

SEXUAL HARASSMENT OF WOMEN MANAGERS AT THE WORKPLACE: AN EXPERIENTIAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Sexual harassment of women is a complex issue that is an area of concern for individuals, organizations, and society. Research during the last two few decades suggests that women continue to be discriminated in various ways, within both the organized and unorganized sectors. In the Indian context, sexual harassment at workplace is viewed as a major obstacle. Despite the enactment of the Sexual Harassment at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act it is observed that organizations are not taking proactive measures to curb the hazard. A victim of sexual harassment also prefers not to make a formal complaint for fear of encountering various obstacles either due to social taboo or the long drawn legal processes. Perhaps there are a host of other reasons that deter women from making a formal complaint like, consequent hostile environment in the workplace, loss of job, loss of reputation or fear of retaliation in public places. 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.

This exploratory research attempts to understand the occurrence and dynamics of sexual harassment of women managers at the workplace. It seeks to explore how do women prevent /manage such behaviour being meted out to them. Despite the law, why do men often get away with committing such crimes? What kind of policies and processes do organisations have for protecting women from being sexually harmed? Is enactment of the Law adequate in safeguarding the interest and reputation of women employees?

The study used a blend of quantitative and qualitative methodology. To reach out to a larger data base of women, a brief questionnaire was prepared which included questions on: type of organisation, its policies related to sexual harassment, whether the respondent had experienced any form of sexual harassment, and if so, who was the perpetrator and what measures were taken to handle the experience. The questionnaire was emailed to approximately 800 women managers. 200 complete questionnaires were received from managers employed across private corporate houses, multinational companies, public enterprises, publishing houses, design houses and the media. They were mainly junior and middle level managers located in different cities across India.

42 per cent of the respondents reported that they were aware of incidence of sexual harassment at their workplace and 15 per cent (N=30) of respondents acknowledged that they had experienced some form of harassment at workplace. Of the 30 respondents, 80 per cent reported that the harassment was behavioral, 63 per cent said it was verbal and 13 per cent reported that it was physical. This group of respondents was personally contacted through phone and emails, requesting them for a personal interview with an assurance of confidentiality. An analysis of the qualitative data based on personal experiences of thirteen respondents offers valuable insights on the nuances of sexual harassment. The purpose of analysis is not only to make generalizations but to also 'listen' and recognize the uniqueness of each experience as it unfolds.

In-depth interviews were also conducted with twelve HR heads representing multinational companies, private organisations and public enterprises to understand what measures they adopt to inhibit / deal with sexual harassment of women.

The experiences of respondents are a testimony that sexual harassment at workplace poses a serious challenge for assimilating women in organisations. Through brief case studies, the paper elucidates the courage amongst some of the respondents to report the matter to the concerned authority when faced with abject experiences. Ironically, for many others quiet acceptance seemed to be a "safe option".

However, regardless of their response to the situation, respondents conceded to their feelings of guilt and the gnawing thought of “did I play a role in allowing this man to take liberty with ME?” Women tend to hold themselves responsible even when they are mistreated by men, at least in their thought process.

For most of the respondents, family members and colleagues perpetuated the feeling of helplessness by discouraging them from asserting their rights. Harassment is therefore not confined to the behaviour which makes women uncomfortable; it also relates to the isolation that society and family thrusts upon a woman. They make her feel that such a fuss is uncalled for and it is best to remain silent and “accept that is the price you pay for working outside the home”. This is perhaps a reflection of the Indian society that is embedded in patriarchy where women are suppressed and find it a challenge to exercise autonomy.

An equally important issue is the insolent attitude of the aggressor. The findings advocate that the concerned person feels he is immune to any consequences, firstly because he believes that the woman would not have the courage to report the case and secondly, even if she does, it would be difficult to ‘prove’ it, as is mandated of the law. Silence from the woman, imbues a confidence in the aggressor that culminates in a triumphant assertion of authority.

The paper emphasises that despite repeated occurrence of verbal and behavioural harassment, at workplaces, it is often not recognized as harassment and even the individual herself may not term it so. It occurs in such a ‘normal’ fashion, that women are usually at a loss on how to react to the situation to avoid making it look “out of place”. The findings also reveal that stereotypes dominate the perception that “certain types of women” who dress in an unconventional manner or those who consume alcohol or smoke are more susceptible to harassment. Also single and separated women are seemingly more vulnerable and perceived to be “easy prey”.

The discussion veered on the disposition of perpetrators of sexual harassment. The experience of respondents and heads of HR indicate that typically married men, those at senior position and mostly high performers were more inclined to exhibit such behaviour. The experience of respondents suggests there is a belief amongst the above categories of men that the organisation would not take adverse action against them. 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? No one will believe you!” or “remember I am the one who will be doing your appraisal”

As per the Vishakha Guidelines, organisations are mandated to provide a safe and secure work environment for its women employees. However the law does not seem to discourage male employees from committing such heinous crimes. Most organisations under review claimed to have policies, complaint mechanisms and training programs pertaining to sexual harassment, however formulation of laws and constituting committees to examine violation of the law is an initial and crucial step, yet they were found to be far from sufficient. In cases where respondents had lodged formal complaints against male superiors the organisation either took no action against the offender or it was so insignificant that it had little impact on the person concerned. Perpetrators in these circumstances were good performers or much higher in hierarchy and perceived to be indispensable to the organization. A response of this nature fuels a belief that a senior male employee, who is also a superior 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 culprit, essentially to maintain the organisation’s reputation; there was a perceptible feeling of regret expressed by the concerned HR personnel. 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. In particular for women who are new to the organisation or junior in hierarchy, such environments create feelings of helplessness and frustration. This is further heightened because women get little or no support or empathy from other women in the organisation.

The paper also draws attention to practices instituted by some organisations that are innovative and gender sensitive. These organisations have invested in developing people-oriented practices that permeate organisational processes while remaining focussed on productivity and results.

Though gender sensitivity, socialization and zero tolerance towards any such acts should be long term goals for any society, a difference can be made within an organization, even though it functions in a social milieu that is embedded within patriarchy and deep rooted prejudices. A sincere effort has to be made by going beyond stereotypes, narrow mindedness and mere enactment of laws. Only then can a true difference be brought in the overall workplace environment.