational materials** such as brochures, prospectuses, and employee contracts that explicitly outline anti-harassment policies. The responses emphasized the importance of creating spaces for open dialogue and ongoing education, rather than limiting initiatives to one-off events.

Institutional mechanisms also came under scrutiny, with a strong call for the implementation of **strict, zero-tolerance policies** accompanied by **transparent and fair investigation processes**. Respondents highlighted the need for a dedicated anti-harassment unit or committee, composed of diverse and gender-balanced members, to ensure impartiality and inclusivity. Proposals for **enhanced reporting mechanisms** included the introduction of **confidential online complaint systems, anonymous reporting options,** and

**open communication channels** with guaranteed privacy. Many participants pointed out that fear of retaliation, gossip, and victim-blaming discouraged reporting, underlining the critical need for trust-building and protective measures for complainants.

Another recurring theme was the demand for structural and organizational changes. Respondents suggested practical measures such as **functional CCTV cameras**, gender-segregated spaces where necessary, and clear protocols for mobile and gadget security. Inclusion of both genders in decision-making bodies, such as academic councils, was seen as vital to fostering equity in governance. Additionally, participants stressed the importance of empathetic support systems, advocating for **counseling services, legal aid**, and proactive victim protection during and after investigations.

The insights from the SAFE project responses reveal a widespread desire for cultural transformation within universities, emphasizing prevention, education, and accountability. The feedback underscores that combating harassment requires more than policy implementation—it demands a holistic approach that integrates awareness, structural reforms, and unwavering institutional commitment to create a safe and equitable environment for all.









## 2.3 FINAL SAFE COLLOQUIUM

The Final SAFE Colloquium, held on **19th December 2024**, marked the culmination of the SAFE project's efforts to combat sexual harassment in educational institutions. Organized by Ziauddin University, the event brought together policymakers, university representatives, and gender equality advocates to reflect on the project's achievements and discuss sustainable strategies for ensuring harassment-free academic environments. The colloquium served as a platform for critical discussions on institutional accountability, policy reforms, and the role of educational leadership in fostering a culture of respect and safety.



A key highlight of the event was the **presentation of findings** from the SAFE project. The data, collected from **800 responses across 25 universities in Sindh**, provided valuable insights into the prevalence and types of harassment experienced by students, faculty, and staff. The findings revealed significant gaps in awareness, reporting mechanisms, and institutional responses, underscoring the urgent need for reform. The SAFE project team introduced policy recommendations aimed at addressing these challenges, advocating for **zero-tolerance policies**, the formation of **inclusive and gender-balanced anti-harassment committees**, and **mandatory awareness and training programs for all university members**.

The colloquium also featured **expert panel discussions**, where participants engaged in meaningful dialogue on strategies to strengthen institutional frameworks against harassment. Key topics included improving reporting mechanisms, ensuring victim protection, and integrating gender-sensitive policies in university governance. Representatives from various institutions shared best practices and challenges, reinforcing the importance of collaboration in tackling harassment effectively. University leaders and policymakers pledged their commitment to implementing these recommendations, emphasizing the need for continuous engagement and action.

The event was honored by the presence of **Madam Fauzia Waqar, Chairperson of the Federal Ombudsperson Secretariat for Protection Against Harassment (FOSPAH), and Mr. Moinuddin Siddiqui, Secretary of the Sindh Higher Education Commission (HEC)**. Madam Fauzia Waqar highlighted the significance of enforcing legal frameworks and providing victims with strong reporting and redressal mechanisms. She stressed the need for institutional accountability in handling harassment cases and ensuring a culture of zero tolerance. Mr. Moinuddin Siddiqui emphasized the role of the Sindh HEC in

promoting safer university environments and called for proactive leadership from higher education institutions to drive meaningful change.

The Final SAFE Colloquium concluded with a strong commitment from stakeholders to sustain and expand anti-harassment efforts across educational institutions. The event reinforced the SAFE project's vision of **empowering individuals, fostering institutional accountability, and ensuring safe and inclusive academic spaces**. By engaging policymakers, university leadership, and experts, the colloquium set the stage for long-term policy implementation and cultural transformation in Sindh's universities.

### 3.0 CHALLENGES

The SAFE project, while making significant strides in addressing sexual harassment in educational institutions, faced several challenges that hindered its implementation and impact. These challenges emerged across multiple dimensions, including institutional resistance, cultural barriers, policy enforcement gaps, and logistical constraints.

One of the primary challenges was **institutional resistance** and reluctance from some universities to openly engage in discussions about harassment. Many institutions lacked established anti-harassment committees or clear reporting mechanisms, making it difficult to initiate meaningful change. In some cases, university administrations were hesitant to acknowledge the prevalence of harassment, fearing reputational damage or backlash from stakeholders. Overcoming this required extensive dialogue, advocacy, and engagement with university leadership to secure their commitment to the project's objectives.

Another significant barrier was **deep-rooted cultural stigma** surrounding harassment. In many cases, students, faculty, and staff were reluctant to

report incidents due to fear of victim-blaming, social repercussions, or lack of institutional support. Many victims chose to remain silent rather than risk retaliation or damage to their academic and professional standing. Addressing this challenge required **awareness campaigns** and training sessions that emphasized victim protection, confidentiality, and the importance of a **zero-tolerance approach** to harassment.

The SAFE project also encountered **gaps in policy enforcement and legal awareness**. Although the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010, and the HEC's anti-harassment policy provided a legal framework, implementation across universities remained inconsistent. Some institutions had policies in place but lacked the mechanisms to enforce them effectively. There was also a lack of understanding about the legal rights of victims, with many students and employees unaware of how to file complaints or seek legal support. This required **capacity-building workshops** to educate institutions on proper enforcement and legal compliance.

Lastly, **ensuring sustainability** of the project's outcomes beyond its initial phase was a key challenge. While universities pledged commitments to implementing recommendations, long-term policy adoption and cultural change required continuous oversight and institutional willingness to adapt. The challenge moving forward is to **integrate anti-harassment policies into institutional frameworks permanently** and ensure **ongoing training, awareness, and accountability mechanisms** remain in place.

Despite these challenges, the SAFE project succeeded in initiating critical conversations, engaging key stakeholders, and laying the groundwork for institutional reforms. By addressing these obstacles through collaboration, advocacy, and capacity-building, the project has set the foundation for long-term efforts in creating harassment-free academic environments.

## 4.0 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were formulated based on extensive discussions during the SAFE Project, where 25 university Chairpersons/Hr Managers/Members reached a consensus on the necessary improvements to the current anti-harassment policies. These recommendations reflect the collective insights and concerns identified by key stakeholders across higher education institutions.

### **1. Expanding the Definition of Harassment**

To address these shortcomings, the policy should be revised and expanded in several key areas. Firstly, the definition of harassment should be broadened to include gender harassment, power-based coercion, and psychological intimidation. Non-verbal harassment, such as stalking, digital harassment, and persistent unwanted attention, should also be recognized. Additionally, faculty-student relationships and employer-employee dynamics should be explicitly covered to prevent exploitation of power (Zubair & Shah, 2024).

### **2. Strengthening Reporting Mechanisms**

Reporting mechanisms must be strengthened by establishing anonymous digital reporting platforms, independent ombudsperson offices, and formalized procedures for handling informal complaints. This will ensure that victims have multiple safe avenues to seek redress without fear of exposure or retaliation (Hassan & Rafiq, 2024).

### **3. Enhancing Protection Against Retaliation**

To enhance protection against retaliation, strict penalties must be enforced against individuals who intimidate complainants. Universities should offer relocation options for victims, such as reassignment of supervisors, course

changes, or temporary work reallocation. Additionally, access to legal aid should be made available through university-provided pro bono legal assistance (Farooq & Siddiqui, 2024).

#### **4. Increasing Transparency and Institutional Accountability**

Institutional transparency and accountability can be improved by requiring HEIs to publish anonymized annual reports on harassment cases, including the number of complaints filed and actions taken. External, third-party audits should be mandated every two years to ensure compliance with harassment policies, and independent oversight committees should be introduced to monitor how institutions handle complaints (Malik & Usman, 2024).

#### **5. Strengthening Training and Awareness Initiatives**

Training and awareness initiatives should go beyond basic policy awareness and focus on behavioral change. Universities should develop interactive, scenario-based training programs that include bystander intervention strategies. Faculty, staff, and students should be required to undergo mandatory refresher training every two years to ensure that anti-harassment measures remain relevant and effective (Javed & Saleem, 2024).

#### **6. Improving Structural and Environmental Safety**

Finally, structural and environmental safety improvements should be prioritized. CCTV monitoring systems should be upgraded with real-time security responses. Anonymous reporting kiosks should be installed at key locations on campus. Campus lighting should be enhanced, and emergency response accessibility should be improved to ensure well-lit walkways and strategically placed security alarms in vulnerable areas (Ahmed et al., 2024).

#### **7. Implementing Data Collection and Policy Evaluation**

In addition, HEIs should implement systematic data collection and policy evaluation mechanisms. A centralized university database should be established to track harassment trends, identify repeat offenders, and analyze the effectiveness of prevention efforts. Regular policy reviews should be conducted based on data-driven insights to ensure continuous improvements in addressing harassment (Hussain & Batool, 2024).

## 6.0 FUTURE PROSPECTS

The SAFE project has laid a strong foundation for combating sexual harassment in educational institutions, but its long-term success depends on sustained efforts, institutional commitment, and continuous improvement. Moving forward, the project aims to expand its reach, strengthen policy implementation, and institutionalize anti-harassment mechanisms to ensure a lasting impact on university environments across Sindh and beyond.

One of the key future prospects is the **scaling up of awareness and training programs**. While initial workshops and seminars have created awareness, there is a need for continuous education on harassment prevention. Future initiatives will focus on **integrating anti-harassment training into university curricula** and making it a mandatory part of faculty and staff orientation programs. Additionally, specialized training will be provided to anti-harassment committees and legal personnel to ensure they are well-equipped to handle cases efficiently and sensitively.

Another critical goal is the **strengthening of institutional policies and enforcement mechanisms**. Many universities still lack dedicated anti-harassment units or proper reporting systems. The project will work towards ensuring that every university has a **fully functional anti-harassment committee**, with clear policies on **investigation procedures, victim protection, and accountability measures**. The SAFE project also aims to collaborate with

the **Higher Education Commission (HEC) and FOSPAH** to push for stronger regulations and nationwide policy enforcement.

A major focus will also be on **expanding the SAFE project beyond Sindh**, reaching universities across **Punjab, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa**. By partnering with national and international organizations, SAFE can leverage funding and expertise to develop a **national-level framework** for addressing harassment in all higher education institutions across Pakistan.

Incorporating **technological solutions** is another future prospect. The project aims to establish **confidential digital reporting platforms**, allowing victims to report harassment anonymously and securely. Mobile applications and university portals can be used to provide resources, legal support, and direct access to counseling services, ensuring that victims receive timely assistance.

The SAFE project also envisions **long-term monitoring and impact assessment** to measure its effectiveness. Regular surveys and feedback mechanisms will be implemented to assess **policy compliance, reporting trends, and institutional response rates**. The data collected will help refine strategies and improve interventions for better outcomes.

Finally, fostering **a cultural shift in attitudes toward harassment** remains a long-term goal. Beyond policies and reporting structures, the project aims to **instill gender sensitivity, inclusivity, and mutual respect** within academic institutions. By engaging students, faculty, and university leadership in ongoing conversations, SAFE will work towards breaking the stigma around reporting harassment and ensuring that every university campus is a safe and supportive environment for all.

With these future directions, the SAFE project aspires to not only **sustain its current impact** but also **expand and institutionalize** its efforts, making harassment-free education a permanent reality in Pakistan.



