

IoBM students lay bare the cost of the union ban in Pakistan

Decades without student unions have left Pakistan's campuses stripped of accountability and a collective voice

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KARACHI: When students at Karachi's Institute of Business Management (IoBM) filled the courtyard ten days ago chanting "We want justice," they were not only standing up for a classmate. They were responding to something larger, a pattern that has defined campus life in Pakistan for decades: where complaints are dismissed, complainants are punished and justice is delivered only when the outrage becomes too visible to ignore.

The protest began after a BBA student reported around a month ago that two men from the university's Transport Office had harassed her when she went to collect her student ID card. She said they filmed her, stared at her, and tried to lock the door before she managed to escape. When she ran to the HR department to report what happened, she was told the matter did not fall under their domain. Instead of investigating, the university accused her of "engaging in aggressive behaviour" and expelled her for "creating a chaotic environment in the Transport, HR and Academics department."

With no internal process willing to hear her case, the student turned to social media. On October 22, she shared her account on an informal campus Facebook group. By the next morning, hundreds of students had gathered outside the administration block. For many, it was their first experience of collective action, a refusal to accept that the university would punish the person who spoke up rather than the ones accused. By evening, the administration announced her reinstatement.

Among those in the crowd was **S**, a final-year student. “It shouldn’t have come to this,” she said. “Our university has policies and offices, but they exist to protect its image, not its students. You realise how fragile the system is when the only way to get justice is to protest.”

Lawyer Jibran Nasir, who followed the case, said that the incident reflected a wider problem across Pakistan’s higher education system. Speaking to *The Express Tribune*, he explained that IoBM could not produce a clear anti-harassment policy when asked. He also referred to similar cases at other universities. In 2014, when a professor at LUMS was accused of harassment, the university’s initial reaction was to defend him. The internal committee exonerated him, but the provincial ombudsman later found him guilty, and only then was he dismissed. Similarly, in 2021 a male student was expelled by IBA for publicly reporting the harassment of a female staff member by senior male staff members. The expulsion led to student protests resulting in the reinstatement of the whistle blower following my committee inquiries which found the male staff members guilty of harassment.

The pattern has become predictable. When formal systems fail, students take their stories online because there is nowhere else to go. What should be a confidential process becomes a public one. Administrations count on silence to preserve their reputations, but this generation has realised that outrage is often the only tool that brings results.

For **RG**, a student at IBA, that case confirmed what many already suspected. “We feel that we are better than other institutes because we at least have a formal committee in place,” she said. “But when the university challenges legal decisions and changes their own policies instead of accepting responsibility, you realise these systems don’t exist to protect the students.”

These stories reveal a glaring structural problem. Pakistan's universities have not had student unions for forty years. When General Zia-ul-Haq banned them in 1984, he dismantled the only democratic space students had to organise and hold administrations accountable. What replaced those unions were administrative committees that managed students but did not represent them. Over time, campuses stopped functioning as communities and started operating like corporations; efficient, hierarchical, and accountable only to themselves.

Without unions, there is no forum where students can question decisions or negotiate fair treatment. Harassment complaints are handled like public relations issues rather than moral or legal concerns. HR departments focus on managing the university's image instead of protecting its students. Policies exist, but they are rarely visible or accessible. "We've heard of a complaint box near the main entrance," said S, "but I've never seen anyone use it or know where those complaints go."

Under the 2010 *Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act*, universities are legally required to form inquiry committees and submit compliance reports to the Higher Education Commission. However, the HEC does not routinely audit how these committees function or whether survivors face retaliation. In that case, compliance can become a procedural requirement rather than a test of outcomes.

The IoBM protest succeeded only because it bypassed that system. Students achieved in one day what formal channels had failed to do for weeks. But that success also exposed how little faith students have in institutional mechanisms. When justice relies on collective outrage instead of due process, it is not a functioning system, it is crisis management.

So, bringing back student unions will not solve every problem, but it would reintroduce a basic balance of power. Elected representatives could oversee harassment committees, demand transparency, and ensure that policies are implemented rather than hidden. A functional union would give students a voice at the very least, that would be formally recognised.

“The administration might have felt our protest was chaotic,” said S. “But I wish it never came to that. We wouldn’t have to shout to be heard.”

IoBM’s reversal may feel like a victory, but it is a band-aid over a bullet hole solution. Until student unions are restored and anti-harassment bodies are made independent, universities across Pakistan will continue to function like corporations with classrooms: quick to control a crisis, but unwilling to confront the culture that creates it.