

A Qualitative Analysis of Social Exclusion and Harassment faced by Pakistani Female Doctoral Students in Malaysian Public Universities

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Abstract

International students are vulnerable to many threats and harassment is among one of them. Malaysia as a Muslim country is currently centre of attraction for the students of other Muslim countries who want to pursue their higher education abroad. This study is conducted to examine the perceptions of international students from Pakistan getting higher education in Malaysia. Using theoretical frameworks of Strauss & Corbin's (1998) grounded theory and Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionism; the study represents the views and experiences of harassment faced by Pakistani female doctoral students. The data was collected through semi structure interviews of thirty doctoral students, who were studying in four different public-sector universities of Malaysia. The data shows that harassment is one of the critical issues in Malaysia and in Malaysian universities too. It was also found in the study that beside local Malaysians, foreigners were also involved in harassment cases.

Keywords: Harassment, Women, International Students, Pakistan and Malaysia

Introduction

Malaysia is emerging as the hub of higher education in the region after the September 11, 2001 incident in the United States of America, which changed the dynamics of international higher education mobility patterns (Sirat, 2008). Most of the Muslim students from Middle-East and South Asia have shifted their preference from USA and UK to Malaysia, due to the number of reasons. The major reasons include screening in visa policy, racism, bullying and harassment issues after 9-11 specifically (Sirat, 2008). The cases of bullying and harassment of female Muslim students have played vital role in this shift. Keeping in mind those harassment issues, the present study was conducted to examine harassment issues in Malaysian context where majority of Muslim female students are reaping the benefits of higher education.

According to Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC) the word "harassment" cover offensive behaviour usually unwanted physical or verbal behaviour that offends or humiliates the person. Further, behaviour is characteristically repetitive as well as serious one-time incidents are also considered harassment (CRHC). Several actions that infringe one's self-respect

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and privacy are categorized as harassment. Among the very common include unwelcome remarks or threatens or intimidates one's life such as making jokes about race, religion, sex, age, disability or any other of the grounds of discrimination (Rosenfeld, 2000). In particular the sexual harassment involves unwelcome physical contact, such as touching, patting, or pinching someone without any consent or mutual agreement (Tang, Yik, Cheung, Choi, & Au, 1995).

Background of the Study

International students are non-citizens in the host country and are living temporarily in a country other than their own country of citizenship for the purpose of education (UNESCO, 2006). In other words, international students are a group of individuals in an alien land, with new and unforeseen challenges. These challenges include adjustments, academic and social environment, food, culture, loneliness and homesickness. According to Koehne (2005) international students are a diverse group of individuals, who are always spoken in the literature as an entity, rather than individuals with their personal experiences and histories. These students may experience many challenges as a result of non-adjustment to many issues including, language and cultural barriers, academic and financial difficulties, interpersonal problems, loss of social support, alienation and homesickness and other emotional problems (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Poljski (2011) in her study in Australia have found that female international students were more prone than their male counterparts to experience discrimination, physical abuse and sexual harassment. Morley (2011) international female students in pursuit of better their lives in host countries may confront hostile and toxic environment involving "gendered violence". Morley's definition of the term "gendered violence" is a broad one, as it incorporates sexual exploitation, harassment and other forms of exploitations that may be illegal but are not always crimes.

International Students: Social Exclusion and Vulnerabilities

Effective social, cultural, and economic support is necessary for the international students otherwise they may be prone to exploitation or social exclusion (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). Brown (2009) in his ethnographic study of the adjustment process of international students in England, has revealed several problems encountered by international students, especially the vulnerability of Asian students in the western countries. The study described that status of being in a minority becomes a reason for their vulnerability. Additionally, the author said that their distinguished physical appearance and visible distinctiveness make them more vulnerable to racial discrimination. Poyrazli, Arbona, Bullington, & Pisecco, (2001) in their study of '*adjustment issues of Turkish college students studying in the United States*' found that international students with psychological dependency on their parents and families were more vulnerable to homesickness. As a result, they often remain in constant tension, and felt less confident, leading to the status of confusion over enjoying and having fun, these conditions worsen their adjustment. Dziech & Weiner (1990) in their study concluded that pressure to succeed in a different country and

culture away from their family support makes female international students vulnerable to gender based violence. There are many avenues of international students to vulnerability that need to be explored (Cadman, 2000). Hence, this grounded study is designed to find out the factors or avenues in words of Cadman (2000) that Pakistani female students encounter in foreign countries in pursuit of higher education.

Methodology

The researcher aimed to explore the challenges encountered by Pakistani female doctoral students in Malaysian universities. This study focused on the harassment issues faced during education in Malaysia.

The present research study is conducted using systematic grounded theory proposed by Strauss & Corbin (1998). Thirty Pakistani female doctoral students from four different Malaysian public universities of west Malaysia were consented to be the study participant. Purposive sampling was used in initial stage to allow the gatekeepers and further sampling was guided by theoretical framework. Many of the study participants were interviewed more than once to allow the saturation. The participants of the different universities were given different codes in order to maintain their privacy and distinguish the experiences at different universities of Malaysia. S, M, U, G are the codes given to the participants of different universities. The data were analysed by three coding steps i.e. Open, Axial and Selective coding procedure of Systematic grounded theory of Strauss & Corbin (1998). In order to answer the research question, the present research study attempted to follow an interpretive qualitative approach by using systematic grounded theory with theoretical foundations drawn from symbolic interactionism of Blumer (1969). This method helped to study human conduct and human life in general. As Glaser (1978) stated that "the theoretical reflections and summarizations of the patterned, systematic uniformity flows of social life which people go through, and which can be conceptually 'captured' and further understood through the construction of basic social process theories" (p. 100). Here, the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism guided the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to examine the phenomenon of social exclusion and harassment in Malaysian educational context.

Results & Discussion

Harassment is very common around the world, and it is mostly happening either in busy places like bus and metro stations or in sub ways or under passes. The case was somehow similar in the present study where some respondents experienced these cases in the metropolitan city of Malaysia. Although Malaysia is considered as a safe country for female, but majority of the respondents not only have seen harassment cases but also have experienced themselves.

This study concerned the harassment issues faced by Pakistani female international students. Although there were mixed experiences of the students but majority of them faced harassment in one way or the other. The data showed that out of thirty, twenty-two students were harassed directly or indirectly at different

places and by different stakeholders. The data is divided and discussed in following themes.

On-Campus Harassment

It was observed that majority of participants were reluctant to share their experiences or perceptions about harassment at the campus due to insecurity or breach of the information or data. The researcher repeatedly ensured the participants about the privacy of their information and data. It was observed that participants had comparatively less complaints of harassment by supervisors as compare to the other staff of their respective schools, centres or faculties. For example, S-3 stated the situation;

“.....the behaviour of male clerical staff was not comfortable, whenever I go to ask about the process of thesis submission or scholarship the language and body language of clerk feels like he can do much for me if I agree on his terms and conditions”

Somehow the same views were shared by M-1 in following words;

“the staff at my school does not take serious the problems I and my other fellow girls students bring to their notice, rather they talk about clothes, smartness and how fresh we look today.”

Although, the girls were very reluctant to talk about supervisors but U-7 had faced many problems during her study period. Due to different rules of degree recognition in all countries, the degree course in which U-7 was registered could not be recognized in Pakistan. For that reason, she had to suffer a lot for change of degree program. She expressed the situation painfully;

“.....this whole process gave me mental and emotional trauma..throughout the period. Even the supervisor kept me misguiding and at the end I was harassed and threatened of dire consequences if ever talked about mismanagement and misleading attitude of the centre”

In mishaps like that with different students, the situation becomes worse. The official academic procedures of students' native country and Malaysia vary in many aspects and in that process to adjust all students face tough time specially the female students. The behaviour of authorities, academic and non-academic staff of the school/centre becomes vicious and harassing at certain points. Somehow same thoughts were expressed by S-8, U-7 and M-3. It should be mentioned that these three participants belong to different universities of Malaysia.

An interesting case was described by S-2. She told that most of the staff of canteens is South Indian or Malaysian Tamils, So, whenever she or her friends from other countries such as Nigeria, India or Iran go to them, they start talking loudly and passing comments, laughing on their dresses, style and attire. S8 expressed that sometimes it harassed her a lot when she went there for dinners or when there was comparatively less people in canteen. S-8 also

added that her Nigerian friend stopped going to that canteen for food or having tea due to the weird and strange attitude of the staff.

The issue of harassment at different universities in Malaysia was critical but when it comes to the security staff, the participants appreciated the role of it. M-2 mentioned an incident in following words;

“Once at night, I was drawing money from campus ATM, when two African boys entered the ATM booth. When I came out, the boys also came out and repeatedly ask me to sit in their car and they will drop me to hostel. I did not take more than two minutes that 2 security guards on bike appeared and followed me till I entered my hostel. They were giving me security without my knowledge and rescued me from the situation”

Similarly, most of the participants of study expressed such incidents and appreciated the security measures taken by different University authorities. On a question of whether the participants report to the security staff in case of harassment by academic and non-academic staff of the campus, majority of the participants denied it. They never approach to security staff or any official in case of any harassment caused by supervisor, other teachers or school staff.

Harassment faced by Multicultural and ethnically Diverse Groups of People

Among the main factors of harassment, one was the multinational and multi-ethnic students' differences with each other. The data shows many incidents of harassment by people of different communities and ethnicities in and out of campus. Most incidents of harassment were reported from the African and Arab people.

M-2 expressed that she was continuously harassed by an Arab person in library when she newly joined the campus and library. The man used to offer dinner *and show me the city as I was new and had not explored the city yet*. At last one day M-2 burst out and scolded loudly to that person and eventually got rid of her. M-2 mentioned surprisingly that all that was happening in presence of library staff, but the staff never forbid or stopped that person from such attitude. Harassment cases in library were also reported by couple of other participants too. Similarly, most of the participants mentioned that not only they themselves but many of their international friends have been target of harassment by the people of that community.

Another case was reported by U-6, where she discussed the issue of her school's student association whose president was from African country. According to her, the president used to call her in association office in evening for school tasks. She never felt comfortable during that meeting of tasks. If any of the students refused to attend his office, he used to report to Deputy Dean who was the chairman of association and girls had to face the results. What scared U-6 most was his remarks, *“I like South Asian Girls.”* Participants at different universities complained of the ill behaviour and attitude of African origin people. U-6 also added that their attitude was not only harassing towards Pakistani girls but also

female of other countries and communities. Talking loudly and talking in a particular manner may be natural for the people of African people but majority of the female take it as harassing attitude. The participants also gave the references of some print media news in which these people have been responsible for certain street crimes in Malaysia. To add more in it, S-7 who was living in a shared apartment with her friends of different nationalities, reported that she was harassed several times in Condominium lift. These people keep on asking her and other girls, “*Hey baby give me your phone number.*” She suggested that its better to live in campus hostel rather than renting apartments outside campus. According to her, she never could focus on her work because of living outside and managing all that attitudes which scared her a lot in lift, building and even sometimes on the way to campus.

It was noted during the data collection that very less cases of harassment were reported or mentioned against Chinese or European people. All the participants had very positive perceptions about these people and told that they help them in certain tasks of their research work and never found them hurting or harassing ever. On the other hand, participants complained about Malaysian Tamils or Malaysian Indians. These cases were not mentioned in campuses but outside the campus on streets or in markets.

When it comes to the international events and conferences, where people of different regions, backgrounds, communities and nationalities gather, the participants of the study appreciated the management and never mentioned any major incident of harassment in it. Some slight problems were discussed by G-4 that sometimes the participants of the conference from South Asia or some countries ask repeatedly to show them the city and have round of city but they never felt comfortable going out with them as the *demands kept on increasing* G-4.

Malaysia being the emerging economy and possessing high rank universities is a hub of international students from different countries and people of different religions, ethnicities. There were students of those countries who have severe clashes with each other. Like, India-Pakistan, Iran-Saudi Arabia, Palestine-Jordan, Iraq-Kurdistan-Turkey. The differences and clashes at country level were also apparent from the behaviour of students with each other. Malaysia itself is considered to be inclined towards Saudi Arabian Shariah Model. Few of the participants who were of Shia Muslims from Pakistan complained about the discriminating and harassing attitude of Non-Shia communities, such as Saudis and Malaysian itself. G-1 very sadly illustrated that my supervisor used to ask me which sect I belong to and knowing the situation I lied and told against my sect. He (supervisor) used to talk bad about my sect and I had to listen with heavy heart. Similarly, the behaviour of Indian people was observed to be harsh with Pakistanis and direct and indirect remarks and threats were also mentioned.

Off-Campus Harassment

According to the data gathered, harassment incidents were reported outside the campuses. Many of the respondents shared their experiences to severe incidents of harassment outside the campus. Most of the harassment cases were

occurred in local transport, subways, streets, shopping malls and night markets etc.

One of the respondents G-3 was worried about the harassment cases outside the campus, as she faced harassment issues many times. She expressed that she was not expecting that environment but when she landed in Malaysia she saw many things, as men harass women and even Muslims were not exception. She further added that she cannot walk alone outside the campus after 9 pm and the university administration has also warned them not to go outside of hostel after 9 pm. She mentioned that there were so many incidents where women have faced harassment and molestation.

G-5 shared her experiences that people offer lift and even if you refuse them they keep on insisting you to sit with them in their car or on bike. She expressed that most of the people seem illiterate and mostly it happens in LRT's, bus stations and taxi stands. She said they try to touch (molestation) in LRT's may be to steal something but they come closer and make the person uncomfortable; it is very common in Kuala Lumpur. She also mentioned such harassment cases that happened with her Pakistani and other friends. Like G-3, she doesn't go out of her hostel after Maghreb prayers.

The harassment in local transport was also reported by many other participants of the study and it was observed that it happens in all cities of Malaysia, but the severity of the problem was more noticed in Kuala Lumpur. G-5 discussed the issue and said that people who have their own transport may be having different opinions regarding this issue, but she uses the local transport and has seen and gone through many harassments attempts many times. She said that she herself experienced harassment few times while travelling in local transport. Overall, except harassment which in her opinion is a common issue in Asia, there was no other challenge in Malaysia. She said it's a mentality and she heard from the local women that not only boys harass girls, but girls also harass boys.

Talking about the harassment cases at different tourist attraction, the participants gave mixed responses. Some of the respondents were satisfied about the atmosphere at different tourist attractions and cities but S-8 told that it is not safe to visit these attractions alone. She expressed that once she had to buy something from a particular area (that is popular for its tourist attraction) and she wanted to see the beauty of the area too. While walking on the street alone, she noted that two people started following her. As she was alone and scared she started walking fast. The people kept on calling her, "*Excuse me Ms, need to talk to you about business.*" Another case was reported by S-2 who was also from same city and university. She faced the same situation at a beach when her friends went to buy drinks and snacks. But comparatively other respondents had positive experiences at tourist places.

Most of the participants also raised the issue of harassment at eating places, cafes and local hotels that have huge chain- franchise all over the country (Not appropriate to take names). According to G-2, while having meals, some boys came and sit on the same table in front her (without her consent) and were

listening to music and watching videos on their mobiles. She added that some of the men smoke cigarettes and throw its smoke to her side intentionally. She further elaborated that the boys who come in groups in restaurants are more prone to harass international females. Sometimes they come and talk, pass remarks on *Shalwar Kameez* or the way we eat *meals traditionally* etc. It should again be mentioned that most of these cases happen in the small local restaurants. On the other hand, in lavish and expensive restaurants and cafes, the situation is totally different and no such issue of harassment is mentioned.

Harassment faced by the Indigenous People

Harassment is not only related to the local people as said by many of the respondents. Many of the international students harass women especially from their own countries. The same case happened with few of the study respondents who were harassed by their own countrymen. There were cases in one of the universities, where student agents were involved in harassment and one of the study respondents was also the victim of the harassment by her agent. The student agents are also the students of the university who are appointed on commission basis by the university to grab admissions from their respective countries.

U1, was from a very conservative society, she shared that when her agent came to pick her from the airport, he deliberately put so many things on the back seat to make her sit with him on the front seat. She stated that she did not like that as she is from a Baloch tribe and it was against her culture to sit on a front seat with a strange man. *"It was quite a challenging thing for me to bear"*. The other tragedy happened with her when her agent fraudulently used her name to get a family house for himself. She said when she knew the fact she was in shock. She said that she immediately took her luggage and walked towards the road in the middle of the night. *"The agent's intentions were not right"* and as per her statement he planned this deliberately so that she can stay with him.

Additionally, on a question whether Pakistani community help them or take measures if there is any harassment case brought to their knowledge, the participants gave very negative remarks. According to them, in such case no one from Pakistani students or associations take any step or support the harassment victims. Instead, they pass very rough and rude remarks and behave like strangers. It must be added that in many universities there are student associations of every country, but their role and practicality to resolve issues of communities is expressed to be pathetic by the respondents. As S-5, shared that one of her friend got harassed by Pakistani male community members and when she informed this to the so called head of the community he replied that: *"she herself is responsible, why does not she wear proper clothes or scarf...from nowhere she looks a Pakistani girl"* (*phiraisa to hoga ab hum kis se jakarlarain is kiwaja se*).

According to M-1, the attitude of Pakistani male in Malaysia itself is harassing; they keep the ethnic, social, cultural and provincial jealousy with them even outside of Pakistan. She added that their behaviour with you will be according to their set of cultural, religious and ethnic beliefs.

Conclusion

The insights derived from the perceptions of Pakistani female doctoral students indicate that problems of harassment exist in the Malaysian universities. Although Malaysia is considered safe country for women, but the problems of harassment prevails even in the educational institutions of Malaysia. It was found that students were not only harassed by academic and administrative staff of their respective universities, but local and foreign people also exploited the female students. The severity of the problem increases when students are not only harassed but also not extended any kind of help by their fellow countrymen.

Suggestion and Recommendations

The data of the study draws attention to the severe problems that female doctoral students at Malaysian educational institutions. If proper steps are not taken for the security of female students, this may result in adverse circumstances for female students residing in Malaysia. Further, it may affect the diplomatic relations of Malaysia and Pakistan which are considered to be exemplary so far.

Firstly, the agent system for admissions in Malaysian universities should be reconsidered. There should only be official and authorized agents by both Malaysian universities and Pakistani government as many cases of harassment and ill behaviour are described in the study by participants. Secondly, ambassador or representative system in some universities (representatives or ambassadors are chosen from the students for their respective countries to help students get registered easily) needs to be more practical and held accountable for such a scenario.

One more serious recommendation would be for the Pakistan High Commission in Malaysia to have regular visits of all university and conduct meetings with students on continuous basis. The officials can inquire the problems of Pakistani students and discuss with Malaysian authorities to resolve and bridge the communication gap in order to facilitate students' sojourns.

In the end, it is the responsibility of the female students to take good care of themselves by connecting with the local community of their country. Through this, they would better equip themselves to immerse in the Malaysian community and avoid unforeseen circumstances relating to harassment. In addition, parents can play an important part in facing such situation with continuous communication with their children regarding self-protection and harassment.

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