

CASE REPORT

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT WORK PLACE: ARE YOU SAFE?

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In today's world women are increasingly participating in the realm of work force, yet they are facing many obstacles in their way. Sexual harassment is one of those obstacles. Sexual harassment at work place is prevalent in every society. It could happen to anyone but women are the targeted victims. Sexual harassment is considered as a traumatic event and the victim may end up in having physical and mental sufferings that hinders a person to work effectively. At an organisational level this may result in decrease work effectiveness, decreased work productivity, high absenteeism, high turnover, and low staff morale. Hence there is a need that, organisations and government should look seriously into this matter. Proper education and training programs should be developed to deal with these issues. The goal must be both to deal with sexual harassment incidents effectively and to prevent the occurrence of future incidents.

Keywords: work place, harassment, training programs

INTRODUCTION

Shifting paradigm of globalisation and liberalisation has increased the women's participation in the realm of work force to contribute to family income and beat the burden of growing inflation. In this journey, women are endangered to face various obstacles; one of them includes sexual harassment. Harassment against women is perhaps as old as the very existence of women.¹ Harassment of women at work place is one of those problems which discourage women in taking active part in economic and social development of society.² The concern of sexual harassment is gaining increased recognition whether it is at work place, educational institution or at home.³ Civil society representatives have observed 70% of the women face sexual harassment at work place; whereas, other reports represent such cases up to 90%.⁴

CASE REPORT

It was a usual working day for a bedside nurse in a clinical unit at a private hospital setting. As the nurse was passing by in the unit, her way was apparently intentionally blocked by a senior male staff member in the unit. This employee was known among the staff due to sharing for his ill-intentioned habits to initiate and engage with a lady staff member in talk and then to eventually and quickly switch over to sharing dirty jokes and talks of nudity. Many times he was found in attempting deliberate unwanted physical contact with female staff, which remains unreported. That nurse usually avoids his encounter but that day become miserable when he stood on her way. She assertively asked him to move back, which he did but then abruptly he rushed and came close to her with an attempt to touch her physically. She moved backward and saved herself from that deliberate and ill-intentioned move of that aggressor; however in her annoyance she slapped him. Her other colleagues who witnessed the incident,

criticised her act with a rationale that she may end up with some kind of consequences as he was more powerful and strong being a male. She was advised by her colleagues to simply tolerate and remain quiet in this honourable institution of discipline. Some female staff members even warned her that she might have to remain prepared for a revengeful consequence. She wasn't motivated to report the incident and couldn't decide herself as she was confused with her unpredictable behaviour. It made her scared by foreseeing the possible repercussion and she couldn't report to work for next two days. It took a couple of days for her to get herself out of that traumatic event, but reflecting on this incidence after so many years, still gives her emotional pain.

This incident gave birth to several thought provoking questions:

- Whether it was an act of sexual harassment?
- Did she react appropriately in that scenario?
- Why her colleagues asked her to remain silent and to refrain from reporting this incident to anyone?
- How does sexual harassment affects on physical, mental and psychosocial wellbeing of an individual?
- What is the responsibility of our organisations we are working for?

This article reviews current literature and attempts to shed some light on these and other questions. The focus of this article is to identify causes and impact of sexual harassment at work place. Furthermore, it will propose to address the issue of sexual harassment at work place through proper education and training programs at organisational and government level.

ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE

Pakistan is a developing country; it has a patriarchal society in which gender specific behaviours are clearly defined. For instance, men are considered as dominant

feature, powerful, independent and superior personality of the society. Whereas, women are considered as mere male possessions, weak, powerless and dependent feature who are subordinates of men. With this mindset, males are considered as responsible to take care of whole family including woman. Similar is the expression of work place environment where abuse of power in working relationships represents the discrimination between men and women in our society. There is a very clear disparity between male and female rights such as, in work, employment, wages, education, health status and decision-making powers.⁵

Pakistan is a society of rigid norms and culture in which the role of a woman is usually considered within '*chadar and char deewari*' [bound within the family/house]. The life of the women becomes miserable when she attempts to work and take financial responsibilities of family against societal norms. According to an estimate seven out of ten women have to face harassment in physical, psychological, or social ways. Whether she is in the street, a shop, at workplace or home, there is a possibility that a woman might face some sort of harassment.¹

Sexual harassment is a complex issue and there is always confusion in its inclusion and exclusion criteria. The definition of sexual harassment was cited in Sigal:⁶

"Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment."

In the light of mentioned definition, the earlier mentioned scenario was an attribute of a sexual harassment. The male staff did the deliberate act to have a physical contact. However, interestingly every one remained silent and did not criticise or raised their voice against such unacceptable act. Social science research highlights that the women experiencing sexual harassment are more likely to ignore the incident either by stepping out or disregard it.⁷ This unreported act usually motivates the offender to continue the offensive behaviour.⁸ Pointing the issues pertaining to reporting the incident of sexual harassment, Ali⁹ mentioned:

"Pakistani women generally go through three different levels of issues within SH (sexual harassment) process. Firstly, women endeavour to hide SH due to Islamic modesty and cultural traditions. Secondly, once they decide to take action there is a lack of redress at organisational and government level. Finally, once they report the issue they face victimisation."

In addition, most of the cases of sexual harassment remains unreported considering the patriarchal society that often question victim's innocence and integrity then the offender, that makes almost 76% of the cases unreported.⁴ Women who are harassed at workplace are always made to feel at fault; and if they complain they may be fired from the job or lose promotion prospects or have to resign in same cases. It may affect their self-esteem and makes them less efficient.² Most often, victims are ashamed and humiliated, and concern that they will be labelled as bad women and therefore decide to keep quiet about it.¹⁰

DISCUSSION

Sexual harassment is considered as a traumatic event for an individual's life. An individual who had experienced such an event may end up in having physical and mental sufferings. The sexual harassment frequently impact on victim's psychological and physiological health, economical conditions⁴ and vocational development³. Consequently, it also leads to overall loss of trust in people, loss of confidence, poor self esteem, fear of being ridiculed, and suicidal ideations. This psychological trauma hinders the effective performance of the sufferers and may have a long-term effect on individual leading towards the road of mental illnesses. Undoubtedly, harassment is morally, legally and professionally unacceptable. Staff morale is reduced; in turn lowers their productivity, and increases absenteeism and turnover. It has spill over effects on individuals career growth, worker productivity, general well being and peace of mind: the fundamental rights of the employees.⁹

The sufferer is not the individual only but the organisation too. Quality of service will be impacted in organisation if its employees are not satisfied and feel safe in the work environment. Hence their job performance will decline and will subsequently, damages the reputation of an organisation.

Several strategies at individual, organisational and government level can prevent physical and mental health deteriorations due to workplace harassment. At an individual level, instead of avoiding the scenario and self-blaming;³ assertive confronting the offender can facilitate the prevention of similar acts. In addition, documenting and reporting the event with the required facts and witnesses will notify the case for possible action against the harasser and the harassment.

Sexual harassment is considered as an 'occupational hazard' and a violation of the right to work with dignity.¹ At an organisational level, provision of safe and harassment free environment need to be considered as an integral part of the organisational policies. This sense of security will also facilitate them to work efficiently and effectively. On the other hand ongoing educational programs, trainings, workshops,

and seminars should be arranged to make the employees aware of the behaviours associated with the sexual harassment.⁷ Organisation culture and management's commitment to eradicate sexual harassment through effective policy implementation and establishing safe work environment can facilitate productive working outcome of its employees. For sufferers, support group needs to be mobilised, under the guidance of organisation that can help them to speak and practice their rights. This group can also serve as a bridge of communication between the victim and the organisation.

Government need to explicitly identify the procedures and practices to solve the issue of sexual harassment for women at workplace in Pakistan through appropriate legal framework.³ Although the Government of Pakistan has taken positive steps towards the elimination of sexual harassment by introducing code of conduct at the workplace; however, the appropriate implementation of laws and policies of sexual harassment needs significant consideration. In addition, illiteracy and women's lack of awareness and access to legal information adds on to its pervasiveness. Hence, women empowerment through knowledge and education may aid them to speak for their rights.

Furthermore, media can also play a significant role in eliminating this curse from the society. The medium of television, advertisement and news paper are approachable to general public. Talk shows that discuss the facts and measures to deal this issue, public messages programs, billboard hoardings, print media and such other sources can be promoted to give awareness to the people on repeatedly basis to keep it live in society's minds.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

Sexual harassment is a complex social concern that needs to be addressed as a serious priority and with appropriate measures. Measures for prevention of sexual harassment; and protection of women need to be addressed at all level. There should be collective and rigorous efforts by the governments, employers,

employees and women's organisations to help create zero tolerance towards sexual harassment at workplace for women and in eliminating this menace from the society. Prevention is the best tool for the abolition of sexual harassment that could also be achieved through independent awareness of the individuals. However employer organisations and government need to take appropriate measures to streamline the policies and the implementation thereof. Sexual harassment can be eradicated most effectively if these strategies are promoted; it will not only improve the working environment but also enhance the physical and mental health of the people. That will have positive impact on job performance, employee satisfaction, and organisational quality outcome: An ultimate impact on the nation's development.

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