



women's action forum

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### Statement on Reports of Sexual Harassment in Schools

Women's Action Forum Lahore, is deeply disturbed at the recent reports in the social and print media about sexual harassment of girls in a private school in Lahore. WAF appreciates the students who had the courage and confidence to complain about sexual harassment and bringing a very serious though neglected issue to public notice. It is a fact that sexual harassment is rampant in private and public institutions, it is also a fact that it occurs in single sex and coeducational institutions and madrassahs where both girls and boys are vulnerable to multiple forms harassment, intimidation and fear.

This issue needs to be addressed without delay. Given that the Punjab Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act, 2014 does not presently apply to students, an effective system and mechanism within it needs to be put in place to ensure that students' complaints are immediately heard and addressed. The Department of Education and associations of public and private schools in consultation with parents and students should urgently draw up guidelines for a workable system. It is crucial to train staff, faculty and in what constitutes sexual harassment and put in place age-appropriate education for students on the complaint mechanism and what comes under the definition of sexual harassment. It is equally important to involve parents in this process so as to enable them to provide their children with the support and understanding that will build their confidence and make them less vulnerable to this abuse. Given the seriousness of the problem, WAF urges parents to recognise the importance of initiatives such as school workshops on child sexual abuse, puberty and adolescence that are undertaken to ensure the safety of their children, not reject them and other forms of human rights knowledge on cultural or seemingly religious grounds.

WAF strongly cautions against sensationalizing this issue or making it a matter of a particular school only. Sexual harassment in schools, madrassahs, and institutions of higher education is a serious matter as perpetrators are not only in positions of power but also come in the garb of mentors and caregivers. Rather this is an opportunity to address a pervasive problem that has been swept under the carpet for too long.

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