

Women Sexual Harassment at Workplace: A Case Study in Shimla District

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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment at the workplace is not only a violation of women's rights but also a serious challenge to their protection, dignity and growth in the professional sphere. In spite of the legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms, many women continue to face harassment in both formal and informal sectors. This study aimed to examine the socio-economic profile of working women in Shimla, their awareness of safety provisions, sexual harassment and strategies to improve security. A descriptive and analytical approach was adopted, using a mixed-methods design with primary data collected from 100 women employees through schedules and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), complemented by secondary sources. Results showed that majority were postgraduates and economic independence was the primary motivation for working. Only 17% fully understood sexual harassment and 35% of women experienced sexual harassment at the workplace. Awareness of Internal Complaint Committees was moderate but visibility of ICC composition was low. The study concludes that empowering women through awareness, training, policy enforcement and positive workplace culture is essential for safety, equality and confidence.

KEY WORDS: Women, Sexual Harassment, Awareness, Workplace safety

INTRODUCTION

Women have long been subjected to sexual harassment and assault. Over the years, numerous incidents of rape, abuse and violence have taken place. Some are formally reported, while others remain confined to private conversations. Vasundhara Prasad rightly states that 'secrecy is an ally of sexual violence.' Often, women remain silent about their suffering, sometimes due to pressure from others (Prasad, 2018; Shilwant, 2019).

Rape and sexual assault are the most visible and widely acknowledged manifestations of gender-based violence. In the present global context, sexual harassment has emerged as a pervasive issue that transcends boundaries and cultures. It is now a reality in workplaces across the world (Gupta, 2014).

A survey conducted by the Indian National Bar Association revealed that almost 70% of employed women have faced some form of sexual harassment in their workplace, but most did not file formal complaints (Indian National Bar Association, 2017). Similarly, the International Labour Organization (2022) estimates that more than one in three women globally experience workplace harassment during their careers.

India's legal system first formally defined 'sexual harassment' in 1997 through the Supreme Court ruling in Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan. The Supreme Court in Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan (1997) held that

sexual harassment violates women's fundamental rights under Articles 14, 19, and 21. This led to key legislations including the 2013 Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act and the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, which introduced Section 354A IPC with penalties up to three years' imprisonment. Despite these safeguards, harassment continues to harm women and society (Vishaka & Ors. vs. State of Rajasthan & Ors., 1997; Agrawat, 2023).

Over the past few decades, incidents of sexual harassment and gender discrimination have been increasingly documented across multiple professions. Sexual harassment at the workplace is defined by persistent and unwelcome sexual conduct which may take verbal, physical, psychological or visual forms. Such actions often include insults or threats which harm the dignity and wellbeing of those affected (Maghraby, 2020).

The repercussions of such experiences are often profound leading to physical, psychological and emotional harm along with adverse effects in the workplace. These may include employee resignations, persistent absenteeism, strained interpersonal relations, counterproductive behaviors and noticeable reductions in energy, efficiency, creativity and job satisfaction (Zeighami, 2023).

The International Labor Organization defines sexual harassment of women as repeated, unwelcome and imposed conduct that harms the victim's wellbeing (Cockburn, 2012). Such harassment may take different forms, including unwanted physical contact like groping, intrusive staring, offensive remarks or jokes about a woman's body, clothing, or reproductive organs, the use of sexually suggestive language concerning her private life, derogatory comments about sexual orientation, or exposure to pornographic material and sexual acts (Chappell & Di Martino, 2006).

Workplace sexual harassment is a common problem that harms both job satisfaction and mental health. Victims often face a greater risk of anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder and even suicidal thoughts (Rugulies et al., 2020).

Thus, workplace sexual harassment is not only a legal and public concern but also a serious psychological, human right and public health issue which continues to challenge both India and the world. This study emphasizes on understanding the profile and workplace experiences of women, their awareness of safety provisions and sexual harassment and explores measures to improve their safety and security at the workplace.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To study the socio-economic profile of working women at the workplace and their experiences at the workplace.
- To study the awareness of working women about safety provisions at workplace and understanding of sexual harassment.
- To identify ways can help improve women's safety and security and find solutions to the problems they face in the workplace.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Although many women continue to experience discrimination and gender bias, recent decades have witnessed a significant rise in their achievements across fields such as politics, technology and business. Society's perception of women has gradually shifted with increasing participation as lawyers, doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers, managers and officers. Yet, working women still encounter challenges rooted in their gender. For centuries, women have endured physical, sexual and psychological

exploitation and even today they face numerous obstacles both at home and in the workplace. In light of these realities, the present study seeks to identify the factors contributing to unsafe work environments and to suggest strategies that can ensure safety and security for women at work.

METHODOLOGY

The present study aims to assess the awareness level regarding the prevention of sexual harassment of women at the workplace, with a specific focus on Shimla city, the capital of Himachal Pradesh. Shimla was selected as the study area because it hosts numerous government offices, academic institutions, hospitals and commercial organizations, offering significant employment opportunities for women. This makes it a suitable site to analyze workplace safety and awareness regarding sexual harassment prevention. The study is descriptive and analytical in nature. The scope of the study is limited to urban, white-collar women employees who have been in their jobs for at least six months. It aims to analyze their perceptions of sexual harassment at the workplace, the precipitating factors behind such incidents and their experiences in different professional sectors such as government offices, schools, colleges, banks, hospitals and commercial organizations. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach to data collection. Primary data was collected from 100 working women employed in the organized sector of Shimla city. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and schedules consisting of open and close ended questions were used to gather qualitative and quantitative insights. Data collection was conducted over a three-month period, from August 2024 to September 2024. Both primary and secondary sources of data were utilized. Primary data was obtained directly from respondents through schedules and FGDs, while secondary data was drawn from published and unpublished materials such as books, reports, journals, periodicals and relevant online sources.

RESULTS

The study presents the socio-demographic profile of respondents. A majority of them (65%) belonged to the age group of 25–35 years, indicating that majority women were in the early to mid-career stage. More than half of the respondents (55%) were married and in terms of educational background, the majority women were postgraduates. Majority of the women belonged to the Hindu religion (97%) and (60%) were from the General category. With regard to employment, 74% were working on a permanent basis. The primary motivation for working was reported as economic independence (53%). In terms of job selection attributes, most of the respondents (48%) had opted this job for financial independence. Regarding annual income, most of the respondents (40%) of respondents had 2-4 lakh per annum income from their job and few of respondents (14%) had above 6 lakh per annum income as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Socio-economic Background of Respondents

Aspect/Response	Frequency	Percentage
Age (in Years)		
Below 25	7	7.0
25–35	65	65.0
35–45	9	9.0
Above 45	19	19.0
Marital Status		

Married	55	55.0
Unmarried	45	45.0
Educational Status		
High School	2	2.0
Graduate	39	39.0
Postgraduate and Above	59	59.0
Religion		
Hindu	97	97.0
Muslim	2	2.0
Christian	1	1.0
Caste		
General	60	60.0
Scheduled Castes	20	20.0
Scheduled Tribes	12	12.0
Nature of Job		
Permanent	74	74.0
Temporary	26	26.0
Annual Income (₹)		
Below 2 Lakh	26	26.0
2–4 Lakh	40	40.0
4–6 Lakh	20	20.0
Above 6 Lakh	14	14.0
Reason for Working		
Necessity	9	9.0
Economic Independence	53	53.0
Personal Development	27	27.0
Miscellaneous	11	11.0
Job Selection Attributes		
Money	22	22.0
Status	48	48.0
Workplace Proximity	2	2.0
Economic Empowerment	28	28.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 2 show the perception of working women regarding equality and sexual harassment at workplace, it was found that less than half (45%) of the respondents were treated as equal with male at workplace. However, (35%) of the respondents were not treated as equal with male at workplace and (20%) of the respondents had no opinion whether they were treated as equal with male or not at workplace. Thus, it is clear from the analysis that women were not treated as equal at work place it may be because of the fact that gender discrimination that is in the society is also there in workplace and is affecting equal treatment of women at workplace.

In terms of women understanding by sexual harassment, it was found that only (17%) respondents

were aware about all dimensions of sexual harassment & right definition of Sexual Harassment while majority of the respondents were not exactly aware about correct definition of sexual harassment. Regarding perceptions about which women can face sexual harassment. Most respondents (40%) believe physical attributes make women vulnerable, (28%) think young women are more at risk and (10%) link it to beauty. However, (13%) recognize that all women, regardless of looks or age, can be harassed, while (9%) had no opinion. The study shows that harassment is not limited to specific traits but can affect women broadly. The main reasons given for sexual harassment in society are women’s defensive approach (40%), cases going unreported (27%), lack of awareness about laws (21%) and the mindset of society (12%). This shows silence, low awareness and social attitudes allow harassment to continue.

Table 2: Perceptions on Equality and Sexual Harassment

Aspect/ Response	Frequency	Percentage
Treated as Equal		
Yes	45	45.00
No	35	35.00
No Opinion	20	20.00
What do you understand by sexual harassment?		
Physical contact and advantages	60	60.00
Soliciting or requesting sexual favor	5	5.00
Sexual Colored Remark	4	4.00
Displaying pornography content	8	8.00
Unwelcome sexual conduct (physical, verbal, or non-verbal)	6	6.00
All of the Above	17	17.00
In your opinion which women can be sexually harassed?		
Physical attributes	40	40.00
Young	28	28.00
Beautiful	10	10.00
All of the above	13	13.00
No opinion	9	9.00
Reason for existence of sexual harassment in the society		
It goes unreported	27	27.00
Lack of awareness about preventive laws	21	21.00
Mindset of society	12	12.00
Defensive approach of women	40	40.00
Total	100	100.0

Table 3 reveals that a majority of respondents (57%) are aware of the existence of an Internal Complaint Committee in their organization, whereas 30% are not aware and (13%) expressed no opinion. The study shows that although more than half of the respondents have knowledge about the committee, there is still a considerable section lacking awareness. Further, when asked whether the composition of the ICC is displayed prominently in the organization, only (32%) confirmed its display, whereas (68%) stated it

was not displayed. This shows a lack of visibility and transparency regarding the ICC, which may discourage employees from approaching it in cases of sexual harassment.

Table 3: Awareness and Visibility of Internal Complaint Committee (ICC)

Aspect/Response	Frequency	Percentage
Awareness of ICC existence		
Yes	57	57.00
No	30	30.00
No opinion	13	13.00
ICC composition displayed prominently		
Yes	32	32.00
No	68	68.00
Total	100	100.0

Table 4 presents the respondents’ experiences of sexual harassment and their perception of safety in the workplace. The findings reveal that (35%) of respondents had faced sexual harassment by male colleagues at workplace. On the other hand female sometimes hesitate to admit that they are sexually harassed due to defensive approach. This study shows that more than one-third of employees have been subjected to harassment. Regarding the feeling of safety at the workplace, 60% of respondents felt safe to some extent, (30%) felt safe to a large extent and (10%) reported not feeling safe at all. Thus majority (60 %) of the respondents had feeling that they were safe at their workplace to some extent only. Thus, security to large extent is comparatively low among women at workplace this can affect their working capability.

Table4: Experiences of Harassment and Workplace Safety

Aspect/Response	Frequency	Percentage
Faced Sexual Harassment		
Yes	35	35.00
No	65	65.00
Feeling of Safety at Work Place		
To Large extent	30	30
To Some extent	60	60
Not Any extent	10	10
Total	100	100.0

Table 5 shows the measures suggested by respondents to prevent sexual harassment. The majority (49%) emphasized a positive attitude and mindset as the most important step. (20%) suggested setting up an Internal Complaint Committee, (12%) recommended women be more assertive, (10%) wanted stricter laws and (9%) mentioned proper socialization. Overall, respondents feel that changing attitudes along with formal mechanisms is a key to reducing harassment in the workplace.

Table 5: What Measures you suggest to check this problem?

Aspect/Response	Frequency	Percentage
Law should be more stringent	10	10.00
Women should be offensive in approach	12	12.00
Setting up of Internal Complaint committee	20	20.00
Proper socialization	9	9.00
Positive attitude & mindset	49	49.00
Total	100	100.0

SUGGESTIONS

These interventions regarding women Safety and Security at workplace

- Educate all employees (men and women) about acceptable and unacceptable workplace b Provide training to employees on reporting and responding to harassment, including interventions to support colleagues
- Conduct regular workshops, orientation programs and gender-sensitization sessions.
- Encourage women to speak up confidently if they face harassment.
- Enforce a strict sexual harassment policy and treat violations as misconduct.
- Establish an Internal Complaint Committee (ICC) in every organization as per law, with names and contact details displayed prominently.
- Ensure speedy, confidential redressal of complaints and strict disciplinary action against violators.
- Create Women’s Cells or Support Forums to help women employees.
- Install CCTV cameras at entry/exit points and common areas without violating privacy.
- Use SMS alerts, mobile safety apps and helpline numbers at the workplace.
- Ensure safe working conditions and workplace monitoring systems.
- Organize self-defense classes and awareness on preventive measures.
- Motivate women to adopt a bold and assertive approach in case of harassment.
- Promote socialization and a respectful work culture among men and women.
- Build a positive attitude and mindset to prevent harassment through collective responsibility.
- Employers must prioritize safety along with productivity.
- Document every harassment case for future reference.

CONCLUSION

Sexual harassment of women is an aberration that exists in every nation and remains widely rampant in our country. With the rapid shift in women’s roles from housekeeping to the professional world, the need for safe workplaces and strong laws has become more urgent, as offences such as unwelcome sexual advances are increasing. Although women are now entering every profession and achieving success in politics, technology and business, many still face discrimination, gender bias and harassment. This not only harms their confidence and health but also discourages others from joining the workforce. Silence, lack of awareness and rigid social attitudes often allow harassment to persist. The constitutional promise of equality between men and women should go beyond words and be actively implemented in practice. The constitutional promise of equality between men and women should go beyond words and be actively implemented in practice. No law will be effective until men learn to recognize and respect

the basic dignity of women. Creating awareness, enforcing strong policies, establishing visible complaint mechanisms, providing training and encouraging women to speak up are essential steps toward change. Every woman has the right to work with respect, confidence and peace. Therefore, building a safe, supportive, and respectful environment at workplaces is not only a legal duty but also a moral and social necessity for true equality and progress.

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