

Investigating Sexual Violence at PK Music Festivals

Authors: Sardar Muhammad Musa Khan¹

Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive investigation of sexual violence at Pakistani music festivals, building upon research conducted by Bows et al. (2022, 2024) concerning sexual violence within the UK festival context. It marks the first Pakistani study dedicated to this subject, incorporating insights from interviews with ten women who have personally encountered instances of sexual harassment or assault at such events. The study employs a dual quantitative and qualitative methodology to explore female experiences with sexual harassment in depth, aiming to discern overarching trends alongside individual narratives. Through an inductive approach that synthesizes numerical and descriptive data, this research illuminates the broader patterns and the nuanced, contextualized occurrences of sexual violence at music festivals – ultimately aiming to enhance the leisure experience for women attending these events by urging a revamp of policies that prioritise their safety and well-being. Collaborative efforts with festival operators have stimulated discussions surrounding the measures designed to cultivate a secure environment for female attendees.

Keywords: Gender Differences, maltreatment, gender studies, cultural sensitivity.

Methodology

Participants and design

The investigation recruited 20 Pakistani female residents via selective sampling, each having either witnessed or directly experienced sexual assault. Around 40% of the participant cohort comprised of A Level (Year 12) students. All participants completed a questionnaire designed to elicit insights on the topic. 10 of these respondents chose to partake in an interview, materializing into an in-depth discussion of either their own encounters or other observations. The age range (in years) of participants was between 15 and 45. While the sample is not representative of all female festival-goers, it captured those with lived experience—from whom detailed insight can be developed (Bows et al., 2024).

Questionnaire: Investigating sexual violence at PK music festivals

The questionnaire, specifically designed to investigate sexual violence at Pakistani music festivals, included ten multiple-choice questions with various response options and four open-ended prompts for descriptive discussion. These were systematically organized under the following headings: 'Demographics', 'Experiences', 'Strategies', and 'Perspectives' respectively. The bulk of qualitative discourse stemmed from the latter two sections, where participants discussed strategies either personally or generally employed to mitigate the risk of sexual assault at music festivals. Within the 'Perspectives' section, participants discussed issues pertaining to the significance and influence of security measures and cultural dynamics that may exacerbate the likelihood of sexual violence. At the concluding portion of the questionnaire, participants were thanked for their contribution and were encouraged to contact us via email to arrange an interview if they had further insights on the subject matter. Notably, half of the respondents who completed the questionnaire took part in an interview. In order to safeguard their confidentiality, all participants were explicitly instructed, through a 'notice' on the questionnaire's cover page, to abstain from disclosing any information that could potentially lead to their identification. Scan the QR code on the cover page to view the full questionnaire.

Procedure

Four supervisors oversaw the distribution and collection of the questionnaires, with one supervisor administering five questionnaires each. Each supervisor selected five female residents who had either

¹ smmkhan2006@gmail.com.

observed or encountered sexual harassment at a Pakistani music festival within the last four years. Each supervisor received a packet of five questionnaires, which were then distributed and returned to the lead researcher. Quantitative data obtained from the multiple response options was processed through a barcoding system – illustrating experiences of sexual violence at music festivals statistically. Descriptive responses from the open-ended/discussion questions were thematically analyzed to provide relevant qualitative insights. Interviews were then conducted with 10 participants who volunteered to provide additional insights, following the methodology outlined by Bows et al., 2024. Prior to the interviews, all participants received an information sheet and consent form, which they signed. The interviews took place via Zoom, lasting between 15 and 45 minutes each. A semi-structured interview schedule was utilized, focusing on experiences of sexual violence and responses, both personal and formal/informal, at festivals. During the structured segment of the interview, participants were asked to elaborate on their discussion on the 'Strategies' and 'Perspectives' portions of the questionnaire. All interviewees were thanked for their participation at the study's denouncement. Consented interviews were recorded to create focused and relevant transcripts. These transcripts were then analyzed with a central focus on the subjective experiences of women. The analysis aimed to develop detailed descriptions of experiences related to sexual harassment and violence, including their impacts, reporting decisions, and responses from participants and others involved. Descriptive labels were assigned to the interviews, and thematic insights were extracted from the transcripts based on this coding.

Findings

The study outcomes, encompassing data from both the questionnaire and interviews, are categorized according to the sections delineated in the questionnaire: 'Demographics', 'Experiences', 'Strategies', and 'Perspectives'. This systematic arrangement provides a structured framework for presenting and analyzing the data coherently.

Demographics

The majority of the participants in the study belonged to the '15-20' age range, underscoring the tendency for sexual violence to be targeted towards younger women. This observation was corroborated by one interviewee who stated:

“I visited the concert with my Khala (Aunt) and my cousins. We all were wearing the same clothes as it was a planned thing for the concert night on the third day of the Islamabad Eat festival. We were all singing together, not far from the stage – somewhere in the middle of the crowd. This man, late forties I would say, looked at my Khala for a second and then continuously stared at me for about three to four minutes. I held my Khala's arm and we slowly started to move out of the crowd. He followed us and touched my buttock and my cousin's neck (she was 17 at the time); saying “idhar aa na bachi (come here little girl)”. Our Khala yelled at him and we all ran back to the car. Perhaps it was our ages rather than ‘what’ we were wearing...”

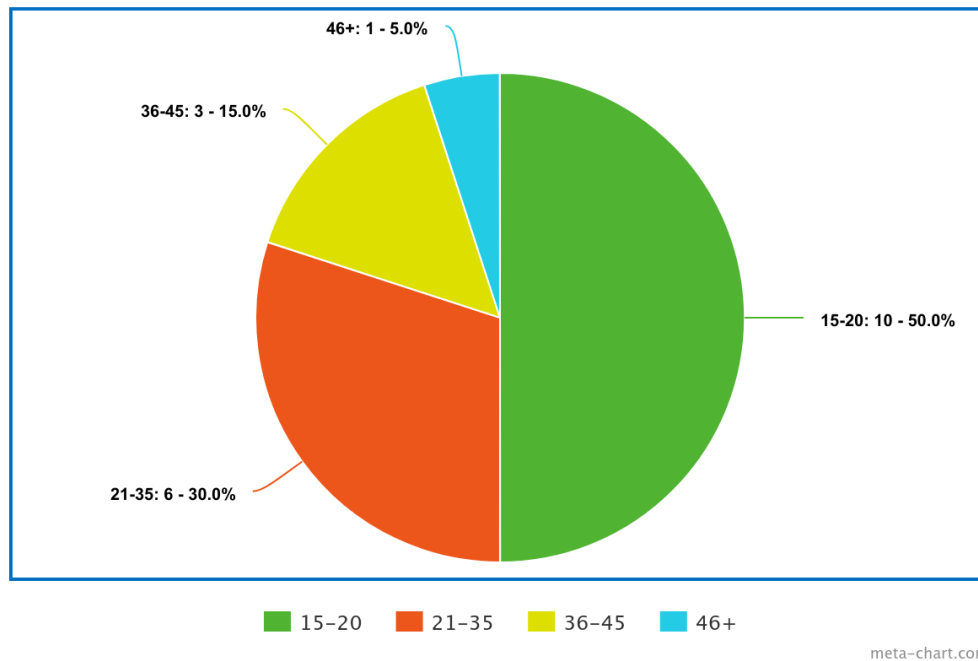
Experiences

Consistent with the literature outlined in Bows et al., 2024, most of the sexual violence experienced and witnessed was physical rather than verbal. Acts of harassment included groping and ‘brushing up against’ the victim. However, the most common physical act noted was ‘pinching’ – “both my friend and I were sharply pinched on our thighs, arms and ears”, as one interviewee stated – and, “My sister said the same man pinched her buttock and her breast at least twice before she broke through her shock, started crying, and finally left”, as one response to Question 3 stated. There were a few instances of verbal violence experienced and witnessed. These commonly included cat calling, swearing and making sexist remarks. Notably, one response particularly aligned with an observation outlined in Bows et al. 2024, where after the victim “refused to give the boys [her] Instagram handle, they started swearing at [her] loudly and accusing [her] of ‘trying to get attention’ by dressing up like a ‘slut’”, as one interviewee stated. This underscores the contingency of sexual violence upon the perpetrator being dismissed (i.e., through a rejection), and largely connects to Bows et al.'s findings. Another participant also described an incidence of sexual violence that firmly meets the criteria for a serious legal offence i.e. penetrative assault, where “he (the perpetrator)

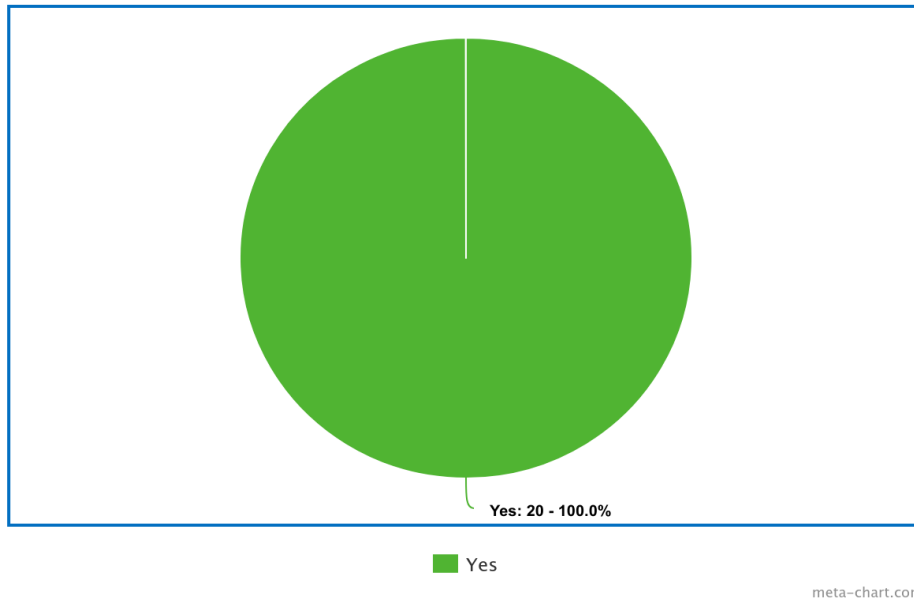
literally shoved his finger inside me from beneath my skirt and I begged him to stop but he said ‘buss do minute ruk jao’ (just wait two minutes)”, as she stated. Participants also experienced male acquaintances attempting to touch their breasts. All participants immediately left the festival and have had no contact with these acquaintances since. This was usually a school friend or a distant family member. There were a few links made to the harassment episode at the ‘Atif Aslam concert’ in Karachi in 2017; however, in order to establish validity, these were not considered as a ‘relevant qualitative insight’ as the study exclusively scrutinized incidents of sexual assault within the last four years. All of these incidences met legal definitions and categories of sexual harassment and assault. In alignment with the sociological portion of Bows et al., 2024, this type of chronic and persistent harassment is well documented in research exploring women’s experiences of sexual aggression (see, e.g., Hlavka, 2014). These experiences may be further understood through the prism of objectification theory, introduced by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) to describe and explain a culture of sexual objectification in which women are treated as (sexual) objects or things, rather than as people (Davidson & Gervais, 2015) (Bows et al., 2024). Statistical analysis of the questionnaire’s quantitative results appears on page 4.

Diagrammatic representations for all quantitative insights gathered from the responses to our questionnaire on Investigating sexual violence at PK music festivals.

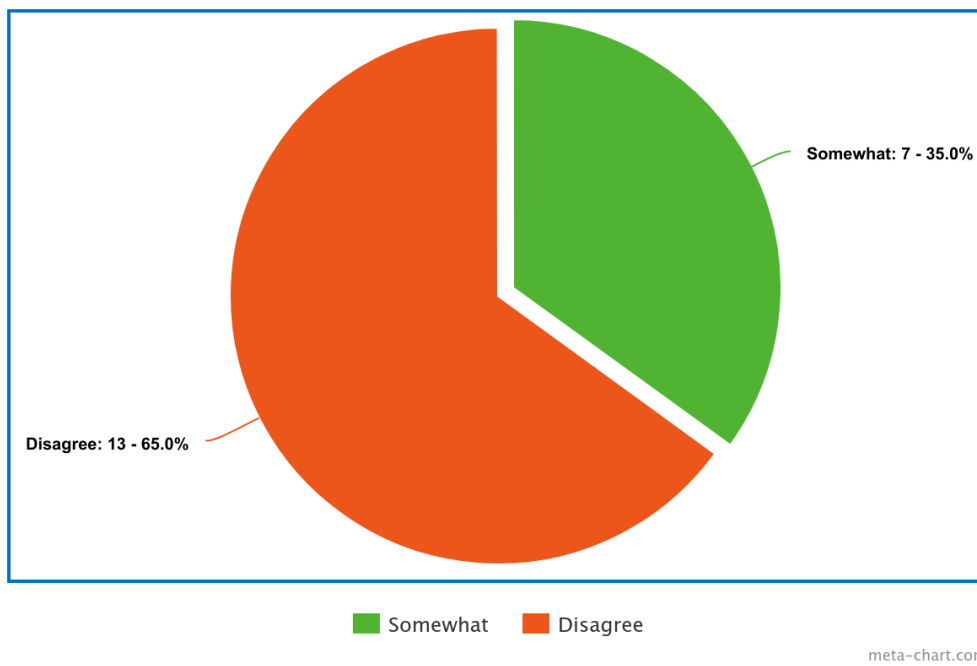
Question 1 What is your age range?



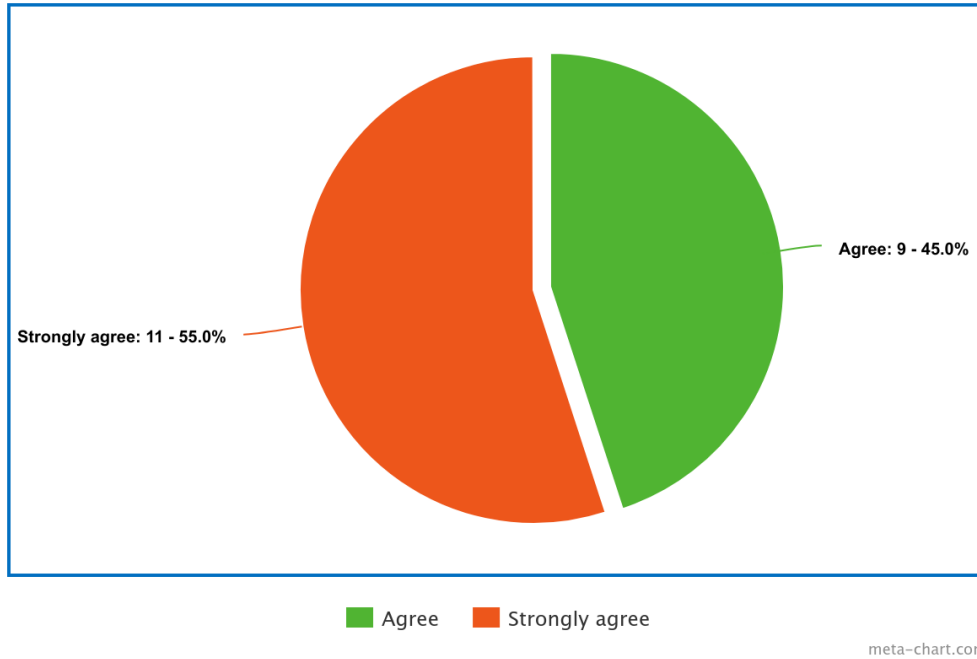
Question 2 Have you experienced or witnessed any form of sexual violence at a music festival?



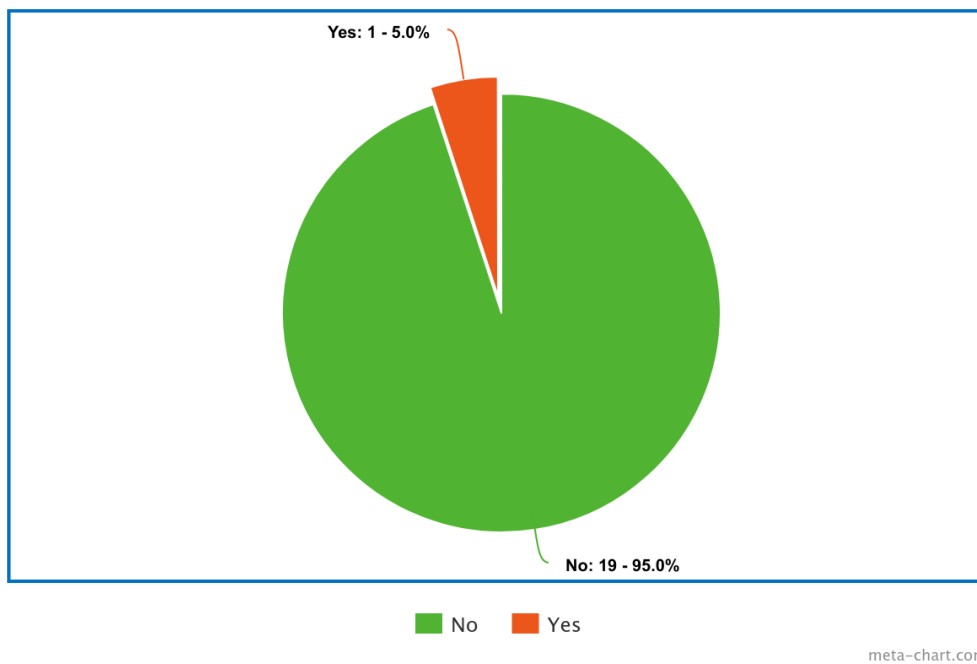
Question 4 How far do you agree with this statement?: ‘The majority of experienced/witnessed sexual violence was verbal.’



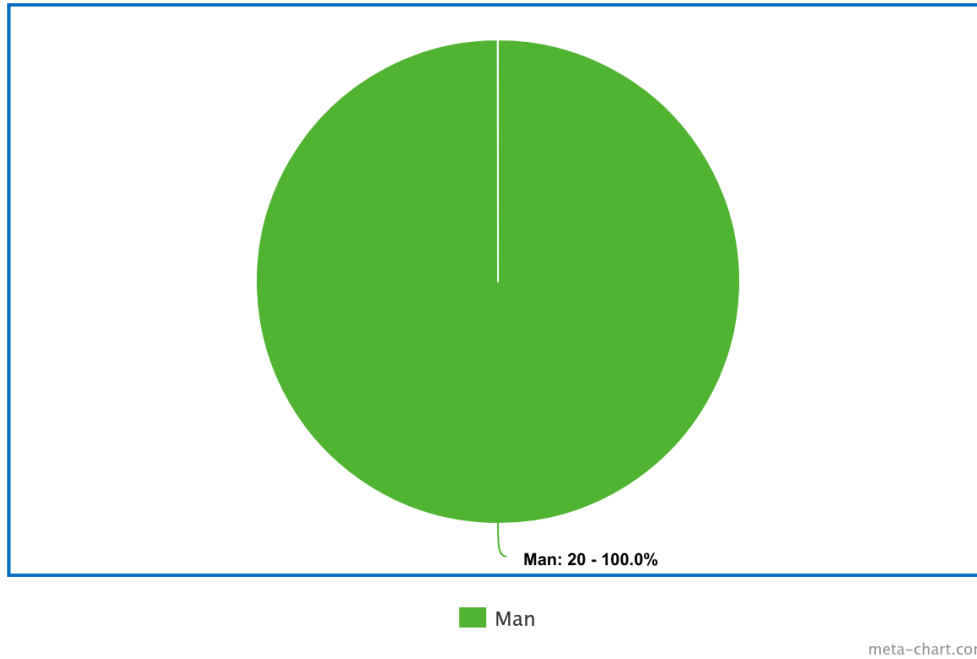
Question 5 How far do you agree with this statement?: ‘The majority of experienced/witnessed sexual violence was physical.’



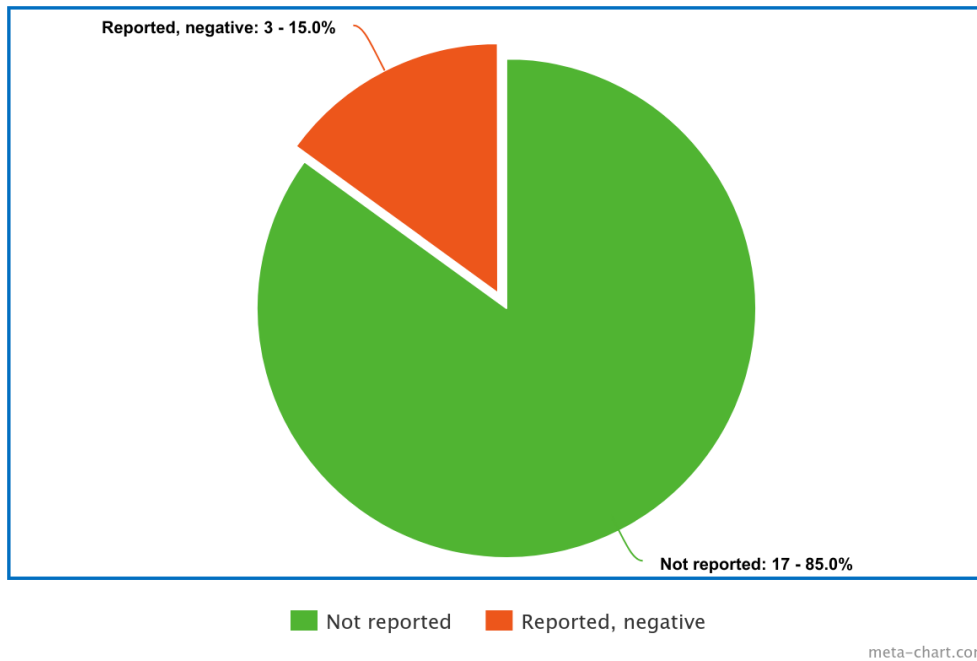
Question 6 Are you aware of any policies or procedures in place at music festivals to prevent or respond to incidents of sexual violence?



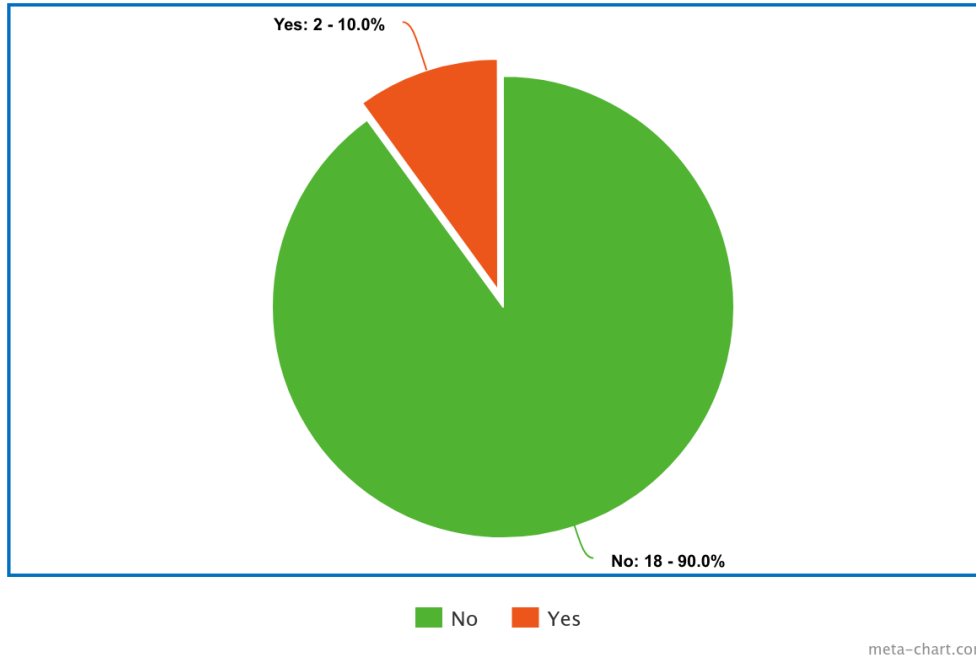
Question 7 Was the sexual violence perpetrated by a man or a woman?



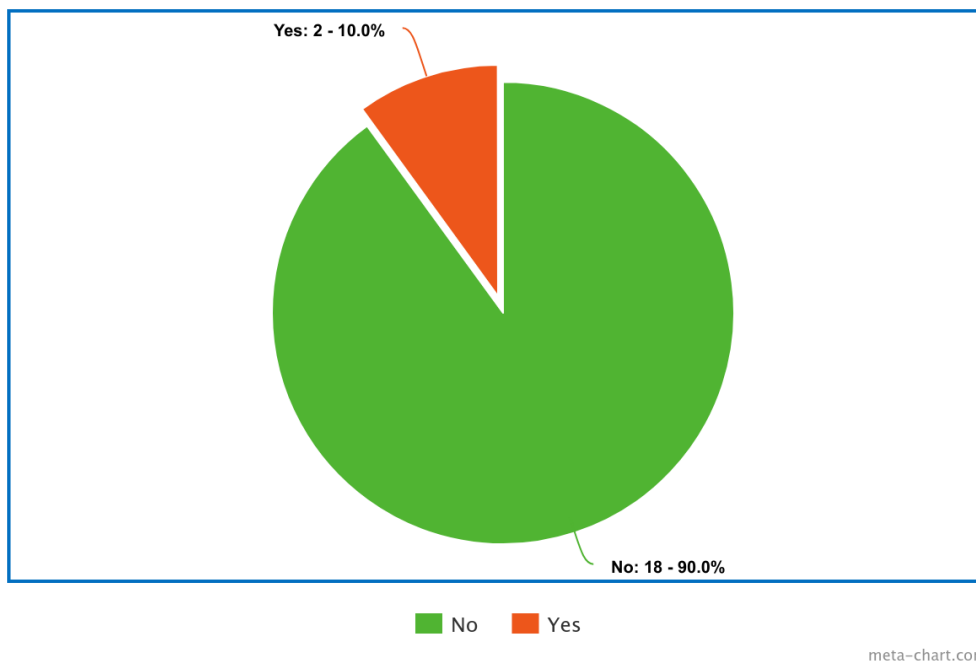
Question 8 Was the violence reported and was the outcome of reporting the violence positive (effective action was taken) or negative (the report was taken unseriously)?



Question 9 Was the perpetrator of the sexual violence/harassment identified or not?



Question 10 Was the sexual violence at the festival perpetrated while the victim was by themselves or with someone else (a group of friends, for instance)?



The aforementioned findings have therefore indicated that the prevalence of physical sexual violence, as opposed to verbal violence, is notably high at music festivals and is primarily targeted towards younger women, regardless of whether they are in groups or alone. In all cases examined, the perpetrator of the violence was identified as male. This trend underscores a significant gap in the policies and measures aimed at mitigating such incidents of violence. Consequently, sexual violence often goes unreported, allowing perpetrators to evade accountability and perpetuate the cycle of harm.

Strategies

A variety of strategies were identified to mitigate the risk of sexual violence. Roughly 55% of women reported carrying self-defense weapons, most often a pepper spray or a concealed makeup knife, both of which were effective in 40% of cases. Instances where these measures failed often occurred due to either non-utilization by the victim or the perpetrator gaining access to the weapon. The makeup knife typically resembled a lipstick containing a concealed blade and was commonly carried in purses or bags. Other strategies involved staying in large groups, often accompanied by male friends or family members. However, this approach occasionally proved ineffective, where male companions were found to perpetrate some form of sexual violence in 25% of cases. Many women opted to wear clothing that provided minimal skin exposure as a 'safety measure'. However, it was reported that these clothing choices were not their initial preference but rather served as a 'protective protocol' – as one respondent stated, "We would've worn our party skirts ... but didn't wanna get groped ... as usual." This largely connects to the 'gendered culturing' ideology outlined in Bows et al., 2024. Some women also refrained from staying mid-crowd. Additionally, many women maintained physical contact with their female friends throughout the concert, as one interviewee noted, "We literally held hands for 2 hours straight otherwise I just knew something was going to happen." Approximately 65% of these tactics and strategies were deemed effective, and were reported to be used in various social gatherings and events.

Perspectives

It was found that almost all respondents felt that increasing the security presence of men at music festivals would not enhance safety, and in most cases, could exacerbate issues of sexual violence. Unfortunately, a significant number of security guards have been implicated in perpetrating acts of sexual violence themselves (for example, the incident at 'Lahore's Solis Festival' in 2019). One of the interviewee stated, "I would be a fool to tell a security guard I was harassed ... he'd probably just see it as an opportunity to harass me as well". Hence, the patriarchal, hierarchical structure within Pakistani security agencies, coupled with the lack of accountability and oversight, creates an environment conducive to abuse. There was insightful discussion on increasing the security presence of female security guards at music festivals, and how that could potentially reduce the possibility of sexual violence. Most participants expressed optimism about its potential impact on their safety – where 90% of interviewees indicated that they would feel more empowered to report instances of sexual violence to a female security guard, and would feel more at ease in their presence compared to a male guard. The visibility of female security guards can therefore serve as a deterrent to potential perpetrators, reassuring women that their concerns will be taken seriously and addressed appropriately. The music festival culture in Pakistan, characterized by large crowds, loud music, and chaotic environments, makes it challenging for individuals to recognize and respond to signs of danger or intervene in potentially harmful situations. Perpetrators may exploit the chaos to carry out acts of sexual violence with less risk of interference or intervention. The 'dark' atmosphere with "shady lighting and disco smoke", as one interviewee noted, induces reduced visibility and enables the perpetuation of violence in an environment where detection is quite easily evadable. Moreover, almost 75% of participants noted that substance abuse (i.e. alcohol, nicotine, cannabis, and cocaine as the most prominent) causes women to be more vulnerable to coercion or manipulation and enables perpetrators to take advantage of their impaired states. About 50% of respondents indicated that music festivals in Pakistan foster a culture of hedonism and excess, where attendees prioritize pleasure-seeking behaviors and indulgence. In such environments, attitudes towards consent and boundaries may become blurred, leading to an increased risk of sexual misconduct or assault. Linking to the absence of effective policies (as discussed earlier), inadequate security measures, including insufficient lighting and male-centric security teams, significantly increase the risk of sexual violence. These, as a core-issue, must be appropriately addressed in order to improve the experience of women at music festivals by prioritizing their safety. Additionally, 80% of the respondents discussed how patriarchal attitudes that objectify women and prioritize male dominance significantly perpetuate a culture of impunity for perpetrators, potentially discouraging victims from speaking out or seeking help. As one respondent noted, "My uncle told my cousin to 'never go to a gathering where she might be harassed ever again and forget that it ever happened' as she would be fiddling with his 'honour' if she was abused again".

Discussion & Further Interviews

These findings were then presented to a prominent festival operator and a police representative to stimulate discussion focalized on measures that aim to cultivate a secure environment for attendees. For ethical purposes, we have decided not to disclose the identity of the festival operator or the police representative. A semi-structured interview was conducted by the lead researcher and one supervisor with the operator and the police representative.

Both interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom, with digital consent forms obtained beforehand. Discussions centered on the challenges and deficiencies in addressing sexual violence at music festivals. The festival organizer acknowledged efforts to cultivate a secure and inclusive environment while also illuminating instances where these endeavors were inadequate. Emphasis was placed on staff training and operational protocols designed to promptly address incidents of sexual harassment and assault, including immediate apprehension of perpetrators, police involvement, and their subsequent exclusion from the event. However, they acknowledged occasional lapses in implementation and response times, particularly evident during peak festival periods. Instances where reports of sexual harassment were not taken seriously resulted in the reassignment of male security personnel from their duties. This phenomenon is reflective of the "feminist killjoys" concept elucidated by Bows et al. (2024). Furthermore, logistical and resource constraints have at times compromised the effectiveness of visible security measures such as enhanced lighting and designated safe zones, particularly in concert settings characterized by subdued lighting. Although attendee feedback is utilized to refine strategies, there have been instances where critical issues were not promptly addressed through feedback mechanisms.

The police representative highlighted collaborative efforts with such festival organizers to safeguard female attendees but also acknowledged various deficiencies. Delays in legal actions against perpetrators and inadequate accessibility to victim support services were distinctive challenges. While data-driven methodologies to identify high-risk areas were underscored, usually through surveying attendees during the festival, the event preemptive mitigation of all potential risks remained a persistent challenge. Additionally, the importance of bystander intervention training and fostering a culture of consent among festival-goers was emphasized, despite acknowledged difficulties in achieving widespread participation and understanding. These challenges are compounded by cultural attitudes influenced by patriarchal views which temper responses to feminist advocacy in Pakistan. Both parties acknowledged these shortcomings and are reportedly actively engaged in formulating measures and policies to improve the festival experience for women.

Implications For Policy and Implementation

Consistent with the UK festival culture as observed in Bows et al., a vast majority of Pakistani music festivals still inadequately address the issue of sexual violence, lacking comprehensive policies or initiatives aimed at its reduction. It is imperative to collaborate with specialized support organizations such as Safe Gigs for Women to implement effective measures. These organizations can offer tailored training and establish dedicated on-site support services at festivals to promptly respond to victims. To advance these efforts in Pakistan, local councils and relevant licensing agencies should enforce stringent conditions concerning safety, security, and welfare at festivals.

Pakistani music festivals should be mandated to implement comprehensive measures aimed at addressing sexual violence. These measures include the development and enforcement of rigorous sexual violence prevention policies outlining zero-tolerance approaches and incident management protocols. Mandatory training sessions should be conducted for all festival personnel and volunteers in collaboration with experienced organizations to enhance their awareness and response capabilities. Additionally, festivals must establish on-site support infrastructure, such as designated safe spaces staffed by trained personnel, to provide immediate assistance to victims disclosing incidents of sexual violence. Collaboration between festival organizers and local support groups and helplines should be fostered to ensure continuous and accessible support for victims. Effectively integrating such strategies into festival planning is essential to proactively mitigate sexual violence and foster safer environments for all participants, and particularly, women.

Our research contributes to the growing body of evidence indicating that sexual violence and misogynistic behavior are prevalent occurrences for women in recreational environments in Pakistan. We advocate for these findings to serve as a catalyst for festival organizers and the broader music industry to acknowledge and address such instances of sexual violence with urgency.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the seminal work of Bows et al., which has significantly enabled and expanded research on sexual violence at music festivals. Led by Sardar Muhammad Musa Khan as the principal investigator and author, our research team is composed of aspiring legal scholars. We are thankful for the supervisors' involvement in contributing to the research initiative.

References

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For inquiries, email khanetal2024@gmail.com.