Workplace Sexual Harassment: A Narrative Analysis

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Abstract

The legal concept of sexual harassment has developed and changed over time since it first emerged around five decades ago. Today, it is a serious issue affecting women and men alike, mainly at the workplace. It has gained international attention and has also been codified by the International Labor Organization (ILO). This narrative paper focuses on the sexual harassment of women and provides an introduction to different definitions of the phenomenon of sexual harassment. This is followed by a description of the different types of the sexual harassment. The author then discusses different reasons that can cause workplace sexual harassment. Three types of costs have been described by the author as a consequence of workplace sexual harassment: costs to the company, legal costs and personal costs. Organizations with female workforce would need to formulate, communicate and effectively enforce a policy to combat this phenomenon. In addition to whatever is required officially, the organizations also need to set up a sensing mechanism, train employees and demonstrate their commitment through the top leadership to help address this phenomenon.

Keywords: *Internal Complaints Committee (ICC), Costs, Sexual Harassment, Women, Workplace.*

Introduction

Women who venture out of the comforts of their home often hear cat calls, ribald songs, risqué jokes and wolf whistles pierce through their eardrums. Nevertheless, they stoically walk on. Feeling helpless and shriveled, they also encounter the risk of a lecherous snarl–toothed auto driver, chewing pan masala and reeking of alcohol strategically settles himself in his seat and slightly shifts the rear-view mirror to catch a surreptitious glance. They also encounter men motoring down on either side who peer in to the auto and mouth a double entendre remark while speeding away.

Women feel uncomfortable in their own skin while walking through their office corridors and taking the elevator. Stepping out, she bumps into a colleague who ogles at her. She walks in to her workstation ready to takes her seat and resumes the daily grind. A call from the boss, however, rattles the atmosphere.

In the boss' chamber, the man aged around 50 years suggests that he take the lady out to dinner, much to her surprise and horror. She is transfixed and feels emotions of helplessness, frustration and revulsion at one go. Is she being made uncomfortable about her own sexuality? Does this all sounds a tad familiar? It does, vif you are one among those millions of hapless working women struggling to find your space in a testosterone-driven workplace today.

This kind of behavior is not relatable to pure unadulterated fun, casual flirting, men having a roving eye, or a consensual physical relationship. By resorting to bawdy gesticulations, remarks laced with innuendos and insinuations, men are acting brazenly against the wishes of women, violating their personal integrity and ravaging their dignity. In recent years, women in India are increasingly entering the job market and account for one-third of the total workforce. As their number in the work force soars, their vulnerability in the workplace has also grown

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exponentially. Though a working woman has to bear the brunt of many abominable discrimination and harassment at work place, everything pales in comparison to the scourge of sexual harassment.

Literature Review

What is Sexual Harassment?

Sexual harassment has assumed a matter of paramount importance in the current day and age. Sexual harassment is seen as a serious occupational hazard and a blatant violation of the human dignity, integrity and rights. The International Labor Organization (ILO) considers sexual harassment to be a gross violation of human rights and inimical to the employee's working condition, employment opportunities and advancement prospects (Forastieri, 2000). Women have long been subjected to harassment purely sexual in nature. Such harassment or the perpetrators has never been given a name or an acceptable coinage (Ethics World, 2008). In Asian countries, one can come across very interesting names that is used against the perpetrators of the harassment or to describe the problem itself. These names among other thins include gatal in Malay language, hum sup in Cantonese, chee ko pek in Hokkien language and pombale porriki in our own backyard (Tamilnadu). The word sexual harassment gained currency in the year 1970 when women in USA rose in collective spirit and strength to ensure that sexual harassment is deemed as gross discrimination shown against women. Since then, the word sexual harassment has come to epitomize the travails women face at the workplace, recognizing such beastly act of sexual conduct unleashed on them and the mechanisms sought to be put in place to avert such instances rearing its ugly head. During the last thirty years a spate of legislations have been promulgated, judgments with far-reaching implications have been pronounced, and a groundswell of publicity has been rolled out. There have also been well-thought out programs and policies to address the problem of sexual harassment in its entirety.

ILO defines sexual harassment as "a sex-driven behavior that is wholly unwelcome and plainly offensive to its recipient". In a nuanced sense, sexual harassment is all about sexual innuendoes and insinuation, unwelcome, bawdy sexual gestures and overtly or covertly seeking sexual favor in consideration for promotion and pay hikes (ILO, 2015). In a rather brazen sense, sexual harassment may include groping, leering, pinching at the bottoms, fondling, touching, hugging, cornering, making off-color jokes or teasing (Nair, n.d.). The Supreme Court guidelines clearly spell out as to what constitutes sexual harassment. It includes among other things, unwelcome advances, lewd jokes, seeking sexual favor and brandishing provocative pornographic materials. There seems to be convergence of opinion among organizations and institutions cutting across national boundaries when it comes to defining two core elements of the definition of sexual harassment-namely unwelcome and unwanted. Flirting and dishing out compliment is okay. If flirtation is taken bit too far, it may be off-putting to people and they may not welcome it. Getting attracted to people of opposite sex is quite natural. One cannot blame people who carry the heart on their sleeves. But things will spiral out of control if employees do not adhere to modicum of decorum. Sexual harassment can manifest itself in two ways: a) quid pro quo (Charlesworth, McDonald and Cerise, 2011) and; (b) hostile environment (Miller, 2014).

Quid Pro Quo

(Expecting Something in Exchange for Something)

Euphemistically speaking, a *quid pro quo* is nothing but sexual blackmail. A person vested with an authority may flagrantly misuse it by seeking sexual favor from the victim in consideration for continuance of employment, salary hikes and promotions. The victim has a limited choice: he/she will have to stand up and say "Big No" and forego all the benefits or give in to the demands of the employer in the fond hope of realizing all the attendant benefits.

Hostile Work Environment

It refers to behavioral conduct that puts the recipient in an intimidating, unfriendly, hostile, threatening and downright offensive atmosphere in the workplace. Such environment may not be conducive to the victim and his/her performance may nosedive. For instance, male colleagues may crack a rather colorful and nasty remark about a female employee's anatomy which may embarrass and freak her out completely.

Sexual Harassment: A Spine-chilling Reality

Sexual harassment signifies a soft underbelly of the workplaces. It exists and any attempt by the employer to sweep it under the carpet would be

self-defeating and way too farcical. Sexual harassment is vastly a global malaise. It is pertinent to look at all the factoids that points to the existence of specter of sexual harassment. As per a report published in Italy in the year 2004, a whooping 55.4 % of women in the age bracket of 14-59 were found to be victims of sexual harassment. Delve deeper in to the survey. It paints a rather disturbing trend. One out of every three female employees complained of sexual favors in exchange for career progressions. In the European Union, women employees accounting for 40%-50% complained of experiencing some form of sexual harassment (ILO, 2015). In a study done in U.S.A, 50%-75% of women seemed to experience sexual harassment at the work place (Srivastava, 1999). Another study commissioned in Canada paints a rather grave picture. As per the study, women accounting for 54% experienced sexual harassment in the hands of men they know in general and 23% of the women were subjected to sexual harassment by the men in their workplace. If India watchers want to take heart in all the statistics bruited above, they should reconsider their opinion. According to Renuka Chowdary, former minister for child development in the previous UPA-led government, the National Commission for Women (NCW) was alleged to have received 60 cases of sexual harassment at work places in Delhi ("60 cases of sexual harassment", 2008). If the capital of India is steeped in this malaise, Uttar Pradesh record is chillingly shocking .Uttar Pradesh has allegedly reported to have 77 cases of sexual harassment in the workplace. The minister further added on the floor of the assembly that NCW has received 36, 21, 20 &20 cases of sexual harassment at the workplace from the states of Rajasthan, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra respectively. According to National Resource Centre for Women, the number of cases involving sexual harassment has shot up from 9746 to 10,155 in 2002 (NCW, n.d.). In the year 2002, the death of a lawyer in Andhra Pradesh sent shock waves across the nation. Tormented by her fellow lawyers and senior advocates, she committed a suicide leaving behind a note alleging sexual harassment. It is a sheer paradox that women in legal profession cannot take a refuge in law and has decided to finish her life (Boloji.com, n.d.). A study carried out by a Kolkata –Based Group called Sanhita reveals that the chance of women facing a sexual harassment at the workplace is startlingly real. 94% of the respondents had said that incidence of harassment exists. This is only the tip of the iceberg. 68%of the respondents opined that it is the employees in private sector who will have to bear the brunt as the harasser is mainly their boss who enjoys unfettered powers and holds the key to benefits and rewards .One common strand of all these research survey points to the fact that it is women who are major victims of sexual harassment .Men are targeted too and more so, homosexuals are always at the receiving end. By and large, men are the perpetrators of this grisly crime against women. According to a research study conducted in 2008 on workplace sexual harassment, a whopping 58.3 % of the women have experienced sexual harassment at the work place (Ethics World, 2008).

Range of Sexual Harassment Behavior

Sexual harassment is primarily about vulgar assertion of power to browbeat victim in to submission. The question that begs an answer is: What constitutes sexual harassment? (ITUC, 2008):

1	Physical	A.	Feeling, groping, touching, pinching, squeezing, or brushing against an individual
		B.	Ogling at someone
		C.	Sexually–provocative gesticulations, come-hither-looks
		D.	Sending provocative pictures, dirty text messages, unnecessary e-mails and double-entendre jokes via Company Intranet
		E.	Physical violence
2	Verbal	A.	Cracking off-color Jokes
		B.	Seeking sexual favors
		C.	Pepper even trivial discussions with lurid sexual details
		D.	Heaping brusquely insulting comments about an individual's gender
		E.	Making crude comments about an individual's vital statistics
3	Non-verbal	A.	Brandishing provocative pictures, calendars or sexually titillating materials
		B.	Blowing whistles
4	Others	A.	Making a women employee work at the oddest of hours in the office

Analysis

Causes of Sexual Harassment at the Work Place

The reason for sexual harassment at workplace is varied .Much of the reasons can be ascribed to the culture, ethical mores and values entrenched in the society and companies More so the reason for high incidence of sexual harassment can be traced to the roles played and relative status and power enjoyed by men and women with in the organization

Socialization

The manner in which men and women were raised influences their world-view and conditions their behavior. Variegated point of view can combine together to usher in an atmosphere that feeds in to sexual harassment.

In a culture where discrimination is done on the basis of gender, age, religion, caste, political ideology and social class, it is not uncommon to find humiliation, harassment and brazen abuse of power practiced with impunity. Harassment is basically primed on deep-seated prejudices and sexist mindset. Men that were reared and conditioned to grow with a macho feeling and testosterone –driven shibboleths may tend to carry it to their workplace and begin to mete out a second –rate treatment to the women co-workers. Worst they may think that they are the best thing to have happened to women folks and may misconstrue that woman may perceive the harassment as a compliment. For their part some women have been raised to believe that their reason for existence is to satiate the biological needs of men. Excessive reliance upon men by women for their emotional, physical, psychological and financial support or if a women is too meek and unassertive, then men will have a field day subjugating women. The most vulnerable women are those who are the sole breadwinners and cannot bring themselves to spurn any sexual advances made for fear of losing their job or facing a bleak future (Sexual Harassment Support, n.d.).

Changing Power Equations

In recent times, the paradigm shifts in the social and political landscape have changed the power equations upside down. . Increasingly, men are feeling threatened by the growing number, clout and independence of women in the workplace. Men are not clearly happy with the prospects of sharing his workspace with what he thinks a "petty –coat brigade" Men who have made it to seat of power after being in the fringes for long may pick on women to prove a point or two. Many men may have come to consider seeking sexual favor as a "Seductive Perks" that come along with territory. In this day of economic rough weather, where lay-offs, retrenchment, job losses, pay cuts, lesser career opportunities, unmitigated work and performance pressures are order of the day, the specter of sexual harassment looms large (Sexual Harassment Support, n.d).

Degeneration of Moral Values and Prevalence of Cultural Differences

In this day and age of moral laxity, sexually permissive behavior, extra marital affairs and "one-night-flings" have become so common place in our society in general and companies in particular. Such sexual permissiveness in work places is spurring men to flirt and have bit of fun on the side. The person who makes sexual advances may pursue diffident colleague with vengeance and try to browbeat them in to submission. Invariably such male colleagues morph in to harassers. Confusion may reign supreme owing to cultural differences relatable to what constitutes right and wrong behavior.

Credibility and Blame Game

The credibility of the victim is always dragged in to question. Victims' allegations against the harasser may always be taken with a pinch of salt .Male co-workers can always rally around the harasser as an expression of their male solidarity and subvert the justice. The concatenation of some of other factors can further exacerbate the problem. A great deal of men who treat their female colleagues with respect and decency may find it tough to fathom that one of their own colleague had been engaged in such debased conduct. Top leadership may tend to go along with the version of the senior person rather than a sub-ordinate. Senior managers may carry the "credibility tag" with them as they have been around for a long period in the company. Things may get worse if all the senior managers are men. They may singularly lack the sensitivity to grasp the severity of the problem. Harasser may become a rallying point for all the other male managers to demonstrate their male loyalty. In many instances, harasser may be a best-of-the breed and indispensable talent where as the victim can be an easily jettisoned. In many cases, victims are hounded and a full-scale smearing and vilification campaign will be mounted. Suddenly the victim finds her private life and her behavior dissected and smudged. The crime against her is relegated to the background. Many a times, victim

may be overwhelmed by the turn of events and may lack the spunk to prefer a complaint. Fear of reprisal may be another reason victim may not dare raise her voice. This only makes her vulnerable to the charges of playing the ball. Scores of women are hopelessly prone to pangs of guilt feeling and may pettily wallow in self-blame. They are always inclined to believe that they have, willy–nilly said or done something to have brought upon such conduct.

Bravado Bordering on Machismo

More often than not, men always behave differently when they are in group or all by themselves. When a woman walks in to the workstation or sashay past a small group of employees or when wine flows in a typical office party, men can gang up and mouth obscene jokes or make insinuations. Left to themselves, these men may not summon enough courage and will lack aggression

Lack of a Sensible Company Policy against Sexual Harassment

Many companies do not have a clear-cut and well conceived corporate policies intended to deal with the menace of harassment. Even if the companies do have one in place they do not exhibit any eagerness to enforce it. women employee often decide to call it quits rather than prefer a complaint as she is absolutely clueless as to what to do and whom to approach and complain? The question that is uppermost on the minds and lips of the women is whether the management will sit on her complaint or contemplate a serious action. If the management reaction is lukewarm, harasser may continue to hound her more aggressively

Costs of Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment at the work place can extract a tremendous cost to the company. Legal implications are bound to be much higher. For victims though, the cost is huge

Costs to Company

1. Sexual harassment can cost the company dear by way of tumbling productivity, sagging morale and flagging motivation. If the women worker is under constant fear that her tormentor may bide his time for a fell strike, she cannot deliver on her job. A co-workers who is in no way connected with the issue may also get highly demoralized as they may not approve of the shady goings-on
2. Organization may lose the most prized employee. Women tormented by sexual harassment may prefer to quit the job as she wants to spare herself the ordeal of confronting the harasser head-on. Money spent on recruiting, training and developing the talent goes down the tube if a sought-after women employee leaves a company.
3. The cost of decisions specifically related to sexual harassment can be hard to quantify. Imagine a senior manager has a thing for his secretary and wants her to be employed in the company at any cost. Company may have to shell out money for hiring this woman with an allegedly bewitching looks (ahem!). Damn with talent and skill sets! Other costs which includes are travel and boarding if the woman tags along with manager on business jaunts (?) may escalate.
4. High level of absenteeism is another disconcerting fall-out of harassment. A sexually harassed woman may undergo tremendous amount of stress resulting in bouts of illness and depression. Some time a harassed woman may not be willing to step out in order to save her skin
5. If the word gets about in the town that the practice of sexual harassment is rampant and management is not taking cognizance of the menace , companies reputation will be in tatters

Legal Costs

Companies can run up a huge legal cost if the problem of sexual harassment is allowed to go unabated in their premises. The Supreme Court pronounced a judgment in a now famous Vishaka case which is by far considered to be the landmark in more ways than one. For once, sexual harassment was acknowledged under Indian jurisprudence as a cancerous malaise afflicting the working women. The said judgment was based on Article 14 and 21 (right to equality and right to life) and 19(1) (right to practice any profession or carry on any trade, business or occupation) supreme court pronounced that harassing an employee sexually at work is a blatant violation of fundamental rights .supreme court also spelt out a comprehensive guidelines for combating, preventing and redressing the problem. A serious legal action can be contemplated against an employer who is fully alive to the sexual harassment taking place in his company. A long arm of the law can catch up with an employer or employees of an employer if they harass employee sexually. In effect, employer may bring up on himself/herself civil claims and actions. Companies can find themselves on a back foot legally if they

don't have a well-thought –out anti-sexual harassment policy. In the absence of a policy, it becomes easier for harasser to exert pressure on employer to quash the disciplinary proceedings nitiated

Personal costs

The harassed victim will have to suffer a maximum personal cost. Women who undergo sexual harassment will suffer from heavy bouts of depression and mental agony .their self-esteem, confidence and productivity may tumble. They may lose respect for the men and people in the saddle. Women, who resign their jobs on account of unmitigated pressure tend to give in to the sexual favors of the harasser, may not be able to find a job easily. They may not be able to obtain references from ex-organization they had worked. They may have to produce a convincing reason for their abrupt exit from their previous job. All these can only serve to put her career in jeopardy .Women who dared to complain or spurn sexual overtures may be singled out for selective victimization. Promotional opportunities will be a casualty. Their professional career may be irretrievably atrophied. It is not only the victim but even other women who are mute spectator to the sordid goings-on can feel intimidated and distressed by the unfolding situation. Other Women may fear that they may lose out on gainful opportunities if they do not give in to the sexual favors of powers-that-be. A perfect way to toxify the atmospherics of a company

Recommendations

How can Organizations Empower Sexually Harassed Employees?

Sexual harassment is a very serious issue and every organization should do whatever it takes to prevent it from taking place. Companies can put in place a detailed, well-thought-out sexual harassment policy. The underlying objective is to make sure that the specter of sexual harassment do not rear its ugly head and even if it does, the companies will have to make it sure that a robust procedure is in place to combat the problem and stop it erupting over and again. Companies would do well to initiate a raft of measures that would go along way in exorcising the work place of an evil like sexual harassment (Prekel, 2001).

Develop a Comprehensive and Clear Sexual Harassment Policy

The company should craft a well-thought –out anti-sexual harassment policy. The broader contours of the policy should outline the following things

1. Companies should make a demonstrable commitment towards preventing, combating and rooting out the problems of sexual harassment. The company should adopt a zero-tolerance approach towards sexual harassment
2. The policy should be uniformly applied across the organization.
3. Companiesould define sexual harassment unambiguously. Companies should elaborate on range of behavior that constitutes sexual harassment.
4. Companies should make it known to every body of the penalties that will be slapped against individuals proven guilty of sexual harassment
5. Companies should articulate the detailed procedure that every individual can make use of if he/she wants to bring the charges of sexual harassment to the light
6. Companies should make it apparent to the employees that that any individual allegedly involved in problems relating to sexual harassment will have to face dire consequences if proved guilty
7. Companies should also communicate its anti-sexual harassment policy to its suppliers and customers
8. Companies should assure its employees that any complaints relating to sexual harassment will be kept under wraps and utmost confidentiality shall be maintained regarding the identity of the victims.
9. Companies will have to provide dope about support system available for hapless employees. Companies can give a name of the contact person whom hapless victims in distress can contact (Business.com, n.d.; Raymond, 2003).

Communicate the Policy

1. Companies will have to make it quite sure that employees get to know and understand about the anti-sexual harassment policy. The policy can be communicated via employee handbook, intranet ,corporate website ,newletters,company circulars and notices
2. If the employees are not too well versed in English, companies shall translate and print the policy in the vernacular language.
3. Companies should deliberate the policy with new entrants
4. Policy should be reviewed at regular intervals (Business.com, n.d.).

Enforce the Policy

1. Companies should take any complaints of sexual harassment brought to the light very seriously
2. Investigations into the charges of sexual harassment will have to be completed in a swift , extensive and professional fashion
3. Companies should maintain a log of all the investigations done and its outcomes
4. Companies should ensure that employees who prefer charges of harassment are able to do so without any fear of reprisal
5. Companies should swing in to action if any instances of sexual harassment is brought out
6. Clamp down heavily on employees who are found to be involved in a beastly acts such as sexual harassment (Business.com, n.d.).

Complaints Channel

Companies should specify the channels through which women employees can prefer their complaints relating to matters of sexual harassment. The channels could be the designated authority for dealing exclusively with charges of sexual harassment. The channel may include among other things, a dedicated phone line, messages sent through e-mails or intranet. The entire exercise of crafting and enforcing a policy is rendered irrelevant if employees are not going to make use of it (Raymond, 2003).

Train Employees

Companies should conduct a training session for employees periodically. Such training should focus on what constitutes sexual harassment, how it impacts the victim and how employees can take precautionary measures to keep the attendant problems at bay. Women employees can be given assertiveness training to discern the problem, to deal with the male colleagues trying to act fresh with them and if possible prevent such problems recurring again. Companies should also encourage employees to use the sexual harassment policy. Companies should give training to managers and supervisors to acquire skills to sharpen their sensitivity so that they can handle complaints well (Business.com, n.d.).

Set up a Complaints Committee

In line with the Vishaka guidelines, employers should put in place a compliant committee companies will have to ensure that the complaints committee is headed by an able and seasoned woman. In the same vein, company should ensure that not less than 50 % of the committee comprises of women. To lend the committee a halo of objectivity, employer shall appoint third party or even a NGO. Committee members will have to rise above partisan ends .they will have to empathize with the complaining victim and should not evaluate them through the prism of moralistic dimension. Any act that is sickeningly unwelcome is sexual harassment. Form women's perspective, unwelcome is inexorably a subjective reality. It is imperative for the committee to buy in to this reality. Complaint procedures will have to closely guarded .employer will have to make it sure that victims, wanting to prefer complaints is able to do so without fear of retribution.

Set up a Sensing Mechanism

Rather than adopting a reactive approach, employers will have to become pro-active in their resolve to nip the problem in the bud. Companies may conduct a periodical survey to ascertain factors or situations that may inevitably lead to debase act of sexual harassment. Survey shall be administered to employees under the condition of anonymity. A copy of sexual harassment can be handed out to the employees along with survey questionnaire. The survey can pose an innocuous questions to employees (women in particular) like "Have you undergone any sexual harassment in our company?" This kind of measures will send out a strong signal of the employers concern towards addressing the problem of harassment (Raymond, 2003).

Top Leadership to Demonstrate its Commitment

Top management may have grandiose plans and may craft a very detailed policy to combat the menace of harassment. On ground, their plans and policy interventions will come to grief if companies do not implement the policy aggressively, professionally and swiftly. Complaints, serious or trivial, will have to be taken with seriousness. Investigations will have to expedited and prompt action taken against the perpetrator of the crime. Employers can maintain a tight vigil over the supervisors. They can conduct a regular high-power meeting, carry out a surprise spot investigations and host sexual harassment training (Raymond, 2003).

Conclusion

Sexual harassment is a serious problem and an affront to the dignity of women. Sexual harassment is all about a naked and vulgar display of power and authority over women. Men resort to this invidious tactics to boost their self-esteem (wonder if it exist). The venal act of sexual harassment committed by men betrays a perverted mindset and false sense of ownership men think they have over women. The present day realities are revealing the widening schism between both the sexes. Men should realize that women are entitled to lead their life with dignity and esteem. Come on guy! Stop this brutal savagery! Let women breathe in an air of freedom and liberation. True empowerment can happen only if the shackles inhibiting women are broken.

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