

## Sexual Harassment at Workplace: A Socio-Psychological Analysis

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### Abstract

Sexual Harassment at workplace has been analysed largely from the lens of legal-rightist perspective ignoring its deep rooted socio-psychological roots. Victims of sexual harassment experience a range of psychological problems that threaten their well-being throughout life. Clinical depression, Post-traumatic stress disorder, social withdrawal, lack of self-esteem are some of them. Stigma and discrimination are its social implications. The paper discusses the prevalence of sexual harassment in India, its various forms and vulnerability of specific groups. It also systematically reviews literature exploring different perspectives providing the causal explanation behind its existence such as the evolutionary-psychological, social-cultural, cross-cultural and personality and power perspectives.

**Keywords:** Socio-Psychological Approach, Well-being, Evolutionary-Psychological perspective, Socio-Cultural perspective.

Women have been part of formal organizational setups since the Industrial Revolution. For years, the sexual advances, intimidation and harassment was considered nothing more than a job hazard. In the 1970's Lin Farley coined the term "sexual harassment" and explained how it originated from patriarchy. The term initiated a discussion on what should be the acceptable standards of behaviour between men and women at workplace. The discourse on sexual harassment usually takes the rightist approach, pointing such behaviours as a blatant violation of the fundamental rights of equality and dignity of women and rightly so. It is prudent to discuss the legal remedies available for victims to seek justice but what is the need of the hour is to understand the deep rooted socio-psychological causes pointing out the origin of such behaviours. The responsible socio-psychological triggers causing harassment are largely ignored so as the long term mental health issues faced by the victims of sexual harassment. These issues manifest in the form of depression, anxiety, panic attacks, sleeplessness, shame, self-blame and loss of trust. The social costs manifest in the form of inequality, victimization of certain vulnerable groups, stigma and discrimination.

### Prevalence of Sexual Harassment

The prevalence of harassment can be understood from the fact that in 2017, INBA conducted a survey on over 6,000 employees and found that in India sexual harassment is pervasive in different job sectors, ranging in the form of lewd comments to an outright demand for sexual favours (Maratha, 2020). The private sector companies also reported a fourteen percent increase in sexual harassment complaints while no data available in the case of unorganized sectors (Bhattacharya, 2019).

According to the NCRB report 2015, around eighty two thousand cases of assault on women were registered in India and out of them twenty nine percent cases alone were registered under the category of sexual harassment, a worrisome issue which needs serious attention from policy makers.

### Forms of Sexual Harassment

Fitzgerald et al. (1995), proposed forms of sexual harassment through three dimensions that overlap and

comprise the behavioural construct of Sexual harassment which are **Gender Harassment** (insulting, hostile and degrading, verbal and non-verbal behaviours aimed at making the target uncomfortable. making obscene gestures, sending obscene videos and intimidation) , **Unwanted Sexual attention** (unwanted sexual touching, bumping at them intentionally at workplace, leering, catcalling sending suggestive texts), and **Sexual Coercion** (a quid pro quo approach where the perpetrator demands sexual favours from target by promising to provide the desirable rewards).

Although women are many times more likely to get sexually harassed at work, and in majority of cases by men colleagues or supervisors, there are incidences where men and members of LGBT community have complained of facing the same form of abuse at work. As reported by Viacom survey, forty three per cent of male corporate professionals reported to be subjected to sexual advances by colleagues (Arora, 2019). The combination of being an ethnic minority or the status of a migrant increased the risk of not only racial discrimination but also the risk of sexual abuse (Buchanan & Fitzgerald, 2008). Another notable fact is that boys and men are targeted for harassment by other males when the latter believe that they are violating the traditional heterosexual gender roles (Burn, 2019).

### Sexual Harassment from the lens of broader Socio-Psychological Phenomena

There are number of social, cultural, psychological factors whose interplay manifest in the form of sexual abuse and violence against fellow workers. The review of research studies on sexual harassment in Psychology has unfolded a number of perspectives that are discussed in the following points-

#### The Evolutionary-Psychological Perspective

One explanation of sexual harassment behaviour has been provided in the form of Evolutionary Psychological Perspective which says that men are biologically predisposed to have high testosterone levels that makes them naturally attracted towards women. This results in the increasing drive towards sexual harassment of women (Burn, 2019). The perspective proposes that just as natural

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selection leads to physiological and morphological changes it also plays an influential role in a person's behavioural and psychological repertoires.

The subjectivity in the perceptions of sexual harassment is also caused by evolutionary Psychology. It is believed that some of the jokes, gestures or behaviours that might be offending for a woman might not be offensive for males, in fact for males these can be harmless and friendly gestures. This led us to the psychological phenomena of differing perceptions. Colarelli and Haaland (2002) described how individual differences also influence the perception of sexually ambiguous behaviours. It has been found that men are more likely to interpret an innocuous behaviour from a woman as a sign of sexual interest, while women interpret the same behaviour from a man as just being friendly. Research studies have also shown that factors of age, gender and power and social status also determine the perceptions of sexually toned behaviour.

#### **The Socio-Cultural Perspective**

Another potential explanation of sexual harassment is embedded in the analysis of how socio-culturally gender roles are defined and the consequent **gender role socialization**. Most cultures follow patriarchal systems, where perceptions are that men are superior to women and that some forms of sexual violence against women are acceptable. Behaviours such as catcalling, inappropriate touching or passing lurid comments are considered by many as harmless flirtation.

The deep rooted socio-cultural gender roles also play a role where sexual violence is used by perpetrators to punish those who violate traditional gender roles and norms (Burn, 2019). There are certain occupations where women are required to don masculine behaviour and appearance, research suggests that such acts increase the risk of harassment (Leskinen, Rebelo and Cortina, 2015).

The misplaced sense of masculine identity is instilled in men through incorrect socialization. The parenting styles of mothers themselves is strongly associated with the notions of male entitlement and the developing of the attitude that it is a man's right to chastise a woman physically (Dhawan et al. 1999). There is a preference of male child over the female child, gender roles are defined in a manner that women are associated with household work while men are considered as the principle breadwinner of the family. In the modern era these roles are changing, women are increasingly making their way in organizations; however, the cultural and gender roles have not been changed. Thus even if a woman has the same position and rank at work, in the psyche of a male perpetrator, she is still an inferior being and when these attitudes of male superiority are internalized such men are more prone to resort to violent behaviour.

#### **The Personality and Power Perspective**

While gender socialization does influence the attitudes, one interesting question that can be asked is that why some men who are raised in same socio-cultural milieu are not abusive towards women? The answer lies in **the Personality Perspective** which focuses on the fact that there are certain personality traits that are specific to the perpetrators of sexual harassment. Zeigler et al (2016) found that personality traits of narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism are positively associated with sexual harassment proclivity. Another study on white collar workers found that lower level of openness and conscientiousness in men are associated with higher levels of sexual harassment behaviours, while in women it is associated with higher levels of neuroticism and extraversion (Hardies, 2019). The attractiveness of the perpetrator or victim also influences the perception of harassment. The behavior of attractive males was less likely to be seen as harassing and attractive females were more likely to be seen as harassed (Johnson and Lopez, 2000).

Another interesting line of argument is that sexual harassment prevails to maintain dominance over those perceived as weak and have low socio-cultural power. Psychologists have explained the role of **power perspective** through two popular theories, one is **vulnerable victim hypothesis** and another explanation is given through the **Power Threat model** (Burn, 2018). The vulnerable victim hypothesis explains that women and racial and sexual minorities are perceived to have low socio-cultural and low organizational power thus they are easy targets. Sexual harassment as a power tactic helps to maintain the glass ceiling in the organization and prevent women and other minorities to run for higher positions. In the quid pro quo harassment the perpetrator uses his authority to gain compliance from victims (Burn, 2019). It is this power that also prevents the victims to resist and to complain about the matter to higher authority.

#### **The Cross-Cultural Perspective**

The cross-cultural perspective explains how the same behaviour has different perceptions in different cultural contexts. In Latin American countries social norms are such that people commonly use physical contact and sensuality to socialize with each other and it could lead to more tolerant and relaxed attitudes towards sexual harassment if compared to other cultures (Merkin, 2009).

Hofstede (2001), explained that in individualistic cultures such as in Western countries, there is less tolerance for sexual harassment practices due to the emphasis on the individual goals and well-being. However, in Collectivistic cultures, in order to promote the group interests, such abuse is overlooked and is more likely to be brushed under the carpet. Cultures which are found to have high power distance (respect to authority and social hierarchy) are more likely to accept inequality in power and high

probability of harassment of individuals with less socio-cultural power. Uncertainty avoidance another dimension proposed by Hofstede (2001) refers to tendency of people to get nervous by ambiguous situations and seek strict codes of behaviour to avoid it. Thus countries where there is high uncertainty avoidance, people are more likely to keep harmony in job and less likely to register complaints of harassment even if they face it on a regular basis. Thus these cross-cultural differences must be kept in mind by managers who run workplaces comprised of multi ethnic identities.

There is no consensus that is reached among Psychologists regarding the causal explanations of harassment but the **Person by Situation Perspective** seems fit that proposes that biological predisposition as well as personality traits when combine with specific situational factors then it results in sexual harassment behaviours (Burn, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

The review of Socio-Psychological perspectives can lead us to the conclusion that sexual harassment has its origin in gender socialization norms and it exists due to the complex interplay of power, status and the need of dominance. It is not just limited to women but men and members of LGBT community and socio-economically weaker sections are also vulnerable. Harassment at workplace has a number of negative and undesirable outcomes for society and individuals. Miner-Rubino & Cortina (2004) reported that it is not just the victims but even other employees who work in the environment hostile to women experience diminished well-being. High workplace stress, lower productivity, high absenteeism is other poor organizational outcomes.

The societal outcomes of sexual harassment can be seen in the perpetuation of gender inequality in the workplace, weakening of economic power of women in the workplace, loss of income to families, seeking of less desirable jobs by women thus causing sheer wastage of talent. Low participation in workforce erodes the Gross domestic product of a country as much as by nine per cent (Berhadl and Ravor, 2011). Thus it proves that outcomes of this practice do not just have a localized impact but it has far reaching effects on economy as well as it seems as a blot to any civilized community which ignore such abuse.

### **Implications for Social Policy and Action**

Sexual harassment as discussed earlier is not simply a case of overt sexual attention towards the opposite sex. It has been used as a tool to perpetuate dominance and maintain status quo. Bhanwari Devi's act of preventing child marriage in rural Rajasthan was considered as the violation of traditions and disregard for gender hierarchy which resulted in the act of sexual violence against her. This incidence led to the passing of a specific act criminalizing Sexual Harassment at Workplace in 2013 in India. This was the case of gender punishing for non-conformity with the community defined gender roles.

Presently women working in unorganized sector still are not covered under any legal framework and are frequent victims of harassment.

The #MeToo campaign took attention to the fact that there is a need to improve the workplace cultures to make it safe, secure and inclusive for all. There is a need to bring open avenues for expression, sensitivity training of employees, regular psychological counselling and zero tolerance policies to prevent sexual harassment. Organization must implement the Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act 2013, in letter and spirit. There is also a need to discuss that whether this Act should be made gender neutral as victims of harassment can also be men and members of LGBT community.

The #MeToo campaign also led the International Labour Organisation to pass, the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention which provides the right of everyone to work free from violence and harassment and now it is a part of international treaty ratified by the 187 International member states (Gilhooley, 2020). This step is exemplary because as per a World Bank report 2018, countries such as Guatemala, Iran and Japan along with several other countries still has no legal provisions to prohibit sexual harassment at workplace (Stauffer, 2020).

Taking a cue from the gender socialization perspective, there is a need to question the patriarchal and sexist traditions that foster unequal gender roles. Gender sensitivity training should be part of school curriculum and social awareness campaigns must be encouraged at community level. Social audits in specific sectors where women are employed in large numbers such as in textile industries can also help in getting accurate estimate of the incidence of sexual harassment. The proactive role of Non-Governmental organizations can also lead to desirable outcomes. A notable example is Initiative for Inclusive foundation whose plea led the Supreme Court of India to direct central government to provide appropriate platforms for victims to register complaints without fear of retribution.

There is also a need to investigate socio-culturally induced factors that perpetuate this practice and the need to find ways to change social norms in a manner that such abuse can be prevented and a level playing field can be provided to all to flourish in life.

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