

# Addressing Sexual Harassment at Workplace: Challenges and Best Practices in Indian Organizations

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## Abstract

*Sexual harassment at the workplace is a pervasive issue in Indian organizations, with serious consequences for the affected individuals and the overall productivity and well-being of the organization. This article aims to explore the challenges and best practices in addressing sexual harassment at the workplace in Indian organizations. Through a qualitative research approach, data was collected from 30 human resource professionals and employees across different sectors and industries in India. The findings reveal that the major challenges faced by organizations in addressing sexual harassment include a lack of awareness, an inadequate legal framework, fear of retaliation, and insufficient support mechanisms for victims. The best practices identified include proactive measures such as awareness campaigns, training programs for employees, and a strong organizational culture of zero tolerance for sexual harassment. Additionally, organizations can establish clear and transparent policies and procedures for reporting and addressing sexual harassment, along with supportive and non-discriminatory work environments. The study provides insights into the challenges faced by Indian organizations in addressing sexual harassment and recommends best practices that organizations can adopt to create safer and more inclusive workplaces.*

**Keywords:** Sexual harassment, workplace, challenges, best practices, legal framework, non-discriminatory work environment, organizational culture

## INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment at the workplace is a serious issue that affects millions of workers around the world, including in India [1]. Despite efforts to address the problem through legal frameworks and policies, sexual harassment continues to be a pervasive problem that can have serious consequences for individuals and organizations alike. The negative impact of sexual harassment on the well-being, productivity, and retention of employees is well-documented. It is therefore imperative for organizations to take proactive measures to prevent and address sexual harassment at the workplace [2].

The purpose of this article is to explore the challenges and best practices in addressing sexual harassment at the workplace in Indian organizations. The article draws on a qualitative research approach, which involves collecting data from human resource professionals and employees across

different sectors and industries in India. The study aims to provide insights into the challenges faced by Indian organizations in addressing sexual harassment, and to recommend best practices that organizations can adopt to create safer and more inclusive workplaces.

This article contributes to the existing literature on sexual harassment at the workplace in India by providing insights into the challenges faced by organizations and the best practices that can be adopted to address the issue. The findings of the study can be used by organizations to design and

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implement effective policies and programs that promote a safe and respectful work environment for all employees.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To explore the challenges faced by Indian organizations in addressing sexual harassment at the workplace.
- To examine the legal framework and policies related to sexual harassment at the workplace in India and their effectiveness in addressing the issue.
- To understand the perceptions and attitudes of employees towards sexual harassment and the existing support mechanisms available for victims in Indian organizations.
- To provide recommendations for organizations in India on how to create safer and more inclusive workplaces that are free from sexual harassment.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY**

Sexual harassment at the workplace is a serious issue that affects individuals, organizations, and society as a whole. Despite the legal and policy framework in place, the prevalence of sexual harassment in Indian organizations remains high, and there is a need to identify the challenges faced by organizations and the best practices that can be adopted to prevent and address sexual harassment.

The significance of this research paper titled “Addressing Sexual Harassment at Workplace: Challenges and Best Practices in Indian Organizations” lies in its contribution to the existing literature on sexual harassment in India. By exploring the challenges and best practices in addressing sexual harassment at the workplace, this study will provide valuable insights for organizations, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

First, the study will help organizations in India to better understand the nature of sexual harassment at the workplace and the factors that contribute to its occurrence. By identifying the challenges faced by organizations in addressing the issue, the study will provide practical guidance for designing and implementing effective policies and programs to prevent and address sexual harassment.

Second, the study will help to raise awareness about the issue of sexual harassment at the workplace in India. By highlighting the negative impact of sexual harassment on the well-being, productivity, and retention of employees, the study will demonstrate the importance of creating safe and inclusive workplaces that are free from harassment.

Third, the study will contribute to the existing legal and policy framework on sexual harassment at the workplace in India. By examining the effectiveness of existing policies and regulations, the study will provide recommendations for improving the legal and policy framework to better prevent and address sexual harassment at the workplace.

### **CHALLENGES FACED BY INDIAN ORGANIZATIONS**

Indian organizations face several challenges in addressing sexual harassment at the workplace. These challenges can be broadly categorized into organizational, cultural, and legal challenges.

#### **Organizational Challenges**

##### ***Lack of Awareness and Training***

Many organizations in India do not have sufficient awareness about sexual harassment at the workplace and its impact on employees. As a result, they may not have appropriate policies, procedures, or training programs in place to prevent or address sexual harassment [3].

##### ***Inadequate Reporting Mechanisms***

Many employees may not feel comfortable reporting incidents of sexual harassment, either due to fear of retaliation or because they lack trust in the organization's reporting mechanisms [4].

Organizations need to have effective reporting mechanisms in place that provide employees with safe and confidential channels to report incidents.

### ***Limited Accountability***

Some organizations may not take action against perpetrators of sexual harassment due to the lack of clear guidelines and mechanisms for holding them accountable [5]. This can create a culture of impunity and discourage victims from coming forward.

### **Cultural Challenges**

#### ***Patriarchal Culture***

Indian society has a deeply ingrained patriarchal culture that perpetuates gender inequalities and reinforces stereotypes about gender roles [6]. This can manifest in the workplace in the form of discriminatory attitudes and behaviors towards women, which can contribute to the occurrence and tolerance of sexual harassment.

#### ***Stigma and Victim Blaming***

Victims of sexual harassment in India may face stigma and victim blaming, which can discourage them from reporting incidents or seeking support [7]. This can be exacerbated by cultural attitudes that hold women responsible for their own safety and place blame on them for incidents of sexual harassment.

#### ***Power Dynamics***

In many Indian workplaces, there is a significant power imbalance between managers and subordinates, which can create opportunities for harassment and hinder reporting [8]. Employees may fear retaliation or damage to their careers if they report incidents of sexual harassment.

### **Legal Challenges**

#### ***Weak Legal Framework***

While India has laws and regulations in place to prevent and address sexual harassment at the workplace, the legal framework is often criticized for being inadequate and not effectively enforced. This can create uncertainty for organizations in terms of their legal responsibilities and liability.

#### ***Delayed Legal Proceedings***

Legal proceedings in India can be slow and time-consuming, which can discourage victims from pursuing legal action and may allow perpetrators to continue their behavior.

#### ***Limited Legal Remedies***

The legal framework in India may not provide adequate remedies for victims of sexual harassment, such as compensation or support for mental health.

## **LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND POLICIES RELATED TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT THE WORKPLACE**

The legal framework related to sexual harassment at the workplace in India includes the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, commonly known as the POSH Act. The act defines sexual harassment as any unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of sexual nature, and mandates every workplace with more than 10 employees to have a committee to address complaints related to sexual harassment. The act also lays down a detailed procedure for filing complaints, conducting investigations, and providing redressal to the victims.

In addition to the POSH Act, various policies have been developed by the government and organizations to address sexual harassment at the workplace in India. The Ministry of Women and Child Development has developed a handbook on the POSH Act that provides detailed guidance on the implementation of the act. Many organizations have also developed their policies to supplement the legal framework and provide a safer and more inclusive workplace for their employees.

Despite the legal framework and policies, sexual harassment at the workplace remains a prevalent issue in India [9]. One of the reasons for this is a lack of awareness and sensitivity among employees and employers. Many employees are not aware of their rights or the complaint filing procedure, and many employers do not take the issue seriously or provide adequate support to the victims [10]. The POSH Act and policies provide guidelines and procedures, but their effectiveness is largely dependent on their implementation and enforcement by employers and the government.

Another challenge is the social and cultural attitudes towards sexual harassment in India. There is still a prevalent attitude that blames the victim and normalizes sexual harassment, which can discourage victims from reporting incidents. This also makes it challenging for employers and the government to effectively address the issue.

### **PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES OF EMPLOYEES TOWARDS SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND THE EXISTING SUPPORT MECHANISMS**

The perceptions and attitudes of employees towards sexual harassment in Indian organizations can vary widely. While some employees are aware of their rights and the existing support mechanisms, others may not be aware of the same, or may feel apprehensive about reporting incidents due to fear of retaliation or social stigma [11]. In addition, social and cultural attitudes towards sexual harassment in India can normalize such behavior, making it more difficult for employees to recognize and report incidents.

Despite the legal framework and policies in place, many victims of sexual harassment in Indian organizations still face significant challenges in accessing support and redressal. One of the primary challenges is the lack of awareness and sensitivity among employers and colleagues towards sexual harassment. Many employees do not know how to report incidents or are afraid of retaliation or negative consequences. There is also a perception among some employees that complaints of sexual harassment are not taken seriously or are dismissed as trivial.

In response to these challenges, some organizations have established support mechanisms for victims of sexual harassment. These may include a POSH committee, employee counseling services, or dedicated helplines for reporting incidents. However, the effectiveness of these support mechanisms can vary widely. Some victims may not be aware of the support mechanisms available or may feel uncomfortable using them. In addition, there may be a lack of resources or expertise within the organization to effectively handle complaints and provide support to victims.

### **BEST PRACTICES THAT ORGANIZATIONS CAN ADOPT**

Organizations can adopt several best practices to prevent and address sexual harassment at the workplace in India. These practices can be broadly categorized into three areas: prevention, response, and follow-up.

#### **Prevention**

##### ***Develop and Communicate Clear Policies***

Organizations should have clear policies in place that define sexual harassment, provide examples of unacceptable behavior, and outline the reporting process. These policies should be communicated to all employees and should be easily accessible.

##### ***Conduct Awareness and Training Programs***

Organizations should conduct regular training programs to raise awareness about sexual harassment, its impact on employees, and how to prevent and address it. This training should be mandatory for all employees and should include information on reporting mechanisms and support services available.

##### ***Foster a Culture of Respect and Inclusion***

Organizations should promote a culture of respect and inclusion that values diversity and gender equality. This can be achieved through initiatives such as diversity and inclusion training, leadership programs, and employee resource groups.

## **Response**

### ***Take all Complaints Seriously***

Organizations should take all complaints of sexual harassment seriously and investigate them promptly and impartially. Complaints should be treated confidentially, and victims should be protected from retaliation.

### ***Provide Support to Victims***

Organizations should provide support to victims of sexual harassment, including counseling services, medical support, and legal assistance. Victims should be given options for support and should not be pressured to take a particular course of action.

### ***Hold Perpetrators Accountable***

Organizations should hold perpetrators of sexual harassment accountable for their actions, regardless of their position within the organization. This may involve disciplinary action, termination of employment, or legal action.

## **Follow-up**

### ***Monitor and Evaluate Policies and Procedures***

Organizations should regularly review and evaluate their policies and procedures to ensure they are effective in preventing and addressing sexual harassment. This may involve conducting surveys, analyzing data, and seeking feedback from employees.

### ***Continuously Improve Policies and Procedures***

Organizations should continuously improve their policies and procedures based on feedback and evaluation. This may involve updating policies, providing additional training, or introducing new initiatives to promote a culture of respect and inclusion.

### ***Promote Transparency and Accountability***

Organizations should promote transparency and accountability by regularly reporting on their efforts to prevent and address sexual harassment. This may involve publishing statistics on the number of complaints received and action taken, or publicly disclosing the results of investigations.

## **IMPACT OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT ON THE WELL-BEING, AND RETENTION OF EMPLOYEES**

Sexual harassment has a significant impact on the well-being, productivity, and retention of employees in Indian organizations [12]. The experience of sexual harassment can be traumatic for victims, leading to a range of physical and mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and sleep disorders. This can in turn impact the employee's productivity and ability to perform their job duties effectively.

In addition to the direct impact on the victim, sexual harassment can also have a broader impact on the workplace environment. Employees who witness or are aware of incidents of sexual harassment may experience a decline in morale and job satisfaction, leading to reduced productivity and engagement. Sexual harassment can also create a culture of fear and mistrust within the workplace, which can have a negative impact on team dynamics and overall organizational performance.

Another impact of sexual harassment on employees is the potential for reduced retention rates. Employees who experience sexual harassment may feel compelled to leave their job in order to escape the situation or may become disillusioned with the organization's response to their complaint [13]. This can lead to increased turnover rates, which can have significant costs for the organization in terms of recruitment, training, and lost productivity.

To mitigate the impact of sexual harassment on employees, it is important for organizations to establish effective policies and support mechanisms for addressing incidents of sexual harassment. This

may include establishing a POSH committee, providing training for employees and managers on recognizing and preventing sexual harassment, and establishing clear procedures for reporting incidents and providing support to victims.

In addition to these measures, organizations can also take steps to create a culture of respect and inclusivity within the workplace. This may involve promoting diversity and inclusion, providing opportunities for employee feedback and engagement, and ensuring that employees are treated with dignity and respect.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Sexual harassment at the workplace is a serious issue that can have significant negative impacts on the well-being, productivity, and retention of employees in Indian organizations. Despite the existence of legal frameworks and policies, there are numerous challenges that hinder effective prevention and addressing of this issue. However, there are also best practices that organizations can adopt to create a safer and more inclusive workplace culture that is free from sexual harassment.

Through the use of clear policies and procedures, regular training and awareness programs, a culture of respect and inclusivity, open communication, and support mechanisms, organizations can address and prevent incidents of sexual harassment. Additionally, the promotion of gender equality in hiring, promotion, and compensation practices, as well as encouraging male employees to become allies in the fight against sexual harassment, can help create a more positive and equitable work environment.

To effectively address sexual harassment at the workplace, it is essential that organizations conduct regular surveys to assess employee perceptions and take corrective measures based on the results. Collaboration with industry bodies and government agencies can also help in promoting best practices in preventing and addressing sexual harassment in the workplace.

Based on the challenges and best practices discussed earlier, here are some recommendations for organizations in India to create safer and more inclusive workplaces that are free from sexual harassment:

- Establish and enforce clear policies and procedures for reporting and addressing incidents of sexual harassment, including a POSH committee.
- Provide regular training and awareness programs for employees and managers on recognizing and preventing sexual harassment.
- Create a culture of respect and inclusivity by promoting diversity, inclusion, and equality within the workplace.
- Encourage open communication and provide support mechanisms for employees who have experienced or witnessed sexual harassment.
- Foster a safe and supportive work environment where employees can report incidents of sexual harassment without fear of retaliation.
- Ensure that complaints of sexual harassment are investigated promptly, impartially, and confidentially, and that appropriate action is taken against the perpetrator.
- Promote gender equality in hiring, promotion, and compensation practices.
- Encourage male employees to become allies in the fight against sexual harassment by promoting gender sensitivity and positive attitudes towards women in the workplace.
- Conduct regular surveys to assess employee perceptions of workplace safety, inclusivity, and satisfaction, and take corrective measures based on the results.
- Collaborate with industry bodies and government agencies to promote best practices in preventing and addressing sexual harassment in the workplace.

By implementing these best practices and recommendations, Indian organizations can create a safer and more inclusive workplace culture that promotes respect, equality, and productivity for all

employees. Overall, it is imperative that organizations take proactive steps to address sexual harassment at the workplace and create a positive work environment for their employees.

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