

Workplace Sexual Harassment as a Problem of Employee Relations

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Abstract: *Sexual harassment at work is an important aspect of employee relations that has become rampant since the beginning of capitalism even as doing research about it as a sensitive topic has not been easy and frequent. While the practice of lawsuits against the perpetrators of sexual harassment has taken off, bringing some relief to the victims in the West, what is awfully amiss in the developing world is the bringing of justice to most of the victims who labour in the formal as well as informal sector. In this paper, we take stock of research on this phenomenon in terms of its incidence, definition, forms, causes and solutions. In the process, the paper highlights some gaps in existing knowledge to be filled in through new research, especially in the Indian context.*

1. Introduction

As the Centre for Equality and Diversity at Work of the Manchester Business School points out, sexual harassment can have a serious impact on the individuals involved and the organization where it occurs and therefore in order to avoid this, organizations must take a proactive, i.e. preventative, rather than reactive, i.e. response driven, approach to developing effective sexual harassment policies and procedures (see Hunt et al., 2007).

Sexual harassment, in a nutshell, is a behaviour defined as unwelcome and of a sexual nature. It is considered as prohibited conduct or illegal behaviour. For example, in the American context, the legal definition of sexual harassment is "...unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal and physical conduct of a sexual nature." The Commission of the European Communities in 1992 pointed out that "sexual harassment means unwanted conduct of a sexual nature, or other conduct based on sex, affecting the dignity of women and men at work. This can include unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct." Some scholars consider sexual harassment in essence as a form of bullying based on the popular perception that sexual behaviour is a free for all private matter. Many consider it simply as a crime that involves serial predator behaviour (see McCann, 2005; Hunt et al., 2007; Sabitha, 2008; Kumalo, 1997; MAHR, 2003).

This paper is concerned about sexual harassment at work or workplace sexual harassment (WSH). This is one of the most frequently discussed topics in employee relations today—a topic that is amenable to multidisciplinary analysis. We take this topic as an examination of an uninvited behaviour of sexual nature which is offensive, embarrassing, intimidating and affects an employee's work performance, health, career or livelihood and self-respect. Examination of this topic is all the more pertinent in light of the very recent case of a Delhi University college principal booked for sexual harassment and abetting ex-employee's suicide.

It is important to note that the boundaries of the workplace are not determined by location (MAHR, 2003). Instead, the boundaries of workplace are defined by whether or not the person is doing something related to his or her job. For this reason, harassment can occur in locations outside the traditional worksite. The workplace includes any place where employees happen to be for work related purposes. This includes traveling to work-related conferences or branch offices, attending staff parties, attending conferences, or at the home of a colleague for a work-related activity. The key to understanding the boundaries of the work environment is to consider whether the person is in a specific place because of her job. If the answer is “yes”, then any unwanted and offensive sex-based conduct could be considered as WSH.

WSH is a serious and widespread problem—a problem that is mostly or almost exclusively experienced by women. And this is not surprising to find as part and parcel of all kinds of offence or violence—stalking, voyeurism, rape, etc.—meted out to women in societies that are patriarchal and sexist. Patriarchy refers to male domination. Sexism is the attitude of a person of male sex that he is superior to a person of the female sex. Sexual harassment is rampant in societies which often treat women as sex objects and second-class citizens. It is also considered as a byproduct of misogyny understood as not only ‘hatred of women’ but also ‘entrenched prejudice against women’.

Historically speaking, sexual harassment has been integral to both the organization of capitalism, and the organization of male dominance that even preceded the rise of capitalism since the rise of class societies about 10,000 years ago (see Bularzik, 1978; Harman, 2005; Gabor, 2006).

According to Naira Khan, a scholar on WSH, “The sexual harassment of women at the workplace has existed as far back as when women first went out to sell their wares, but it has only recently been recognized as behaviour that impedes the development and health of women at the workplace” (see Samuel, 2004). In fact, the naming of the problem in terms of WSH first emerged in the late 1970s in the industrialized American context.

2. Lack of Common Definition

The more we read about how international organizations such as the United Nations and the International Labour Organisation and how various nations and the states within them have approached this topic, the more we find ourselves seeing the lack of a common definition of WSH. And this variation in defining WSH stems from the differences in treating the topic broadly as a form of violence against women that also violates workers’ human rights or as a discriminatory treatment or as illegal or prohibited conduct or as something that creates hostile and unsafe work environment.

There is general consensus, though, in treating WSH as unwelcome conduct. Sex-based conduct in the workplace is unwelcome when (1) an employee does not solicit or initiate the conduct; and (2) when the employee regards the conduct as undesirable and offensive. It is important to note that persons in position of power within the workplace, such as supervisors and

employers, must ensure that any social contact between employees is consensual and welcome. Furthermore, even though employees may not actively object to specific conduct, they may in fact find the work environment hostile because of the conduct of others. Frequently employees do not feel safe enough or strong enough to voice their objections. Particularly if an employee is in a relatively weak and vulnerable position, she may appear to acquiesce. Because the employee has appeared to acquiesce, however, this does not mean that the conduct was consensual or that sexual harassment has not occurred (MAHR, 2003).

Most people associate WSH with sexual overtures, unwelcome touching, or outright assaults on an employee. Such actions are usually accompanied by promises of favourable treatment at work or by threats of unfavourable treatment. This is known as “quid pro quo” sexual harassment. This is said to be rather rare as compared to the much more frequent situation of sexual harassment in terms of hostile work environment. The latter arises from any conduct in the workplace that has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with a person’s work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment. It is said that in many ways, employers have a harder time dealing with this type of sexual harassment because it can be so hard to spot, whereas the *quid pro quo* variety of sexual harassment is fairly easy to recognize.

Examples of sexual harassment in terms of hostile work environment are as follows (see <http://www.beta.mmb.state.mn.us/doc/mad/harrassment.pdf>):

Verbal

- Referring to an adult as a girl, a boy, hunk, doll, babe, or honey
- Whistling at someone, making cat calls
- Making sexual comments about a person’s body
- Making sexual comment or innuendos
- Turning work discussion to sexual topics
- Telling sexual jokes or stories
- Asking about sexual fantasies, preferences, or history
- Asking person questions about social or sexual life
- Making sexual comments about a person’s clothing, anatomy, or looks
- Repeatedly asking out a person who is not interested
- Making kissing sounds, howling, and smacking lips
- Telling lies or speaking rumours about a person’s sex life

Non-Verbal

- Looking at person up and down (elevator eyes)
- Staring at someone (as if to undress)
- Blocking a person’s path
- Following the person
- Giving personal gifts (e.g. underwear)

- Displaying sexually suggestive visual
- Making facial expressions such as winking, throwing kisses, licking lips
- Making sexual gestures with hands or through body movements

Physical

- Giving a massage around the neck or shoulders
- Touching the person's clothing, hair, or body

3. "HARASSER" and "HARASSED"

It is commonly thought that WSH is limited to interactions between male bosses and female subordinates. This is not true. In fact, sexual harassment can occur between any co-workers, including the following (MAHR, 2003):

- Peer to peer harassment
- Subordinate harassment of a supervisor
- Men can be sexually harassed by women
- Same sex harassment, i.e. men can harass men; and women can harass women
- Third party harassment; and
- Offenders can be supervisors, co-workers, or non-employees such as customers, vendors and suppliers

4. Victim of WSH

Another common perception is that the person who directly receives sexual harassment is the victim. In fact, anyone who is affected by the offensive conduct, whether they were intended "target" or not, is a victim of sexual harassment. According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunities Commission, "the victim does not have to be the person harassed but could be anyone affected by the offensive conduct." Likewise, there is no "typical harassed woman". Women of all ages, backgrounds, races and experience and in every work environment experience sexual harassment (see MAHR, 2003).

5. Is WSH about Sex or Power?

Is the drive to sexually harass a programmed urge to fulfill urges that result from the biological urge to mate (O'Connell, 2009)? Or is it a byproduct of unequal power relations between sexes? These are not easy questions to answer. It is important, however, to sort out confusion in this regard, especially to understand the fact that most women do not strongly oppose sexual harassment (MAHR, 2003).

Confusion about the difference between sexual invitation and sexual harassment is common. Many men and women around the world believe that sexual harassment is a social practice based on simple sexual attraction. It is often seen as an expression of male interest and a form of flattering sexual attention for women—a sometimes vulgar but essentially harmless romantic game, well within the range of normal, acceptable behaviour between men and women.

However, the difference between invitation and harassment is the use of power. Harassment is not a form of courtship and it is not meant to appeal to women. It is designed to coerce women, not to attract them. When the recipient of sexual harassment has no choice in the encounter, or has reason to fear the repercussions if she declines, the interaction has moved out of the realm of invitation and courtship into the arena of intimidation and aggression.

Confusion about the dynamics of sexuality and power in sexual harassment prevents women from reacting to harassers with strong, effective counter-measures.

As Hunt et al. (2007) point out, "People have different perceptions of what constitutes sexual harassment but behaviour is more likely to be seen as harassment if there is a power difference between the person being harassed and the harasser. Women are sometimes reluctant to label their own experiences as sexual harassment because they do not think they are serious enough; this obviously has implications for research which seeks to clarify the prevalence of the problem."

6. Some Salient Research Findings About WSH

Research over the last two decades has exposed the pervasiveness of WSH. Legal cases and women's rights activists have also exposed the details of specific instances of WSH (see, for instance, Grant, 2005; Dine and Watt, 1995; Bagilhole and Woodward, 1995; Hunt et al., 2007; McCann, 2005; MAHR, 2003).

Harassment does not impact on women in a uniform way. It is more prevalent against the more vulnerable. Those women who are financially dependent are at most risk. Young workers are common targets. The single, separated, widowed and divorced women are found to be disproportionately subjected to sexual harassment. Women in non-traditional jobs and predominantly male environments and women who work for male supervisors have been found to be more likely to be subjected to harassment.

In developing countries, casual workers and informal sector workers appear to be particularly subject to harassment. In both developing and developed countries, migrant workers have been identified as particularly at risk due to obstacles they face in securing alternative employment, their social exclusion, and their lack of language skills and financial resources. Sexual harassment occurs in all occupations and industries. JCB (2013) mentions sexual abuse as part and parcel of routine labour exploitation in the buyer-driven as well as producer-driven commodity chains.

Organisational culture is key to understanding how and why it occurs in some places and not in others. Sexual harassment, bullying and physical violence can all be seen in terms of "organizational violation". This is where the culture of an organization makes it possible for individual employees to be treated abusively or with disrespect. Hierarchical and managerial power are central to understanding how such a culture develops and continues. As the climate of disrespect within an organization worsens, the more likely it is for certain inappropriate

behaviour to be taken for granted, leading to the creation of an “incivility spiral”. This is where discourteous behaviour becomes routine and regarded as normal by employees and employers. Sexual harassment has been found to be more prevalent during periods of job insecurity or when a new supervisor or manager is appointed.

Two types of leadership style are particularly associated with harassment and bullying: an authoritarian style where there is limited consultation with staff; and a laissez faire style where management fails to lead or intervene in workplace behaviour. The former seems to have become the dominant leadership style of contemporary neoliberal management of workplaces, much contrary to the fashionable managerial evangelism about participative management or Human Resource Management (see JCB and Pratap, 2012).

Sexual harassment imposes various costs on its victims. Most victims are upset by it. Many experience feelings ranging from irritation and nervousness to anger, powerlessness and humiliation. At its worst, WSH can make their working lives miserable and dangerous. Victims can eventually become ill when subjected to sexual harassment on a regular basis, particularly where it is perpetrated by a supervisor, involves sexual coercion, or takes place over a long period of time or in a male-dominated setting. Sexual harassment triggers a wide range of ailments, including stress-related illnesses, high blood pressure and depression. Sexual harassment has been theorized as a stressor with consequences for the physical and mental health of its targets. And in fact, research has confirmed that sexual harassment is a stressor that is associated with increased depressive symptoms (see Houle et al., 2011; Schneider and Swan, 1997). Ultimately, victims may miss out on career opportunities or leave their jobs.

Sexual harassment also costs employers. Employers incur significant losses when harassed workers lose concentration, when sexual harassment interferes with their judgement, when they are difficult to motivate or tend to be late or absent. Productivity decreases, team work is jeopardized and risk of workplace accidents increases. Ultimately employers may lose valuable workers, while others may be dissuaded from applying for vacancies. Employers who fail to prevent sexual harassment also face financial costs of sick pay for employees who become ill, and legal bills from court actions brought against them.

Sexual harassment functions as a form of sex discrimination. When it is allowed to continue, many women become reluctant to take up traditionally male jobs or jobs in a largely male workforce. Women’s equal opportunities are threatened and their position in the labour force undermined when they are dissuaded from applying for higher-status, well-paid, traditionally male jobs.

In developing countries, women who report sexual abuses in the workplace are often fired or demoted. Most women do not have knowledge about laws that forbid sexual harassment or about workplace codes of conduct. Most victims in both developing and developed countries do not take action and remain passive. They are doubly-victimised, once by their harassers, and twice by their colleagues who condemn them for remaining passive (see DGE-ILO, 2013; Kompipote, 2002; Shameem and Tuiketeci, 2011).

7. Dealing With WSH

Neutering coupled with social ostracism is mooted as an effective solution to tackle sexual offenders by some while others look at this as a fundamentalist and barbaric solution like in some Islamic cultural contexts. Many prefer legislative and non-legislative 'civilized' processes that can be used to deal with cases of WSH (see Kumalo, 1997). These processes are based on the premise that sexual harassment is in the eye of the beholder.

A. Criminal Law and Civil Law Remedies

Some forms of sexual harassment constitute criminal acts and can be prosecuted as such. For example, charges can be laid for rape, attempted rape, and the various categories of assault. Under criminal law, charges can also be laid for damage to the dignity and reputation of an individual and blackmail.

The disadvantage of laying a criminal charge is the high burden of proof required; guilt needs to be proved beyond reasonable doubt. This is often very difficult considering that there are generally no witnesses to incidents of sexual harassment; cases often consist of one person's word against another's.

In terms of civil law, a grievant may seek redress in labour law which recognizes sexual harassment as unfair labour practice. A grievant may also seek redress in the law of delict which refers to private claims for the damage suffered by an individual as a result of sexual harassment. A grievant may claim damages for the wrongful and intentional impairment of her physical integrity, dignity or reputation.

The advantage of using civil law remedies is that they involve a lower burden of proof than that required by criminal law. The grievant need only prove her case on a balance of probability. The grievant also has some control over the proceedings of her case. She is not at the mercy of police, prosecutors or criminal law bias in terms of the duty of the victim to prove that the offence was committed. In addition, the grievant can sue the harasser and the company as well. However, the legal cost entailed in suing someone is high and should the grievant lose her case, she will be liable for the legal costs of the other side as well.

A major difficulty for grievants in approaching an employment tribunal or labour court is the lack of financial support. This means that they have to represent themselves which can include cross-examining the alleged harasser. Research reveals that individuals have found the proceedings distressing particularly having to confront their sexual harassers at such close proximity.

B. Workplace Health and Safety Legislation

Since many grievants have no desire to take legal action against the perpetrators for fear of losing their jobs and they only want from the perpetrators some compensation for physical and psychological damage, it is now argued that laws regarding occupational health and safety and compensation for occupational injuries and diseases should be broadened to include WSH as an

occupational injury on duty to be compensated for, as it has happened in Canada. Under this kind of legislation, a worker has the right to withdraw from an unsafe workplace.

C. Non Legislative Processes

This basically refers to informal processes or institutionalised workplace codes of conduct on the understanding that employers have an overriding responsibility to provide a workplace free from harassment.

Employers will have to confront and negotiate with the harassers individually, for example, asking them to stop, threatening or disciplining them; or by seeking advocacy, that is reporting the behaviour, asking another person to intervene, or seeking legal remedy. Unfortunately, avoidance of the harasser and denial that sexual harassment is happening are the most common methods used by employers and these are the least effective methods. Many case studies highlight that corporates do not learn from experiences and that they continue with a corporate culture of insensitivity to women (see, for example, Gabor, 2006) despite the fact that there are costs to employers as mentioned above.

There are, however, three types of intervention that employers can implement to effectively deal with WSH in terms of workplace code of conduct: prevention, responding to sexual harassment where it does occur, and follow-up in the aftermath of an investigation into a complaint of sexual harassment.

Preventive actions include the formation and adoption of a sexual harassment policy, training and awareness raising, monitoring and evaluation. Staff and staff representatives must be fully involved with management in developing and owning the relevant policies and programmes. A culture of respect has to be developed within the organization and a strong zero tolerance policy towards sexual harassment is essential.

Training is required to raise awareness and understanding of sexual harassment and to help equip individuals with the necessary skills to deal with it. Research indicates that training is effective for changing men's attitudes. Education for an anti-harassment workplace can help employers avoid costly litigation and help create a safe and productive work environment (Harvill, 2006).

There should be a complaints procedure within the organization such that confidentiality is maintained and complainants are protected from victimization. In the absence of this and if the alleged harasser is the manager of the grievant, then making a complaint can be a very difficult procedure for the grievant.

Following an investigation of a complaint of sexual harassment, rehabilitation of the person who has been harassed, including support and counseling where required is essential. Others will need to be reintegrated, including the harasser and any witnesses or other colleagues who have been affected. Examination of how the harassment occurred and whether existing policies and procedures need amending, are also necessary.

Pressures for workplace codes of conduct must be generated through public awareness programmes in the society at large through the involvement of worker organisations, women's rights organizations, social media organizations, etc.

The reality check from research reveals that in most countries, especially in the developing world, there are inadequate or no legal and non-legal mechanisms for checking sexual harassment.

8. The Indian Context

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 is indeed a landmark legislative act in India that seeks to protect women from sexual harassment at their place of work. This was preceded by the enactment of a new stricter law on sexual violence in light of the pressures built up in relation to the fatal gang rape of a young woman on a bus in Delhi in December 2012. The 2013 Bill on WSH in India owes a lot to the great pressurizing role played by the women's movement in India since the early 1980s. Also the recent role of the National Commission for Women cannot be denied.

Till these new developments came into existence in India, the anti-sexual harassment scene was pathetic. There was no direct legislation addressing WSH in India. While Constitutional provisions and Indian Penal Code provisions indirectly and vaguely addressed sexual harassment, sexual harassment has been not part of labour legislation. The trade unions in India have not pursued this topic. In such a milieu, the victims of sexual harassment were left at the mercy of general litigation which has its well-known traumas—unduly long time and high cost besides social humiliation, etc. The only saving grace in this milieu was the landmark Supreme Court of India judgement in *Vishakha vs. State of Rajasthan* case in 1997. For the first time in India, this judgement gave a definition of WSH and detailed guidelines and norms and orders to be strictly observed for prevention of sexual harassment and enforcement of the right to work with dignity and right to gender equality of working women as fundamental rights (see Singh, 2000; Tejani, 2004; Chaudhuri, 2008; Srivastava, 2004).

The 2013 law on WSH is said to be more comprehensive than the Vishakha Guidelines of the Supreme Court of India in that the former covers all sorts of workplaces, including in the informal sector. While the new laws have been hailed as milestones in India's women's rights movement, their enforcement and implementation need to be seen. Research reveals that the enforcement and implementation of the Vishakha Guidelines has been terrible. The legal machinery and state machinery in India do not know these developments. And most managements care two hoots for following these guidelines by bringing about effective workplace codes of conduct. Most private and public companies in India refrain from making investments in Complaints Committees in their workplaces (Chaudhuri, 2008). The case study by Saheli (1998), from a leading woman's organization in Delhi, clearly shows how managements manipulate and sabotage the WSH cases and cruelly worsen the situation of the grievants. How workers employed indirectly through labour contractors or private employment agencies can be

protected in the absence of direct employer-employee relationship is a hundred million dollar question. Workers such as these are nowadays the typical workers and most of these work without written contracts, pay slips and I-cards.

In light of this, it is clear that while appropriate laws are necessary, they are not sufficient to bring about social change against sexual harassment (see Patel, 2005).

9. Conclusion

In any civilized society, it is the fundamental right of people to be able to work and lead their lives with dignity, free from mental and physical torture. To ensure this, transgressors must pay for their unsolicited sexual advances. To effectively prevent WSH, we need both a top-down initiative by the state as also the employers but also bottom-up civil society initiatives from citizen's groups, women's organizations and trade unions. We also need a movement of *Men against Violence and Abuse* to shatter the following myths ruling the minds of men (Patel, 2005):

1. Women enjoy eve-teasing/sexual harassment
2. Eve-teasing is harmless flirtation. Women who object have no sense of humour
3. Women ask for WSH. Only women who are provocatively dressed are sexually harassed
4. Women who say 'no' actually mean 'yes'
5. Sexual harassment is not really an issue. It does not hurt anyone
6. Sexual harassment is 'natural' male behaviour. Man is the hunter and woman the prey
7. Women keep quiet. That means they like it
8. If women go to places where they are not welcome, they should expect sexual harassment

Last but not the least, while the knowledge about WSH has certainly expanded, especially in the West, there are still gaps in knowledge which need to be filled to enable the move towards fully effective harassment law, policies and preventative programmes all around the world. This requires fresh and more empirical research on the following subtopics:

- Incidence of sexual harassment
- Leadership styles and their impact on sexual harassment incidence rates
- Ethnicity and sexual harassment
- Same sex sexual harassment
- Disability and sexual harassment
- Sexual harassment via electronic media
- Attitudes towards sexual harassment and the impact on the individual of filing a complaint
- Effectiveness of sexual harassment programmes and training
- Comparative review of public and private sector policies and procedures
- Gap between policy and practice

- Mechanisms of enforcement and implementation of sexual harassment specific legislation
- Employer best practices in the formal sector
- What is to be done for the informal workforce that is nameless/invisible/migrant?

In the final analysis, sexual abuse is, in a way, a reflection of human entropy and barbarism. Sexual harassment, therefore, can be expected to completely disappear only in a society where personalities and social relations are governed by “spiritual capital” as a moral core for inter- personal behaviour as well as social and economic justice (Rima, 2013).

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