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Workplace Harassment and Coping Strategies among Women Employees

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Abstract

Workplace harassment is a pervasive global problem that disproportionately affects women employees and undermines their health, dignity, and careers. Recent meta-analyses estimate that around one in four women worldwide experience workplace sexual violence, with even higher prevalence in some regions. Harassment ranges from overt sexual coercion and unwanted touching to subtle gender-based hostility, bullying and psychological abuse. Women frequently underreport incidents due to fear of retaliation, victim-blaming, organisational inaction and structural power imbalances. This paper synthesises sociological and psychological research on workplace harassment against women and examines the coping strategies they adopt, including avoidance, silence, seeking social support, confronting perpetrators, formal reporting, and resilience-based approaches. It argues that coping is not merely an individual psychological process but deeply shaped by organisational climate, legal frameworks, gender norms and intersectional inequalities. The paper concludes that while individual coping can mitigate harm, sustainable change requires organisational and policy interventions that prevent harassment, protect complainants, and redistribute power in the workplace.

Keywords: workplace harassment; sexual harassment; women employees; coping strategies; organisational climate; gender-based violence.

1. Introduction

Workplace harassment has emerged as a central concern in debates on gender equality, labour rights and occupational health. Harassment includes sexual harassment, bullying, psychological abuse and other forms of gender-based violence that create a hostile, intimidating or humiliating work environment (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2019; Maran et al., 2022). Women are disproportionately targeted due to gendered power relations, occupational segregation and widespread sexism (Willness et al., 2007; Debnath et al., 2025).

A recent systematic review of workplace sexual violence among women, drawing on 129 studies with over 330,000 participants, estimated a pooled prevalence of 26%, with higher rates in male-dominated workplaces and in regions of Africa and Asia (Debnath et al., 2025). In India, a policy brief based on a LinkedIn survey of women in corporate firms reported that nearly 70% had experienced at least one form of workplace harassment in the previous year, ranging from sexist hostility to unwanted sexual attention and criminalised acts such as unwelcome touching (G²LM|LIC, 2025).

Against this backdrop, women employees must navigate daily decisions about whether and how to respond to harassment. Coping strategies are central to understanding both immediate well-being and longer-term career trajectories. Yet research shows that the burden of coping is often shifted onto individual women,

while organisations and legal systems fail to provide adequate protection (Shannon et al., 2007; Mirhosseini, 2023).

This paper synthesises the literature on workplace harassment and women's coping strategies with three aims:

1. To outline the forms, prevalence and impacts of workplace harassment faced by women employees.
2. To analyse the range of coping strategies women adopt and the factors shaping these choices.
3. To situate coping within broader organisational and socio-legal frameworks, highlighting implications for policy and practice.

2. Conceptualising Workplace Harassment

2.1 Definitions and Forms

The ILO's Violence and Harassment Convention (C190) defines violence and harassment in the world of work as behaviours, practices or threats that aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm (ILO, 2019). It explicitly recognises gender-based violence and harassment as forms rooted in gender norms and inequalities (ILO, 2020).

Sexual harassment is commonly defined as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that explicitly or implicitly affects a person's employment, interferes with work performance or creates a hostile environment (Maran et al., 2022; ILO, 2018). Scholars often distinguish between quid pro quo harassment (linking sexual compliance to job benefits or threats) and hostile environment harassment (pervasive unwanted behaviours, comments or imagery) (Bauerle, 2010; Willness et al., 2007).

However, women's experiences extend beyond sexual acts. Research on workplace bullying and gender harassment documents patterns of persistent ridicule, exclusion, excessive criticism, and undermining that may not be overtly sexual but are gendered in their targets and effects (Gattis, 2019; Karami et al., 2019; Baghestani, 2024). These forms of harassment often operate in subtle, "normalized" ways, making them harder to name and challenge.

2.2 Gender, Power and Organisational Climate

Harassment is strongly patterned by power relations. It is more common in male-dominated occupations, hierarchical workplaces and contexts where women occupy subordinate positions or non-traditional roles (Willness et al., 2007; Bauerle, 2010). A meta-analysis of 41 studies found that organisational climate—particularly tolerance or discouragement of harassment—was a key predictor of incidence and severity (Willness et al., 2007).

Bowling and Beehr's (2006) theoretical model of workplace harassment emphasises that harassment is embedded in organisational structures and norms, not just individual pathology. Similarly, feminist analyses highlight how harassment polices gender boundaries, punishes women who transgress traditional roles, and reinforces male dominance in high-status occupations (Berdahl, 2007; Karami et al., 2019).

3. Prevalence and Impacts of Workplace Harassment among Women

3.1 Global and Regional Patterns

Debnath et al.'s (2025) meta-analysis found that globally 26% of women reported workplace sexual violence, with higher pooled prevalence in Africa (38%) and Asia (30%). Studies in specific sectors such as hospitality, healthcare and academia often report even higher rates due to customer-facing roles, client dependency and hierarchical cultures (Worke et al., 2021; Mirhosseini, 2023; Marsh et al., 2009).

In India, data from corporate and organised sectors indicate widespread harassment. The LinkedIn survey cited above found that around 60% of respondents reported sexist hostility and 44% unwanted sexual attention; many also described criminalised acts such as groping and indecent exposure, yet a large proportion did not formally report their experiences (G²LM|LIC, 2025). Case studies of Delhi/NCR workplaces similarly highlight significant underreporting and uneven implementation of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (Bala, 2015).

3.2 Psychological, Physical and Career Consequences

A landmark meta-analysis by Willness et al. (2007) showed that workplace sexual harassment is associated with reduced job satisfaction, lower organisational commitment, increased withdrawal behaviours (absenteeism, turnover intentions), poorer mental and physical health, and even symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Later reviews and empirical studies confirm these patterns across contexts (Maran et al., 2022; Shannon et al., 2007; Ahmed, 2025).

Women who experience harassment report elevated anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and somatic complaints; some studies link chronic exposure to hypertension and other stress-related conditions (Maran et al., 2022; Long-Term Impacts Study, 2024). Job-related consequences include diminished performance, stalled promotion, loss of professional confidence, and in some cases, exit from the organisation or occupation (Willness et al., 2007; Shannon et al., 2007).

Recent work suggests that harassment also has "spillover" effects on women's broader life trajectories—affecting financial security, family life and willingness to pursue leadership roles—thereby reinforcing gender inequalities in employment and income (Debnath et al., 2025; Worke et al., 2023).

4. Coping Strategies among Women Employees

Coping refers to cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific demands appraised as taxing or exceeding one's resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Studies of women facing workplace harassment have documented a range of coping strategies that can be grouped into avoidance/denial, emotion-focused coping, problem-focused or active coping, and collective/structural strategies (Shannon et al., 2007; Worke et al., 2021; Masood et al., 2021; Mirhosseini, 2023).

4.1 Avoidance, Silence and Minimisation

Many women respond initially with passive or avoidance strategies: ignoring comments, laughing them off, changing routes or schedules to avoid perpetrators, or leaving certain tasks and spaces to minimise contact (Masood et al., 2021; Gilani & Waqar, 2018; Mirhosseini, 2023).

Masood et al. (2021), in a study of women employees in universities, banks and NGOs in Quetta, found that avoiding the harasser, ignoring incidents, and staying silent were among the most commonly reported coping strategies. Similarly, Gilani and Waqar (2018) reported that domestic workers frequently used internal-focused coping (normalising the behaviour, "keeping it to themselves") rather than external-focused actions such as lodging complaints.

Avoidance may temporarily reduce immediate risk but can also reinforce impunity and contribute to internalised blame or shame. Women often fear that speaking up will lead to retaliation, victim-blaming, social stigma or loss of employment, especially when perpetrators are supervisors or powerful colleagues (Shannon et al., 2007; Bala, 2015; Mirhosseini, 2023).

4.2 Emotion-Focused Coping

Emotion-focused strategies include cognitive reappraisal, seeking spiritual comfort, distraction, and managing feelings through self-care activities (Coping Mechanisms study, 2021; Gattis, 2019). In

qualitative interviews, women describe drawing strength from family support, religious beliefs, or personal values to preserve self-esteem in the face of degrading treatment (Gattis, 2019; Mirhosseini, 2023).

While emotion-focused coping can buffer psychological harm, it may also shift attention away from challenging the structural conditions that enable harassment. The balance between self-protection and resistance is often fraught, particularly in contexts where economic dependence on the job is high.

4.3 Seeking Social Support

Social support is consistently identified as a key coping resource. Targets of harassment confide in colleagues, friends, family members and, more rarely, counsellors or mental health professionals (Shannon et al., 2007; Vivarelli, 2025; Worke et al., 2021).

Shannon et al. (2007) found that women experiencing harassment were more likely than men to seek emotional and instrumental support, but also faced barriers in accessing professional services. A recent study on workplace harassment and coping patterns reported that women showed higher use of "seeking social support" strategies than men, and that social support moderated some negative mental health outcomes (Vivarelli, 2025).

However, the quality of social support matters. When coworkers trivialise experiences or advise silence "for your own good," social networks may inadvertently discourage formal reporting and reinforce organisational denial (Karami et al., 2019; Mirhosseini, 2023).

4.4 Confrontation, Resistance and Reporting

Some women adopt more active coping strategies: directly confronting the harasser, clearly stating boundaries, documenting incidents, and using formal complaint mechanisms (Worke et al., 2021; Mirhosseini, 2023; Masood et al., 2021). In the Ethiopian hospitality sector, Worke et al. (2021) found that women's coping strategies included verbal confrontation, seeking help from colleagues or supervisors, and, in some cases, quitting the job. Yet many participants described significant barriers to active coping, including fear of job loss, lack of trust in management, and normalisation of harassment by customers and supervisors.

Mirhosseini's (2023) study of women in Iranian hospitals similarly reported that formal complaints were rare; women often anticipated that official action would lead to reputation damage, further victimisation, or no meaningful change. The study concludes that robust organisational support—clear policies, responsive managers, non-retaliation guarantees—is crucial to empowering women to use active coping strategies.

4.5 Resilience and Meaning-Making

An emerging body of work emphasises resilience as a coping resource. Gattis (2019) explored how professional women experiencing workplace bullying used resilience—framed as self-efficacy, optimism and meaning-making—to manage stress and maintain well-being. Participants described consciously reframing experiences, building external networks, investing in career development, and in some cases, planning strategic exits from toxic workplaces.

While resilience can be empowering, critics warn that an excessive focus on individual resilience risks shifting responsibility onto targets and obscuring organisational accountability (Kim et al., 2022; Gattis, 2019). Resilience-based coping may mitigate harm but cannot substitute for structural change.

5. Factors Shaping Coping Strategies

5.1 Organisational Climate and Support

Organisational climate is one of the strongest determinants of how women cope with harassment. When workplaces have clear policies, accessible complaint procedures, supportive leadership and visible consequences for perpetrators, women are more likely to confront harassment and use formal channels (Willness et al., 2007; ILO, 2018; Jenner, 2022).

Conversely, in climates that normalise sexism, protect powerful perpetrators, or retaliate against complainants, women often conclude that confrontation is too risky and instead adopt avoidance or exit strategies (Shannon et al., 2007; Bala, 2015; Mirhosseini, 2023). Mirhosseini (2023) argues that both formal support (policies, complaint systems, legal protections) and informal support (collegial solidarity, empathetic supervisors) are crucial in enabling women to resist harassment and report misconduct.

Recent work in organisational psychology highlights the concept of "institutional courage"—organisational practices that actively protect complainants and take responsibility for addressing harm—as a buffer against institutional betrayal in harassment cases (Smidt et al., 2023; Jung & Yoon, 2020).

5.2 Legal Frameworks and Policy Implementation

Internationally, the adoption of ILO Convention 190 and Recommendation 206 signals a growing consensus that everyone has a right to a world of work free from violence and harassment (ILO, 2019, 2020). National laws, such as India's 2013 POSH Act, set minimum standards by requiring internal complaints committees, prevention training and remedies for victims (ILO, 2018; Bala, 2015).

However, research shows that legal frameworks often suffer from weak implementation. Bala's (2015) study of Delhi/NCR organisations found that while many employers were aware of the law, a significant share had not effectively constituted internal committees or publicised procedures. Similarly, comparative policy analyses across more than 190 countries indicate large gaps between legal provisions and workplace practice (Heymann et al., 2022).

Where legal protections are poorly enforced, women perceive formal reporting as unlikely to lead to justice, steering them towards more cautious coping strategies, including silence or resignation.

5.3 Gender Norms, Intersectionality and Power

Coping strategies are also shaped by broader gender norms and intersectional inequalities. In contexts where women are socialised to prioritise harmony, modesty and family honour, speaking out about harassment can be framed as "creating trouble" or tarnishing reputations (Gilani & Waqar, 2018; Mirhosseini, 2023). Married women or those from conservative backgrounds may face stronger pressures to endure harassment quietly to protect their family or community standing.

Class, caste, race, migration status and contract type further shape vulnerability and coping options. Domestic workers, hospitality employees and informal workers often lack secure contracts, union representation or access to legal recourse, limiting their ability to confront perpetrators (Gilani & Waqar, 2018; Worke et al., 2021; Debnath et al., 2025). Intersectional analyses emphasise that coping is constrained not only by individual psychology but also by material precarity and structural marginalisation.

6. From Individual Coping to Collective and Structural Responses

While individual coping strategies are crucial for immediate survival and well-being, they cannot, by themselves, eliminate workplace harassment. Scholars and practitioners increasingly argue for multi-level

interventions that redistribute responsibility from individual women to organisations and the state (ILO, 2019; Jenner, 2022; Maran et al., 2022).

6.1 Organisational Interventions

Research on prevention and response emphasises the following elements:

- Clear, well-communicated policies that define harassment broadly (including gender harassment and bullying), outline reporting pathways, and specify protections against retaliation (ILO, 2018; Workplace Harassment Policy Guide, 2025).
- Independent, gender-sensitive complaints mechanisms, such as internal committees with trained members, external experts, and survivor-centric procedures (Bala, 2015; Jenner, 2022).
- Training and culture change, focusing not only on legal compliance but on bystander intervention, respectful communication, and leadership accountability (ILO, 2019; Jenner, 2022).
- Data collection and transparency, including regular monitoring of complaints, outcomes and climate surveys to identify patterns and address systemic issues (Nath & Ranga, 2025).

Studies show that when organisations demonstrate "zero tolerance" in practice—by acting swiftly on complaints, sanctioning perpetrators, and supporting victims—women are more likely to report and to use problem-focused coping strategies (Willness et al., 2007; Maran et al., 2022).

6.2 Collective Action and Union/Professional Support

Collective actors such as trade unions, professional associations and women's networks can provide crucial support. In some sectors, unions have negotiated anti-harassment clauses in collective agreements, established independent reporting mechanisms, and offered legal aid to members (ILO, 2019; Bectu survey, 2025).

Surveys of women in creative industries, for example, show high levels of bullying and harassment but also increased awareness of industry-wide initiatives such as independent standards authorities and anonymous reporting systems (Bectu, 2025). Such collective mechanisms can supplement individual coping by shifting harassment from a "personal problem" to a shared labour and rights issue.

6.3 Mental Health and Restorative Supports

Finally, addressing the psychological toll of harassment requires integrating mental health support into workplace responses. Studies highlight the value of confidential counselling, peer support groups, and trauma-informed approaches in helping women process experiences and rebuild confidence (Maran et al., 2022; Vivarelli, 2025).

Restorative or transformative justice approaches—where appropriate and desired by survivors—can also play a role in addressing harm, provided they are not used to avoid accountability or pressure women into forgiveness (Jenner, 2022).

7. Conclusion

Workplace harassment against women is a widespread and deeply entrenched problem that reflects and reinforces broader gender inequalities. Evidence from meta-analyses and sectoral studies shows that a substantial share of women experience some form of sexual or gender-based harassment at work, with serious consequences for mental health, physical well-being, job satisfaction and career progression (Willness et al., 2007; Debnath et al., 2025; Maran et al., 2022).

Women employees are not passive victims: they deploy a wide repertoire of coping strategies—avoidance, silence, emotional regulation, seeking social support, confrontation, reporting, and resilience-building—to navigate unsafe environments (Shannon et al., 2007; Worke et al., 2021; Masood et al., 2021; Gattis,

2019). However, these strategies are constrained by organisational climates, legal frameworks, cultural norms and intersectional power relations. Often, the cost of speaking out remains unacceptably high, pushing women towards self-protective but system-sustaining forms of coping.

From a sociological perspective, coping must therefore be understood not as a purely individual response but as a relational and structural phenomenon. Sustainable change requires shifting responsibility from individual women to employers, institutions and states through robust laws, genuinely enforced policies, supportive organisational cultures and collective action. Only when workplaces actively prevent harassment, protect complainants, and hold perpetrators accountable will women's coping strategies move from survival to empowerment.

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