

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace: Legal Protection at A Glance

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Abstract:

Sexual harassment at workplace undermines the dignity, safety, and well-being of women, posing a significant challenge to creating secure professional environments. In India, the introduction of the Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act, 2013, marked a crucial step toward addressing this issue. This legislation provides a structured framework to prevent harassment, establish mechanisms for redressal, and safeguard women in their workplaces. This study evaluates the Act's effectiveness, examining the prevalence of workplace harassment, its impact on women, and the adequacy of existing grievance mechanisms. It further explores the responsibilities of employers in promoting a secure work environment, the performance of internal complaint committees, and the critical role of awareness campaigns in addressing harassment. The research also delves into the social, cultural, and institutional challenges that may hinder the successful implementation of the Act. By evaluating these factors, this study seeks to propose strategies for improving policies and practices to create safer and more inclusive workplaces for women in India.

Keywords: Workplace Harassment, Gender Equality, Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment Act, 2013, Legal Remedies, Vishaka Guidelines, Policy Enhancement.

Introduction:

Sexual harassment in the workplace is a widespread issue that jeopardizes the dignity, safety, and well-being of women, infringing upon their fundamental rights. To tackle this serious problem, India has established a legal framework that aligns with international human rights norms, emphasizing prevention, redressal, and protection. The Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act, 2013, was enacted to ensure a safe and secured workplace for women. This Act recognizes sexual harassment as a violation of constitutional rights, including the right to equality under Articles 14 and 15, the right to live with dignity under Article 21, and the right to a safe and respectful workplace.

This study aims to assess the effectiveness of the Act of 2013 which focuses on Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment at Workplace, by examining the nature of workplace harassment, its impact on women in professional environments, and the sufficiency of existing measures to safeguard their dignity and safety. It also explores the influence of organizational culture, awareness programs, and legal support systems in addressing harassment and promoting a secure and inclusive workplace.

Objective of the Study:

This study aims to focus on:

- Evaluating the effects of sexual harassment on women's well-being and careers.

- Analyzing the strengths and gaps in legal protections, including the Vishaka Guidelines.
- Examining employers' roles in fostering safe work environments through preventive measures and complaint mechanisms.

The study seeks to provide recommendations for strengthening legal frameworks, workplace policies, and societal attitudes to ensure the safety and security of women in the workplace.

Methodology:

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the effectiveness of legal frameworks, workplace policies, and organizational strategies in preventing and managing workplace sexual harassment.

Research Methods:

Literature Review: Review of legal documents, academic articles, case studies, and international frameworks like CEDAW to understand the evolution of harassment laws and their impact on Indian legislation.

Primary Data Collection:

- **Surveys:** Quantitative data from employees on awareness of the Act of 2013 for Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment, harassment prevalence, complaint mechanisms, and workplace safety.
- **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews with employees, employers, legal experts, and ICC members to gather insights on experiences, legal knowledge, and challenges.
- **Case Studies:** Analysis of workplaces with effective and ineffective harassment prevention mechanisms.

Data Analysis:

- **Quantitative:** Analysis of survey data using statistical methods to uncover patterns and trends.
- **Qualitative:** Thematic analysis of interviews and case studies.
- **Content Analysis:** Examination of relevant legal documents to evaluate implementation.
- **Observational Research:** Observing harassment case handling in organizations with active internal mechanisms.

This approach provides a comprehensive understanding and recommendations to improve legal frameworks, workplace practices, and societal attitudes toward sexual harassment in India.

Review of Literature:

- **Singh and Desai (2018)** explore legal frameworks for addressing sexual harassment in India. They argue that while the laws are comprehensive, challenges such as cultural and organizational barriers impede effective enforcement. The authors stress the importance of proactive employer involvement in ensuring safe workplaces and resolving complaints.
- **Kapur (2016)** explores the development of Indian sexual harassment laws, tracing their progression from the Vishaka Guidelines to the enactment of the 2013 Act. The study emphasizes the disconnect between legal provisions and their implementation in practice, highlighting the limited awareness among employees and employers regarding available legal protections.

- **The Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan (1997)** case led to the creation of the Vishaka Guidelines, which were eventually included in the 2013 Act. Nair (2014) assesses the impact of these guidelines, pointing out that their application has frequently been uneven across different employers.
- **Sharma (2020)** underscores the importance of workplace awareness and sensitization programs in combating sexual harassment, arguing that legal provisions alone are insufficient without fostering a respectful and equal workplace culture.
- **Kumar (2023)** reviews the enforcement of the 2013 Act and suggests that stricter penalties, regular workplace monitoring, and improved internal complaint mechanisms are necessary for more effective implementation.

Key Elements of Workplace Sexual Harassment:

Workplace sexual harassment typically begins with behaviors that may appear harmless but gradually escalate into inappropriate or unprofessional conduct. Sexual harassment in the workplace is defined by its sexual nature, the unwelcome nature of the actions, and the subjective experience of the individual impacted (Singh & Desai, 2018). The primary concern lies in the impact of the behavior on the person, rather than the intent of the individual responsible.

Types of Sexual Harassment:

Typical examples of sexual harassment at workplace include:

- Unsolicited physical contact or touching
- Soliciting sexual favors
- Unwelcome sexual advances or gestures
- Sexualized verbal or physical conduct
- Making sexually explicit or crude remarks
- Sending explicit content, such as pornography, without consent (Kapur, 2016).

Indian Context:

CEDAW, an important international human rights treaty, and incorporated its principles into national law. In 1997, the Supreme Court of India, through the landmark Vishaka Judgment, formulated guidelines to prevent workplace sexual harassment, inspired by CEDAW's principles (Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan, 1997). These guidelines were subsequently enshrined in the Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act, 2013 (Patel, 2015).

Laws Governing Sexual Harassment:

- The Sexual Harassment of Women (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013, and its associated rules.
- Vishaka Guidelines.
- Indian Penal Code (Sections 209, 354, 376, and 509).
- Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946.

The Sexual Harassment at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013:

This Act was introduced to protect women's rights and ensure a safe work environment. It requires emplo-

yers to establish an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC), while district officers must set up a Local Complaints Committee (LCC) to address sexual harassment complaints. In February 2015, the National Commission for Women (NCW) organized a meeting with State Commissions to discuss effective implementation of the Act. Key recommendations included:

- Monitoring the establishment of ICCs and LCCs: State Women's Commissions should oversee the formation of ICCs and LCCs at the district level.
- Supervising Functionality: Ensuring effective operation of these committees with periodic video conferences between district officers and State Commissions.
- Awareness Programs: Regular initiatives to inform stakeholders about the Act for improved enforcement.
- Internal Complaints Committees: Encouraging State Commissions to form ICCs within their own offices.
- Collaborations: Promoting partnerships to organize workshops and training sessions for ICC members.
- Annual Reports: Requiring organizations and district officers to submit annual performance reports of ICCs and LCCs to State Women Commissions.

Vishaka Guidelines:

Introduced by the Supreme Court in 1997, the Vishaka Guidelines were a precursor to formal legislation. They laid down measures for addressing workplace sexual harassment, based on constitutional principles and international conventions. While the guidelines were eventually replaced by the 2013 Act, they remain relevant for cases that occurred before the Act's implementation.

Indian Penal Code Provisions:

- Section 209: Penalizes false claims in court, with imprisonment up to two years and a fine.
- Section 354: Makes it a criminal offense to assault or use force with the intent to dishonor a woman's modesty, with penalties that may include imprisonment or fines.
- Section 376: Prescribes penalties for rape, including life imprisonment or up to ten years, with specific provisions for spousal rape under certain conditions.
- Section 509: Punishes actions aimed at offending a woman's modesty, including words, gestures, or conduct, with penalties of up to three years in prison and a fine.

Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946:

This Act mandates that employers in industrial establishments with 100 or more employees (or 50 in certain cases) define and certify employment conditions with the appropriate authorities. The Central Government supervises establishments under its jurisdiction, such as major ports, mines, and railways. Regional Labour Commissioners (Central) serve as certifying officers, while the Chief Labour Commissioner (Central) and Deputy Labour Commissioners (Central) handle disputes and appeals.

POSH Training:

POSH (Prevention of Sexual Harassment) training is vital for organizations across government, semi-government, and private sectors to effectively prevent and address workplace sexual harassment. This training educates employees about the nature of sexual harassment, strategies for prevention, and the appropriate procedures for handling complaints (Singh, 2021). Additionally, it helps protect employees

from making false allegations and ensures organizational compliance with legal requirements related to sexual harassment (Joshi, 2022).

Suggestions:

- **Strengthening Legal Framework and Enforcement Mechanisms:** While the Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act, 2013, provides a solid foundation, there is a need to improve its enforcement. More explicit guidelines and stronger penalties for non-compliance could encourage employers to take proactive steps in addressing sexual harassment (Kumar, 2023).
- **Enhanced Sensitization and Awareness Programs:** Mandatory awareness and sensitization programs should be implemented, particularly for managerial and leadership staff. These programs should focus not only on legal aspects but also on shifting organizational attitudes toward sexual harassment, creating a workplace culture where such behavior is not tolerated and employees feel safe to report it (Sharma, 2020).
- **Strengthening Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs):** Regular evaluations of ICCs are needed to ensure their proper functioning. Training, impartiality, and sensitivity in handling cases should be prioritized for committee members. Transparent procedures for appealing decisions will help ensure fairness and accountability (Verma, 2019).

Conclusion:

Workplace sexual harassment continues to be a pressing issue impacting the dignity, safety, and well-being of women, despite legal progress in India. The Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act, 2013, provides a crucial legal framework for prevention, prohibition, and redressal. However, significant challenges remain in achieving its effective enforcement.

This study reveals that while the Act, along with the Vishaka Guidelines and the establishment of Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs), offers a structure for addressing harassment, there are still gaps in its practical application. Women continue to face obstacles in reporting harassment, often due to organizational culture, lack of awareness, and insufficient enforcement of policies. Employers play a crucial role in creating a safe, respectful workplace where harassment is not tolerated and effective mechanisms for prevention and redress are in place.

Enacting laws alone is not enough; employers must actively engage in fostering a safe and inclusive work environment. Moreover, cultural and organizational challenges, such as gender biases and the fear of retaliation, must be addressed. Ongoing sensitization programs, comprehensive awareness campaigns, and training initiatives are essential to changing attitudes toward gender equality and encouraging the reporting of harassment.

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