

**MORE THAN AWARENESS: A ZERO-TOLERANCE POLICY ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT
AT WORKPLACE**

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ABSTRACT:

Workplace sexual harassment is still a pervasive problem even in the age of *MeToo*. Awareness campaigns have raised awareness about the issue, but not necessarily done enough to eliminate harassment in professional spaces. Implementing a firm policy framework that establishes guidelines, protocols for enforcement and accountability is key to developing a safer and more inclusive workplace. This article tells how strict anti-harassment policies are essential, and what ethical and legal responsibilities the organisations should follow, alongside contribution of leadership towards zero-tolerance culture. It explores how bad policies have contributed to the mismatch, and the obstacles to more stringent policies. With emphasis on accountability and clear reporting mechanisms, organizations can minimize mere awareness and instead act with resolve against workplace harassment. The article ends with a call to assess company policies regularly, train employees, and pledge to a harassment and discrimination-free workplace. This include having strong workplace policies against sexual harassment, enforcing those policies and holding corporations accountable.

Keywords: Sexual Harassment, Workplace, Policies, Enforcement, Accountability.

INTRODUCTION:

Promises of a workplace free of sexual harassment have gone unfulfilled. However, harassment remains shockingly common, even in the face of growing legal frameworks and corporate policies designed to combat it. There are legislative requirements in India, for example, the ***Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013*** (POSH Act) as well as international legal instruments like the ILO Convention No. 190 on Violence and Harassment in the Workplace, which provide employers with a legal obligation to ensure safety at the workplace. Still, enacting laws doesn't protect workers. But a culture of silence still permeates many workplaces, where victims fear reprisals, damage to their professional reputation, or loss of their job, if they raise a complaint.

Power imbalance between employees and organizations is one of the main reasons why workplace harassment is still a prevalent issue. Often occupiers of authority in corporate hierarchies, oppressors are less likely to experience consequences when the oppressed are junior subordinates and encouraged to report without fear of professional repercussions. Moreover, an all-boys' club culture at work means that harassment will be left unchecked, and that there will be a subtle tolerance of it, the perpetuation of systemic gender discrimination. Poor grievance redressal mechanisms further make women shy away from reporting harassment. Victims do not trust a system to dispense impartial justice, even in organisations where an ***Internal Complaints Committee*** (ICC) exists.

Equally, traditional societal norms continue to be a significant factor when it comes to workplace conduct. The other crime here is that in many cultures, women and marginalized groups are taught to put up with bad behaviour or to think of it as a nuisance rather than a crime. Consequently, this normalisation gives rise to more perpetrators and deters cases of victims from continuing with their case. Despite organizations trying to address these problems with awareness camps and training programs, workplace harassment continues to exist, which suggests that these solutions are only partial. Departments need to

do more than just awareness camps to not just eliminate harassment but also need stringent punishment for the offenders, which helps making the zero-tolerance policy work.

WHY AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS ALONE WILL NEVER STOP HARASSMENT :

Corporate responses to sexual misconduct have become typical, and we have all heard them: sexual harassment education campaigns. A lot of companies organize regular workshops, compulsory online trainings, and information meetings that inform you about what is considered harassment, your legal rights and outlining how to make a complaint. And although this kind of thing helps raise awareness, it rarely translates to cultural change in the office. And one of the broadest limitations of recognition programs is its floor level approach. Most trainings are a one-off activity, a check-the-box compliance activity more than an actual effort to change harassing behavior. Employees might sit through these sessions but not really be engaged with it, it is seen as just a formality and not a process that helps in reflection and change of behavior. And too often, training materials utilize legal speak and fictional examples that probably do not reflect employee experiences, limiting the policy and practice connection. The most dangerous another flaw in awareness campaigns is that the awareness around such crimes is shifting the responsibility on the victims not the organizations and perpetrators. Unfortunately, many of the modules designed to combat harassment and other forms of workplace wrongdoing concentrate on how to identify it and report the behavior to the authorities, treating the symptoms but avoiding the underlying causes. By doing this, it is removing the responsibility of the employer and management who are responsible for making sure the workplace is free of harassment. Without a demonstrable commitment from leadership these initiatives will ultimately be futile, as employees may feel that reporting harassment or misconduct will lead to no meaningful action.

Furthermore, many companies struggle to connect awareness campaigns with actual policy activation. And while employees may know what qualifies as harassment, they may still not report it as they might fear repercussions. Often times, organizations are more concerned with preserving their reputation rather than seeking justice, choosing to sweep allegations under the rug to prevent bad press. Workers who file complaints of harassment too often suffer what some call "*professional retaliation*" things like passing over for advancement, being excluded from important projects and being socially ostracized in their workplaces. Such factors generate a perfect environment to silence victims and render awareness campaigns meaningless.

Also, awareness campaigns rarely focus on bystander actions to stop harassment. Employees who see bad behavior might not know how to step in, or worry that there would be backlash for siding with the person on the receiving end of bad behavior. Awareness programs that do not empower the collective workforce against workplace harassment by training the bystanders in active intervention only them fall flat without the active bystander training and intervention policies.

A ZERO-TOLERANCE POLICY: MORE THAN JUST RAISING AWARENESS :

If a company wishes to stamp out workplace harassment, it must develop a zero-tolerance policy that provides for immediate, unbiased, strict action to be taken against all offenders without exception, regardless of their rank or status. Zero-tolerance does not merely mean punishing one more than the other, but an environment in the workplace that does not allow for harassment at any level, and in which employees feel comfortable and safe enough to speak up without fearing backlash. Enforce a zero-tolerance policy by doing the following:

Specific, Enforceable Policies: Organizations need to stop issuing vague antisex harassment statements and have clear policies about what is harassment, how to report it, and what its consequences are. These policies must be easy to read and accessible to all employees.

Impartial and Non-Punitive Grievance Redressal Systems: A large number of organizations would have an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) based on the requirements of the POSH Act, what is crucial is that the ICC is non-partisan, transparent and maintains confidentiality. Victims should be able to report through several avenues, including anonymously, and the reporting process should be safe for victims.

Disciplines Needs to Be Strict and Transparent: Zero tolerance does not only need to be proclaimed. The first step in addressing that is for organizations to ensure that all perpetrators are held accountable — even, or perhaps especially, if the offender is high-ranking — and that disciplinary actions are made public, which shows the company is actively working to address harassment. If workers feel that repercussions depend on the status of the offender, belief in the system will evaporate.

Leadership Responsibility and Role Modelling: The strongest keywords leading to the creation of a zero-tolerance cultural will be leadership accountability. Top executives, managers, and senior staff must be ambassadors for anti-harassment policies. Frequent commitment from leadership to awareness and policy can reinforce how serious the company is about its position.

The Continuous and Interactive Training Programs: Awareness programs are a one-time event; organizations must instead invest in interactive, scenario-based training programs. Employees must be involved in solving real-world problems that they could face in their day-to-day as part of the Interactive training programs Training should be continuous and not a once-a-year tick-the-box exercise, cementing anti-harassment learning as part of the workplace culture.

Promote Bystander Intervention: Employees must be educated about safe bystander intervention in cases of harassment, reporting misconduct, and how to support neighboring targets. It becomes increasingly harder for perpetrators to function due to the presence of a proactive workforce that speaks out and stands against harassment.

Routine Workplace Introductions and immunity surveys: Organizations will need to carry out the mandatory nameless worker surveys and independent audits to scrutinize the impact and influence of these anti-harassment policies. These surveys can help find gaps so that policies do not remain confined to paper only.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AS AN ENABLER OR BARRIER OF HARASSMENT:

Organizational culture is a key factor in whether workplace harassment thrives or not. The internal environment, values, and attitude towards ethical behavior of a company influence how workers interact and whether misconduct is tolerated, ignored or addressed. If harassment is just the way things are at a workplace—because of ingrained biases, since one cohort holds power over another, or because nothing changes if you are on the right level, it is hard to keep steady at the stench. Abusers are protected by a wall of silence, and know they can act without consequences. And if you are an organisation that places the importance of inclusivity, mutual respect and accountability, you have established an environment in which harassment is not only discouraged but opposed by leadership and their peers.

Such toxic workplace culture often involves unbridled power dynamics, gender inequality, and no consequences for acting inappropriately. In such environments, senior employees, especially those in power and authority, may use their power to commit wrongdoing, without the risk of accountability. Employees seeing behavior like this may feel impotent, thinking: "The leadership is in on it. This only encourages wrongdoers and dissuades victims and bystanders from speaking up when organizations do not follow up with action. Thus creating a sense of harassment not as a one-time incident but as built-in structural aspect of the office environment.

It is important to note that leadership has a significant influence on creating and sustaining workplace culture. If harassment is to have zero tolerance, it must start at the top with executives and senior management modeling behavior. When company leaders speak out about harassment policies, treat

allegations seriously and hold everyone from janitors to board members accountable for violating them, they send a message to employees approving of zero-tolerance for harassment at all levels in the workplace. DEI (Diversity, equity, and inclusion) initiatives must be prioritized and actively championed by leadership, as marginalized groups are often most at risk of workplace harassment, and need the sense of security and value DEI provides. Organizations cannot just have anti-harassment policies; policy deployment in daily workplace practice is essential, and has to be followed by continuous reinforcing and training, with accountability as a tool.

In addition to all of this, workplace culture also includes peer-to-peer accountability. Instead, we need colleagues and team members to feel empowered to actually speak up to those who display inappropriate behavior and not just passively stand by. A culture of silence and non-engagement can be as damaging as direct involvement in harassment. Workers need to be comfortable calling out the off-color joke, the sexist comment, the unwanted come-on without fear of being shunned or punished. Is having bystander intervention training to know when to take action and assist your fellow workers in addressing harassment. Moreover, the posture of an organization with respect to harassment needs to be more proactive than reactive. You can track whether employees feel safe and supported by conducting regular employee feedback surveys, anonymous reporting systems, and external audits. A workplace that encourages employees to share and raise their voice without any fear of retribution will have less room for harassment. Finally, preventing workplace harassment is solely contingent upon organizational culture that embraces respect, safety, and accountability as enforced realities instead of mere rhetoric.

BEYOND COMPLIANCE: DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN LEGAL OBLIGATION AND ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY:

Legal frameworks such as the POSH Act, 2013 in India, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) guidelines in the United States, and ILO Convention No. 190 on workplace violence and harassment, lay down essential mandates for every organization to prevent sexual harassment at the workplace, but constituting the laws is insufficient. However, for many organizations, ensuring legal compliance is a box-check exercise that stops at fulfilling the bare minimum of legal requirements and fails to confront the root causes of systemic harassment in the workplace. But preventing this kind of harm is more than just legal compliance; it calls for an ethical imperative that delivers a workplace that values the well-being and dignity of employees over simple statutory compliance.

Understanding the difference between legal responsibility and ethical responsibility explains the gap between legal protections against harassment and its persistence in the workplace. The law prescribes things that need to be done — set up Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs), do awareness training with employees, adhere to due process in investigating and dealing with complaints. While these steps are encouraging, they do not always yield real change at work when they are simply treated as a box to check. Most organizations conduct POSH training every year, handout policy handbooks and boast of having a redressal mechanism, but not of whether employees actually have faith in these mechanisms or the fact that the offenders may not be punished. By contrast, an ethical approach to workplace harassment prevention takes it a step further by enforcing a workplace climate in which employees feel safe, respected, and supported, in excess of what is legally required.

The way to go beyond compliance for organizations is to leverage the best practices from global leaders in workplace safety. One example would be adopting independent third-party investigations for harassment complaints instead of having it isolated in-house for possible bias. A few organizations have even adopted “no forced arbitration” policies, promising that employees will not be coerced into private settlements that benefit the employer and silence the victim. In addition, it would also be a best practice to disclose publicly if and why an organization was found to have committed sexual harassment and how

it has rectified the situation, which would encourage organizations to take proper action when misconduct claims arise while ensuring employees that misconduct claims would not be disregarded.

In addition, an ethical obligation is to build an environment in which the default response to a harassment allegation is to a supportive response instead of skeptical response. Far too often, when a victim steps forward to tell her story, she faces disbelief, denial, or retribution. Responsible organizations safeguard victims and hold perpetrators accountable while encouraging all employees to play a role in moving forward in a positive direction. Employers need to extend their viewpoint beyond old-fangled ethos of “grievance redressal” and adopt a preventive and rehabilitative methodology that includes:

1. Multi-tiered interactive Scenario-based training at the workplace rather than rule-based compliance sessions
2. A leadership-led commitment in which company heads and other executives discuss and enforce anti-harassment measures rather than passing the buck to HR departments.
3. Frequent self-audits by the organizations to check the functioning of anti-harassment policies and whether the loopholes in them are working in favour of the powerful.
4. An environment that flat-out says there will be no retaliation; employees will also need counselling and legal support, rather than being pushed aside after a complaint.

The end goal should be a workplace culture in which employees feel appreciated, respected, and safe, not merely protected in accordance with the letter of the law. As a law compliance sets the base for a safe workplace, a responsibility develops the walls and structure that all enable companies to ultimately prevent harassment. If companies want to be genuinely harassment-free, they need to go beyond check-the-box legal compliance but at the same time ensure that their anti-harassment policies are not an empty legal exercise but instead a daily reality.

CONCLUSION:

Workplace harassment is an age-old problem that will not go away via a mantra of awareness. Even though structured training programs and legal provisions like POSH Act, 2013 are of paramount importance, they are of no avail if institutions do not build a proactive culture of accountability and zero tolerance. Harassment flourishes in places where power imbalance, lack of active stewardship, and social norms to not challenge misconduct. Change only really comes when organizations start actively taking action to subvert these structures.

Harassment-free workplace is not something to be created with policies but it needs to be part of the organization DNA (motto of ethical responsibility). This look beyond compliance and takes a comprehensive and employee-centered approach to ensure safe, dignified work and empowerment. Rather, companies should guarantee that their internal complaints mechanisms are not procedural formalities but trusted, effective and accessible channels for obtaining justice. The promotion of whistleblower protection, bystander intervention and independent investigation also should help inspire confidence in the system and create an atmosphere in which employees are incentivised to come forth to report alleged misconduct.

This transformation is determined by the Leadership. It also sends a message that workplace safety is inviolable when executives and other senior management lead the way by speaking out on harassment, sanctioning wrong-doers, and emphasizing inclusiveness. Harassment prevention is a compliance issue, but also part of leadership — if organizations do not take action decisively, they risk not only lawsuits but also reputation, working with unhappy employees, and productivity issues.

In the end, a zero-tolerance policy should not just be talk — it needs to be enforced consistently and transparently. Organizations have to put in place systems that prevent harassment rather than just react to the incidents of harassing behaviour. A culture of respect, fairness, and accountability can help create truly

safe, equitable, and empowering workplaces for everyone, beyond awareness campaigns and policy statements. Moving from compliance to a commitment to ethical behaviour goes beyond mere good practice; it is crucial for the future of integrity in the workplace—and indeed for workplace justice.

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