

# Sexual Harassment at Workplace

## Experiences of Women Managers and Organisations

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This exploratory research attempts to understand the occurrence and dynamics of sexual harassment of women managers at workplace. While the number of sexual harassment cases is staggering, little is known about the experience that women go through when their personal space and dignity is violated. It seeks to explore how women manage such behaviour meted out to them, what kind of policies and processes do organisations have for protecting them from being sexually harmed, and whether the enactment of a law is adequate in safeguarding their interest and reputation. It also draws attention to practices instituted by some organisations that are proactive and gender sensitive.

Sexual harassment is a complex social issue that adversely affects individuals, organisations, and society (Gelfand et al 1995; O'Connell and Korabik 2000). Though various laws and institutional measures have been promulgated (United Nations General Assembly 1979; Vishakha Guidelines 1997) but research (ILO Report 2001; Social and Rural Research Institute 2012) across the last few decades suggests that women continue to be discriminated, within both the organised and unorganised sectors, in various ways.

The study by the Lal Bahadur Shastri Institute in 2000 revealed that 21.4% of women civil servants believed that cases of sexual harassment were on the rise in coveted government jobs (Thakur 2004). A decade later, the Centre for Transforming India (2010) focused its attention on the information technology (IT) and back office operations (BPOs) sector which employs a large number of women. An alarming 88% of the 600 women employees between the age of 19 and 45 years across five large cities, reported they were sexually harassed in some form or the other. Similar findings were reported in the health sector (Chaudhuri 2008). Of the 135 women doctors, nurses, attendants and administrative staff interviewed, 77 had experienced 128 incidents of different forms of harassment. The Social and Rural Research Institute (2012) interviewed a large sample of women from the organised and unorganised sectors from eight cities in India. The findings revealed that 17% women faced sexual harassment at the workplace. Satpodar (2014) points out that India tops the Reuters Survey conducted in 2010 with 26% women reporting sexual harassment.

Despite the alarming number of cases as cited above, a number of cases of sexual harassment in India go unreported. Ghosh, Puri and Dewan (2010) point out that out of 500 instances of harassment, only 50 get reported.

### 1 Review of Literature

It is contended that sexual harassment cannot solely be based on sociocultural model, but should also be examined from behavioural as well as subjective perceptions of harassment. MacKinnon (1979: 1) defines sexual harassment as "the unwanted imposition of sexual requirements in the context of a relationship of unequal power." Uggen and Blackstone (2004) suggest that the meaning of sexual harassment can vary, depending on the age, gender, race, class and in the Indian context, caste of an individual.

Distinction has been made between "sexual harassment" and sex-based harassment, thereby emphasising the fact that

The research study was funded by the Indian Institute of Management, Lucknow, under the "Seed Money Assistance" scheme.

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sexual harassment is not necessarily about sexuality or sexual desire; rather it can be to assert power of one sex (as in maleness or femaleness) over the other (Berdahl 2007; Leskinen and Cortina 2013). Leskinen and Cortina developed a multidimensional index to study sexual harassment, namely, “sexist remarks, sexually crude/offensive behaviour, infantilisation, work/family policing, and gender policing” (2013: 114).

McLaughlin et al (2012) advocate that sexual harassment is used as an equaliser against women in power, rather than instigated by sexual desire. They contend that this is one way for men to dominate and control women, who are seen as non-conformist and have risen to positions which have been traditionally occupied by men. Chamberlain et al (2008) argue that sexual harassment as an act is deeply embedded within organisational practices and policies and thus needs to be examined within the specific context. They point out that employees with tentative tenure, economic vulnerability, or those who are self-directed are inclined to experience sexual harassment. They further add that the work culture plays a significant role in either increasing or decreasing such instances. Organisations with co-worker solidarity and better grievance mechanisms face less of these problems, whereas large organisations which provide anonymity to its workers, report more cases of women being sexually harassed (Chamberlain et al 2008; De Coster et al 1999; Quinn 2002).

Salin et al (2014) study on discrepancy between ideal and actual responses to ill-treatment within organisations reveals that this can be predicted on perceived severity of behaviour, coping strategy chosen, difference in organisational status, and gender between the perpetrator and victim. The target of mistreatment go through problems, whether they respond actively or passively to situations. In case they complain, co-workers can become antagonistic or they may obtain lower performance ratings; and if they do not complain, they go through emotional trauma. The findings further demonstrate that subordinates fear to take action due to fear of retaliation, while superiors refrain from taking action in their attempt to be perceived as “fair” or due to lack of supportive policies.

In the Indian context, sexual harassment at workplace is one of the most closeted forms of gender discrimination (Shukla 2002). In many cases, employers do not go beyond setting up a complaints committee as mandated by the law (Shukla 2002; Tejani 2004). Ratna Kapur (2005) endorses the view that the law on sexual harassment instead of leading to respite, actually becomes a way to control the sexuality of women that in turn causes greater repression. Anagha Satpodar (2013) points out that privately-owned organisations are not receptive to complaints of sexual harassment. Despite enactment of the law, there is unwillingness in organisations to streamline policies or set up appropriate mechanisms. Chaudhuri (2008) reports that even if there is a grievance mechanism in place, the power dynamics against a woman if she makes a formal report, or the status of the perpetrator, plays a major role in the complaint getting invalidated.

## 2 The Objective

The foregoing experiences are a testimony that sexual harassment at workplace poses a serious challenge for assimilating women in organisations. Ironically, many women tend to remain silent when they face abject experiences at the workplace. Is it because of their ignorance, or a lack of understanding, or is it fear that drives those subjected to sexual harassment to accept the treatment meted out to them? Do those who are expected to protect the rights of their employees take cognisance of such cases or do they tend to hush up matters, with the hope that they would “somehow” get sorted out on their own?

The objective of this research was to examine the nature and extent of sexual harassment amongst women managers in corporate India. It aimed to gain deeper understanding of how women managers handle sexual harassment. The focus on women managers was because of limited qualitative research on women managers in the Indian context. It further aimed to gain deeper understanding of organisational policies and practices for safeguarding the interest and reputation of women employees, as mandated by the law. The purpose was to learn from experience and suggest measures for strengthening organisational processes to foster a secure workplace for women.

## 3 The Method

This research was a complex journey to embark upon due to the sensitive nature of the subject. It was challenging to contact women who had been sexually harassed and more so, were willing to share their experiences with the researchers.

The study used a blend of quantitative and qualitative data. To reach out to a larger database of women, a brief questionnaire was prepared which included questions on: type of organisation, its size, and its policies related to sexual harassment. It also included questions on whether the respondent had experienced any form of sexual harassment, and if so, who was the perpetrator and what measures did the respondent take to handle the experience.

The questionnaire was emailed to approximately 800 women managers known to the researcher and through them to other people. Despite using the purposive sampling method with known people, it required several reminders on email and telephone assuring them on the confidentiality of their responses as well as that of the organisation.

## 4 The Sample

Two hundred complete questionnaires were received from women managers employed in private organisations, multi-nationals, public enterprises, publishing houses, design houses, and the media. They were located in different cities across India. The majority of these women were postgraduates, holding junior to middle positions in their respective organisations when the incidence of sexual harassment occurred. The demographic data is given in Table 1 (p 51).

Forty-two percent of the respondents reported that they had heard of cases of sexual harassment at their workplace (Table 2, p 51). Fifteen percent of respondents acknowledged that they had experienced some form of harassment at workplace. This

**Table 1: Profile of the Respondents**

		Age (Years)					
		30–39	40–49	50 and above	Total		
20–29		90	20	4	198		
84							
		Educational Qualification					
		Postgraduates	Above Post-graduation	Other	Total		
Graduates		137	7	1	200		
55							
		Work Experience (Years)					
		1–10	11–20	21 and above	Total		
Less than one year		140	51	7	199		
1							
		Marital Status					
		Married	Divorced	Other	Total		
Single		110	5	1	200		
84							
Have You Heard about Cases of Sexual Harassment in Your Organisation?							
		Yes		No			
		Number	%	Number	%		
84		42		116		58	
Organisational Policies and Practices Regarding Sexual Harassment at Workplace.							
Organisations That Have a Policy on SHW		Organisations That Have an Internal Complaints Committee		Organisations That Have Neither of the Two		Respondents Who Attended Gender Sensitisation Training	
Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
170	85	164	82	18	9	95	47.5

Source: Table generated by the author based on the survey which was carried out during the course of this study. Two hundred women managers responded to the questionnaire.

group of respondents were requested for a personal interview. Thirteen women agreed to share their experiences, with an assurance of confidentiality. This apprehension reinforced a typical response that silence still dominates a subject matter of this nature, despite changes in the law (Stanko 1997).

**Table 2: Respondents Who Experienced Harassment at Workplace**

		Marital Status of Respondents							
		Single		Married		Divorced			
		Number	%	Number	%	Number	%		
11		36.6		17	56.6	02	6.6		
		Type of Sexual Harassment Experienced							
		Behavioural		Physical		Verbal			
		Number	%	Number	%	Number	%		
23		76.6		7	23.3	19	63.3		
		Who Harassed You?							
		Supervisor		Colleague		Subordinate		Outsider	
		Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
12		40		15	50	2	6	1	3
		Did You Complain against the Person who Harassed You?							
		Yes				No			
		Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
20		66.66		10		33.33			

Source: Table generated by the author based on the survey which was carried out during the course of this study. Two hundred women managers responded to the questionnaire.

An equally important aspect was to understand organisational systems and practices on the issue of women safety at the workplace. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 chief human resources (HR) managers representing multinational companies, private organisations, and public enterprises to understand their perspective on the subject and measures taken by them to restrain/manage occurrence of sexual harassment and to provide a safe and equitable work environment to women employees.

## 5 Data Collection

The questionnaire provided relevant information on the nature of abuse that woman undergo, who were the perpetrators, and steps taken to handle the issue. However, a questionnaire

is not sufficient in itself to understand the experience of the person despite effort that is made in refining the survey design. Though a questionnaire helps in providing a figure and frequency of crime, it may not be sensitive to the gendered and experiential dynamics of research (Currie and Maclean 1997).

Using qualitative analytical techniques (Ritchie and Lewis 2003), the data was analysed to elicit significant themes to develop a contextualised understanding of experiences of respondents. The interview design was semi-structured and conversational to facilitate open sharing. Broad themes for the interview included an understanding of organisational policies on sexual harassment; experience of the respondent; support rendered by the organisation, family, and colleagues and coping mechanism deployed.

In-depth interviews, spanning approximately two hours each were conducted with women respondents. Most of the interviews were conducted through telephones or Skype as the respondents were located in different cities, though few were also conducted in person. This made the process efficient and cost effective and saved time. Currie and Maclean (1997) suggest that telephonic interviews can have a high rate of disclosure, as the process provides a certain degree of “anonymity” to the interviewee especially for sensitive issues like sexual harassment. The interviews were audio-recorded after seeking due permission and transcribed. In a few instances, a second round of telephonic interviews was conducted to obtain additional information or to seek clarifications.

A second set of interviews were conducted with chief HR managers of different organisations located in and around Delhi. These interviews were conducted in person and recorded with the permission of the interviewee. Using a semi-structured approach, the broad themes included organisational policy on sexual harassment, practices for sensitising employees, nature of sexual harassment incidents that occur at workplace, and the process of dealing with them.

## 6 The Findings

An analysis of the qualitative data based on personal experiences of both sets of respondents offers valuable insights on the nuances of sexual harassment. These are enumerated below, supported with excerpts from interviews with different respondents. The purpose of analysis is not only to make generalisations but also to listen and recognise the uniqueness of each experience as it unfolds.

### 6.1 Dynamics of Sexual Harassment

Of the 30 respondents, 80% reported that the harassment was behavioural, 63% said it was verbal, and 13% said it was physical. Harassment included incidents like a male colleague pushing a respondent's office chair out of her cubicle repeatedly, not allowing her to sit at her work station, or a senior discussing intimate details of his marital problems, sharing offensive/pornographic material, stalking, looking intently at her breasts while speaking, sending lewd text messages, or a senior

inviting the respondent to his hotel room at night “to know each other better” during an outstation work trip.

There were also instances of a peer who looked for opportunities to stand “uncomfortably” close and seek unsolicited physical closeness with the respondent or a male superior who would get drunk and pass obscene comments during an office party and tried to kiss the respondent in the lift. Such misbehaviour as reported was accentuated during off sites, office parties, and field trips, although the policy within few organisations clearly demarcates that even such places are under the purview of “extended workplace.” In most cases, behavioural harassment was accompanied with some form of verbal and in few cases, physical harassment.

Is harassment embedded within the intersections of economic status, age, and marital status? As reported by respondents and HR managers, women who are divorced or separated are more likely to experience sexual harassment at workplaces, as they are deemed to be “available.” Of the five divorced women in the sample, three reported they had faced sexual harassment at their respective workplace. In another instance, it became very difficult for a separated woman to run her own business as she was persistently asked to return “favours” to get business leads or contracts.

Another facet that assumes significance is that a fresher or a woman lower in the organisational hierarchy is more liable to being harassed than those in senior positions. A respondent employed in the information technology (IT) sector stated that when a woman intern or fresher joins work, her male colleagues start “trying,” an exercise that was expected to be taken in a “sporting spirit” by the fresher. It was also reported that single girls and those from small towns working far from their homes are more vulnerable to such incidents as they perhaps do not have support systems in the city and are perceived to be “easy prey.” However, the present sample also includes two respondents in their mid-40s, holding middle-level positions, who faced such treatment. The economic status of the woman is not a factor that seems to have a bearing on how she is treated. The group of respondents represented middle and upper middle-class backgrounds.

Do certain kinds of behaviour or demeanour of women make them more susceptible to harassment? A characteristic response was that a woman who is friendly and outgoing, or if she smokes or drinks and her attire is unconventional (not provocative), is likely to be perceived as “willing” and “open” for a man to make advances. In fact, these facets came across starkly in case of two respondents. In one case, during investigation to a complaint made by a respondent, the investigating officer wanted to know “what sort of clothes does the respondent wear?” and “whether she smokes?” Only when it was affirmed by other members that she dressed “decently,” was her complaint taken seriously.

In another case, when the respondent filed a complaint against her manager for sending vulgar text messages to her, she was questioned during investigation if “she had drinks with him or went out for dinner with him at any point?” Being a shy person, she had been advised by this very manager that

she should participate in team outings for greater bonding with team members. To her surprise, the same behaviour was held against her during her hour of need.

Looking for patterns amongst the perpetrators of sexual harassment, married men, those at senior position and mostly high performers were found to indulge in such behaviour. The experience of respondents suggests there is a belief amongst the above categories of men that they are seemingly unaffected by adverse action being taken against them by the organisation. They are also under the impression that their marital status and credibility would not be questioned in the eventuality of a complaint being made against them. It was alarming to know that the response of some men when they were confronted by the respondents was “what can you do? Or no one will believe you!” and “remember I am the one who will be doing your appraisal.”

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 provides a broad definition of what constitutes sexual harassment at workplace. Yet, an analysis of experiences draws attention to not only the experience but, more importantly, the conflict, guilt, and dilemmas associated with the experience. Such instances are daunting; they occur in such a “normal” fashion, that women are usually at a loss on how to react without making it look “out of place.”

It would be pertinent to underline that the experience of “harassment” is not necessarily confined to one incident, but a series of incidents which may occur. However, the tendency is often to focus on the “event” or “incident” and know its various facets, and in the process overlook the repercussions it may have on the individual. As shared by one respondent, the “everydayness” of such occurrences can be tormenting and leads to feelings of helplessness and despair. For instance, working and interacting with the same person who has caused anguish, or reporting to him on a daily basis, is difficult to ignore or overlook. The Sakshi (2001) survey and Yugantar Education Society (2003) study validate that such a treatment can cause loss in productivity, depression, and a general feeling of mistrust for men within and outside the workplace. Menon (1999) articulately points out that legal rationality cannot grasp the complexities of what constitutes violence.

## 6.2 Dilemmas and Internal Struggles of Women

The majority of respondents had to grapple with the gnawing thought of “what role did I play to permit this man to take liberty with me.” Women tend to hold themselves responsible, at least in their thought process. The implication of this pattern of retrospection as well as undertones of others around is that it becomes a woman’s moral responsibility to be constantly vigilant “to catch the signal in the first go.” For instance, a respondent did not give a second thought about giving a lift to a male colleague in her car after an office party. But when he misbehaved with her in the car, despite being angry and disturbed, she was ridden with feelings of guilt of having allowed herself to be trapped into a state of helplessness. Apart from focusing on her work and performance, it is an added burden

on a working woman to be overly cautious and perhaps even suspicious while interacting with men.

Another typical response amongst some respondents was the tendency to underplay the experience, thereby giving undue concession to the man who had violated her rights. This is exemplified by a respondent who took almost a month's time to report the incident after it had occurred, to ensure that she was not "overreacting." She said, "This person had been persistently calling me at odd hours and making sexual insinuations. Nothing else happened beyond that." Another respondent spoke about her colleague who would try to get physically close to her and touch her on some pretext or another. She continued to tolerate such behaviour, believing that since she is friendly with her male colleagues, this person probably thought it was "okay" to behave in a certain fashion with her.

Another respondent's superior would "get drunk" at parties and pass comments that had sexual overtones. While describing his behaviour, she clarified that "he is generally very well-mannered but it was only under the influence of alcohol that he becomes obnoxious." Though his behaviour and comments made her chary of him, yet she seemed willing to discount them on the pretext of his drunkard behaviour. In case of another fresher, her supervisors repeatedly harassed her but she refused to report the incident because she felt vulnerable in a new organisation and new city.

Such behaviours are tolerated or ignored by women themselves, thinking it is "alright and not worth making an issue of." They are ignored either due to the hierarchical status of the perpetrator, or discounted because "it was just a scandalone case, the person is otherwise known for his impeccable image." Perhaps women tend to safeguard themselves by denying or discounting the importance of such experiences, which may unfortunately send signals that they do not have misgivings about being treated disrespectfully.

However, tolerance and little privileges render uncouth behaviour as normative and an integral constituent to the "everydayness" of sexual harassment. The Yugantar Education Society (2003) study describes this as a "slow poisoning process" which starts with staring, obscene body language and if not acted upon at that time, culminates into sexual favours and physical contact. The Saheli (1998) survey also confirms that sexual harassment continues because many times women find it difficult to take action due to job insecurity. Sakshi (2001) reiterates that women remain silent and refuse to report due to loss of reputation, stigma, and blame coming on the women themselves.

### 6.3 Exercising Agency to Reclaim Space

An inspiring aspect that emerged during the research is that women are also moving beyond the rhetoric of "victimisation" to exercise their agency. Of the 13 women interviewed, seven reported the incident(s) they experienced, either to their supervisor, or to HR department, or they managed to assert with the perpetrator himself to ensure that any untoward behaviour was not repeated. The brief narratives hereafter

describe the self-belief and tenacity of three respondents (all names have been changed).

Bhavna, a young 24-year-old had joined a private firm where the owner (who was 60 years old) started giving her undue attention. Initially, she was uncertain on how to react to advances by her superior. There was no one she could report to, as he was the head of the organisation. She withstood his behaviour for a few days, fearing that if she retaliated, she may lose her job. However, when he attempted to get physical with her, she reported the incident to the nearest police station and he was put in the lock-up. She did not take the easy path of quitting her job, nor did she remain quiet and accept being victimised.

Charu, a middle manager, was harassed by her superior. He would pass lewd and suggestive comments, ask her for undue favours, and often behave in an offensive manner. Despite confronting him on several occasions and expressing her annoyance, he continued to treat her disrespectfully. In response to her displeasure, he started pointing flaws in her work. Her colleagues cautioned her of facing dire consequences if she made a formal complaint as the supervisor was supposedly close to the senior management. Out of sheer desperation, she was driven to a point on one occasion when she hit him with her shoe in his office. This was the beginning of a long and arduous battle for Charu. She gave a written complaint against her superior. He in turn levied fictitious allegations against her, and before she could respond to the allegations, he got her transferred to a small town.

The problems got compounded when she had to lose her salary increment for two consecutive years, which affected her seniority, on account of the charges made against her. The severity of harassment was not confined to the workplace alone but also invaded her domestic space, when the police came to her home to question her family on their religion affiliations.

Despite experiencing setbacks in her professional and personal life, she mustered evidence from other women who had been harassed by this man. She finally managed to create so much pressure that he was compelled to give her a written apology.

Devina, a new entrant in a public enterprise, accompanied a senior manager on a business tour. After dinner, the manager invited her to his hotel room to "get to know each other and enjoy the evening." Devina was quite flabbergasted. This officer was held in high esteem and had a very good reputation in the organisation. On her return to office, she gave a written complaint to the HR department. However, there was pressure from the HR department, her colleagues, as well as her parents to withdraw her complaint. The reasons put forward were that first what he did "was not so serious," and second "he is a very senior and respectable officer." The officer himself tried to give a twist to the whole incident by claiming, "I was only testing you! I had no other intention." Even though the officer and his wife apologised and tried to persuade Devina to withdraw her complaint, she remained adamant. The manager who had bright career prospects in the organisation was transferred to an innocuous post and had to lose seniority.

These cases emphasise that despite facing humiliation, over 50% of respondents demonstrated perseverance to reclaim their space and their right to dignity.

#### 6.4 Social Support

Was it their inner strength that was the driving force or did respondents receive support from others that helped them to fight injustice? Social support is a catalyst that encourages a tormented woman to take action. Ghadially and Kumar (1988: 172) affirm that support is the “single most important source of help in mitigating the impact of highly stressful situations.” Chevalwala (2012) asserts that sexual harassment along with lack of support by peers and family can cause irreparable damage to an individual like prolonged depression and stress.

A significant factor was the support that respondents received from the husband, father, or a male colleague. Ironically, female colleagues or the mother of the respondent, expressed apprehension when the respondent sought to confront an abusive situation. In fact, female colleagues advised them against bringing these experiences in the open. Their concern for “getting a bad name” or a belief that “women have to accept this as reality” and “nothing will come out of complaining” were in sharp contrast to the support received from male colleagues. Respondents concede that their female colleagues were uncaring and distanced themselves from showing concern. They either doubted the respondent’s intention or undermined the intensity of the experience by remarking “he didn’t get physical with you! Why are you making such an issue of it?”

Female HR managers, who were interviewed, also seemed to have misgivings on the occurrence of sexual harassment and opined that “the law actually gives women an undue advantage.” On the one hand, women tend to tolerate and avoid confrontation even at the expense of their discomfort, while on the other end, as leaders, they want to be perceived as unbiased and not overly sensitive to the issues of women. It is ironical that when women are junior in hierarchy, they tend to be submissive; but at senior levels, when they have power, they seek to be neutral and distant to the concerns of other women.

#### 6.5 Organisational Support System

The data suggests a blend of organisational experiences ranging from an apparent unwillingness to render support to women employees to upholding the dignity of women as a priority.

In some organisations, even when there were systems in place, either due to a policy mandate or fear of law, organisations diluted these mechanisms. For instance, in a large public enterprise, the HR department reported that they put up posters on the notice boards to make women employees aware of organisational processes for dealing with sexual harassment. Interestingly, they confided that these posters were removed the same day because “if too many women become aware of the law pertaining to sexual harassment, they may take undue

advantage.” In other organisations, sexual harassment committees have been constituted, but in a perfunctory manner, essentially to fulfil the legal requirements.

In three cases, respondents acknowledged that more than the incident itself, dealing with the complaints mechanism was far more nerve-racking. Not only were respondents unaware of how the entire process worked, but also the legality and evidence-based justice system proved to be equally cumbersome. In one case, when the respondent reported the case to the HR department, the department filed a written complaint to the investigating committee without validating the details of the incident with her. Since the facts were not taken into account, the investigation got diluted and the matter was officially closed. This brings forth the disjuncture as it exists between an everyday form of harassment and role of such committees, which are based on scientific evidence (Sen 2010). This further compounds the invisibility of sexual harassment cases despite its rampant presence (Majumdar 2003; Oversier 2010).

There is a predisposition that even where the organisation takes action related to sexual harassment, it seems to be more of a face-saving exercise than a belief that the behaviour warrants strict action. The dilemma at organisational level was evident from reactions like “he was a good performer and the organisation stands to lose;” or “it was only one incident, it was really not so serious, but we had to terminate him as it may set a wrong precedent.” In a case where the perpetrator was a senior officer and perceived to be indispensable to the organisation, the action taken against him was so insignificant that it had little impact on the person concerned. A response of this nature fuels a belief that a senior male employee, who is also a high performer, is invulnerable to repercussions from misbehaviour towards women.

It is worth noting here that even in cases where stringent action was taken against the man, essentially to maintain the organisation’s reputation, there was a perceptible feeling of regret expressed by the concerned HR manager. The lament was that while it is very difficult to establish whether a woman was harassed in the absence of clear evidence, the company had to pay a huge price in losing a high performer. It seems evident that for such organisations the primary objective is to achieve results, while the concern for building work culture that upholds values of respect, dignity, and safety of employees, assumes far less significance.

The data suggests that in the event of being harassed, women usually reported the matter to their supervisors. In very few cases, respondents approached the HR department when either the supervisor himself was the perpetrator or when appropriate respite was not provided by the supervisor. The reason why these respondents did not approach the department was either because “HR is not accessible” or “I doubt whether I would get their support.” It is unfortunate that the HR department, which ought to be perceived as a support provider is approached only as a last resort for such serious issues.

Though the foregoing findings may offer a dismal picture regarding organisational practices, some of the organisations under review have developed proactive practices and had no

qualms in going an extra mile to create a safe work environment for women.

Hiring as well as promotion of women in a multinational corporation (MNC) is celebrated to ensure that they feel respected and welcomed within the organisation. The practice of assigning a “buddy” to fresh recruits was particularly effective for women. In the event of any female employee being harassed, she could reach out to the “Ombudsman,” who is mandated to investigate a complaint within a stipulated time frame and his/her decision is accepted as final.

The on-board training for all employees in another MNC includes an intensive module on the code of conduct, the meaning of workplace/extended workplace, and what constitutes harassment. These are made explicit through case studies and role plays to ensure that employees have clarity on behaviour for which there is zero tolerance. An internal complaints committee examines cases of sexual harassment of women. The committee is comprised of the HR department and line managers as its members, who are required to undergo training on their role and expectations of the committee. Reese and Lindenberg’s (2003) study on public sector organisations highlights that a good policy must be supported by training, to have the desired impact.

Taking cognisance of the importance of women’s safety and respect, a large private organisation was proactive in constituting committees at their corporate and regional offices much ahead of the act of 2013. Posters on what constitutes harassment are visible on noticeboards and workstations. Training is conducted for all employees, regardless of their positions to create awareness as well as to caution them that discrepant behaviour is unacceptable. Refresher courses on behaviour norms are conducted along with sending reminder emails and holding campaigns on a periodic basis. The importance of gender sensitivity is neither assumed nor is it believed that giving it emphasis only during induction would suffice.

The tone of discussion during the above-cited induction/training programmes is deliberately gender-neutral to avoid making employees unduly wary of working with the opposite sex. Elssesser and Peplau’s (2006) study on cross-sex friendship at work highlights that acute awareness of sexual harassment at workplace, policies, etc, impacts the relationship between colleagues, especially cross-sex friendship and how a glass partition can be harmful for women as they can lose friends, especially in a male-dominated workplace.

As mentioned earlier, harassment may be confined to a particular incident, but it leaves an enduring feeling of low self-worth. An MNC facilitates its women employees to alleviate their mental stress through a process of “healing.” The organisation does not restrict its responsibility to taking stringent action against the perpetrator of sexual harassment, but goes a step further in providing counselling support to help a woman to cope with the aftermath of the trauma she has undergone. They deploy senior women within the organisation as mentors to provide the necessary support.

Another organisation extends its concern to out of office premises by giving importance to the seating arrangements in

cabs that are provided to transport employees. It also ensures that a guard always accompanies female employees while they travel to and fro from work during late hours.

Apart from the positive practices discussed, some organisations also displayed scrupulous demeanour when they were confronted with cases of harassment. In a large consulting firm, a complaint is required to close within 15 days from the day it is filed. After thorough investigation of a case, the concerned perpetrator was fired from the organisation, despite him being a superior performer and perceived to be indispensable to the organisation. To quote the HR manager, “it was essential to fire such a leader because an organisation can claim credibility only if its leaders also have one.” This action by the organisation also sent a strong message to other employees on the possible outcome of transcending behaviour norms.

In a small private organisation, there was no written policy on sexual harassment but the guidelines were framed for individual cases. Based on the complaint by a woman employee, the HR manager asked the concerned man to apologise to the woman. He was further cautioned that if he tried to intimidate the woman for filing a complaint against him, “it would be considered as retaliation and he would have to face severe consequences.” They also sought affirmation from the woman if she was satisfied with the action taken or wanted a harsher recourse.

The law states that a written complaint must be filed by the applicant to proceed further with the case and that assistance can be rendered to the individual in filing the complaint. Many of the respondents preferred to communicate verbally and did not file written complaints to avoid getting enmeshed with the legal formalities. Chaudhuri (2008) reports that women feel a legal battle can get prolonged and messy. In the absence of a written document, it becomes a plea for many organisations not to take obligatory action. However, organisations that are committed to the cause of fair practices, devise innovative ways to deal with this issue. In one case, the HR manager recorded the written complaint for a women employee and emailed it to her to verify the facts and give her concurrence. By doing so, the organisation not only fulfilled the legal requirement of a written complaint but also gave necessary support to the employee, thereby alleviating her apprehensions and discomfort.

## 7 To Summarise

It was heartening to learn that many of the respondents were able to assert their rights and had the courage to withstand social pressure. Yet, women also question their own role when they are abused! Why do women hold themselves responsible when they are treated inappropriately? This reflects bleakly not only on our society that is embedded in patriarchy, but also on the education system. Though pedagogy is not within the scope of this article, yet it is worth commenting that our education, whether through family or institutions, enable women to develop skills and competence to be economically independent, but perhaps fails to empower and emancipate them. Women are capable and proficient to work outside the home, to

pursue various occupations, yet many are unable assert and to stand up for the wrongs being committed, more so when they are of a sexual nature.

A salient point is that all the respondents were educated, economically independent women, holding responsible roles in their respective organisations and perhaps also had alternative employment opportunities. Yet, they depend on men to support them when they are harassed by other men. Do they feel the need to seek the approval of men before asserting? Is it low confidence in oneself or is it because women look towards men for affirmation to express their rights? While it was reassuring to know that men were supportive of women during adverse times, yet some of the women respondents were unable to act on their accord or get succour from other women. Is it not natural for women to express solidarity with other women who have been wrongly treated? Do they believe they are protected from similar situations or is this a part of their conditioning where women carry the belief that they have limited choices in a male-dominated environment? The plausible reason can be attributed to girls imbibing a strong message to be tolerant and to accept male superiority.

Thus, even within the organisation, unfortunately, in place of supporting other women, women colleagues dissuade them from taking a justifiable stand. Closely related is the support rendered by the family and society. In most cases, family and colleagues perpetuate a feeling of helplessness by discouraging the woman to assert her right. Harassment is therefore not

only confined to the behaviour that women have to confront; it also relates to the isolation that society and family can thrust upon a woman. They make her feel that “a fuss” is uncalled for and it is best to endure and remain silent.

An area that causes concern is the insolent attitude of the aggressor in believing that the woman would not have the courage to report the case and second, even if she does, it would be difficult to “prove” it, as is mandated of the law. One respondent fittingly stated that “since childhood, men are made to feel superior within the family, and within workplaces these behaviours manifest in different ways.” This phenomenon is aptly articulated by V Geetha (2013: 16), who states that “silence is partly due to the sexual nature of violence, which women experience as shame, and partly due to the furtiveness the aggressor invests in his actions but which he displaces onto his victims.”

A woman prone to blaming herself or not reporting harassment is strongly associated to the aggressor believing that he can get away with committing such acts. Socialisation plays a key role in indoctrinating the response of men as well as women to such situations. The primary responsibility is therefore on parents to raise children with equality that inculcates respect for girls at the very outset. As part of their education, both boys and girls must also be aware of the laws and their rights. Silence for women is definitely not an option.

The commitment of the organisation in creating a safe and equitable workplace assumes importance. While women experience sexual harassment across different types of organisations,

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data suggests that MNCs are relatively more responsive to needs of women employees in contrast to public enterprises and small private companies. Organisations that have invested in developing ethical norms and people-oriented cultures have interrelated practices that permeate across organisational processes. It was observed that organisation that emphasise on gender diversity and ethical practices were equally focused on productivity and results. It is in the organisation's own interest to inculcate a strong work ethos where employees develop a sense of commitment to the organisation and are willing to go that extra mile. Only then can a true difference be made to the overall workplace environment.

While some organisations in our sample have indeed taken long strides in creating an equitable and secure workplace, there are many others who are yet to give this issue its due importance. While having a policy or committee in place is an initial and crucial step, it is far from sufficient. The findings underpin the facts that despite policies on sexual harassment,

inappropriate behaviour towards women employees at the workplace continues to prevail. A committed effort on the part of organisation is necessary, to ensure that policies are also implemented with the right spirit. Law and policies are universal in nature; but it is upon the organisation to improvise on them, depending on specific needs of their workplace.

Though gender sensitivity, socialisation, and zero tolerance towards any such acts should be long-term goals for any society, a difference can be made within an organisation, even though it functions in a social milieu that is embedded within patriarchy and deep-rooted prejudices. A respondent succinctly pointed out that "laws and policy implementation do help. But this is a myopic way to resolve the problem of harassment. Organisations should focus on gender diversity at a workplace not only in terms of increasing numbers of women but also ensuring that those numbers count!" A sincere effort needs to be made in overcoming stereotypes, narrow-mindedness, rhetoric and mere enactment of laws to implementing policies that protect women at the workplace.

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