

Impact of Sexual Harassment on Women's Higher Education and Institutions Accountability

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Abstract—One of the social issues in contemporary culture is sexual harassment, which has contributed to the underlying issue of sexual assault that affects women worldwide. In 1997, the landmark case of Vishakha v. State of Rajasthan raised awareness of sexual harassment in Indian society. The Indian Supreme Court recognized in this case that sexual harassment is against women's constitutional rights to equality and dignity. So, we can say that the foundation for the creation of protections against workplace harassment of women, includes educational institutions. The criteria imposed by the ruling for addressing claims of sexual harassment were later incorporated into the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, and the UGC Regulations on Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal of Sexual Harassment of Women Employees and Students in Higher Educational Institutions, 2015 provide legal protections against sexual harassment in educational institutions in India. In addition to being a major barrier to women growth, sexual harassment of women in higher education is a grave violation of human rights. It is required for universities to offer secure environments for education, research, and career development. However, sexual harassment incidents lead to discrimination, anxiety, and insecurity, which hinders women's involvement in and access to higher education. Despite the POSH Act, 2013 being passed in India, the law is still not being fully implemented. As a result, there are still a lot of harassment instances occur, and many women either don't know about the legal options accessible to them or don't report them because they don't trust the redressal systems.

Index Terms—Higher Education, Women, Sexual Harassment, Workplace, Legal protection

I. Introduction

Sexual harassment causes major hurdles that lead to an unhealthy and hostile work environment that impedes employees' productivity, efficiency, learning environment, motivation, and morale by negatively impacting their career advancement, social, academic, and economic development in relation to organizational advancement. Due to these difficulties, employees have poor job satisfaction. It makes no difference if the workplace is a construction site with regular wage earners, a domestic helper within a home, experts working for multinational corporations, or an educational institution with individuals from highly educated and competent backgrounds. People's peace and safety continue to be major concerns for any civilized society. However, these conversations have consistently been suppressed. The majority of this harassment occurs because perpetrators find fun in it without consequence. The victim chooses not to submit a complaint because they are demoralized by the surroundings, their coworkers' prior experiences, their lack of faith in the system. A woman's fundamental right to gender equality under Article 14 of the Indian Constitution and her right to life and dignity under Article 21 of the Constitution, which includes a right to a secure environment free from sexual harassment, are both violated by sexual harassment. The Supreme Court in many of his judgement interpreting these Articles have stress on the right to lead a life with dignity assured by Article 21 of Indian constitution. In the past, the Indian Constitution's Article 15 and Article 19 (1) (g) were used to address situations of discrimination and workplace harassment. According to our Indian constitution while making

any policy the following principles should be considered by the state: free legal aid and equal justice;¹ education, labour rights and under certain situations, government assistance;² provide maternity benefits and fair and suitable working conditions;³ living wages and a respectable standard of living for workers.⁴ These guidelines for state policy must be followed while creating, implementing, and interpreting the law. According to Article 51A, in order to maintain harmony, all citizens must uphold and respect the Constitution. If disrespectful acts against women are to be taken, they must be forbidden.

The awareness of sexual harassment at educational institutions in Delhi NCR (India) was investigated in a study. A total of 430 respondents was chosen from 10 private and state colleges using simple random sampling, and the results of all respondents were divided into two categories for the study: private and state institutions. In comparison to state or government-controlled institutions, the survey found that awareness of private institutions is comparatively strong but unclear. The results also showed that sexual harassment occurs at both state and private universities.⁵ After engaging in sexual harassment of numerous female students, including classmates and seniors, a university student of Bangladesh was expelled.⁶

At a university based on Punjab a study was carried out with an eye on female students enrolled in different courses. A descriptive study technique was used, and 200 female students were included in the sample. Based on the data, 90% of female students reported having experienced physical harassment, but only 10% of students gave negative answers when asked about it.⁷

According to a survey it is reflected that more than 80% of the participants believed that the main cause of sexual harassment occurrences at educational institutions is the victim's lack of bravery, fear of shame, and social isolation when they file a complaint against the harasser.⁸

Even though being passed over a decade ago, the POSH Act, 2013 is still not being successfully implemented in the educational institution. The institution faces a number of obstacles that make the act's appropriate enactment and execution ineffective.

II. Impact of Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment at work is a serious problem that undermines the rights and dignity of many Indian women. Many women still experience harassment despite major legislative advancements, especially with the passage of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act in 2013. They frequently feel helpless. Addressing the underlying causes of this widespread issue is important because it not only ruins careers but also fosters a culture of fear and quiet. By defining sexual harassment precisely and requiring the establishment of Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) in organizations, the 2013 Act's legislative structure seeks to provide a secure and encouraging workplace for women.

Organizations need to nurture a culture of respect and accountability in order to build a truly safe workplace. This entail organizing frequent training sessions, raising awareness, and making sure that strong reporting procedures are in place to safeguard victims from reprisals. India may advance toward a more professional

¹ Article 39 A of constitution

² Article 41 of Constitution

³ Article 42 of Constitution

⁴ Article 43 of Constitution

⁵ Aina, A.D., Kulshrestha, P. Sexual Harassment in Educational Institutions in Delhi' NCR (India): Level of Awareness, Perception and Experience. *Sexuality & Culture* **22**, 106–126 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-017-9455-5> accessed on 05/03/2026

⁶ MdAbdulAlim, "Understanding Masculinity and Sexual Harassment for Sustainable Development", *Social Science, Humanities and Sustainability Research* ISSN 2690-3628 (Print) ISSN 2690-3636 (Online) Vol. 4, No. 5, 2023 (October 18, 2023) doi:10.22158/sshsr.v4n5p86. accessed on 14th May 2026 available at

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sshsr.v4n5p86>

⁷ Kaur, S.P. & Kaur, N. (2025). Experiences of Harassment Among Female Students in Higher Education: A University-Based Analysis. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 13(1), 3185-3193. DIP:18.01.306.20251301, DOI:10.25215/1301.306 <https://www.ijip.in> accessed on 27th Jan 2026

⁸ Srikanth Aligi "Incidents of Sexual Harassment at Educational Institutions in India: Preventive Measures and Grievance Handling" (2018) *Asian Review of Social Sciences* ISSN: 2249-6319 Vol.7 No.3, pp. 108-113

environment where women can work without fear and harassment and fully contribute to society and the economy by tackling the legal and cultural aspects of sexual harassment.

Harassment is a serious kind of violence and is defined as any behaviour that, under reasonable circumstances, makes a woman fear that her disagreement may result in unfavourable employment action or create a hostile work environment. In educational institutions, any form of bullying or threat intended to make it clear to a woman who objects that her refusal to cooperate, file complaints, or resist in any way will have negative effects on her exam results, if she is a student, or on her opportunities for advancement or employment, or job stability, if she is a faculty or staff, is also a type of harassment in nature.

Sexual harassment has long been acknowledged as one of the most violating and terrifying kinds of assault on a worldwide basis. The court referred to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which was adopted in 1979, and concluded that international treaties can be based upon to fill the gap and safeguard Indian citizens' human rights in the absence of any specific legal frameworks. Therefore, there was no law or regulation in India that particularly addressed sexual harassment before the historic ruling in the Vishaka Case. In the landmark case of *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan* (1997), the Indian Supreme Court recognized workplace sexual harassment as a violation of human rights. The ruling established guidelines for the effective enforcement of the basic right for equality through the prevention, protection, and punishment of sexual harassment. It mandated the establishment of a complaint procedure by the government, and other sector. According to the Vishaka Judgement (*Vishaka and Anrs vs. Union of India*, 1997), the guidelines must be strictly adhered to by both public and private organizations when handling sexual harassment cases until a legislative framework is developed and passed. It took sixteen years for Indian lawmakers to pass a bill that would address complaints about sexual harassment of women at workplace in the country.

Every woman who falls under the umbrella of an educational institution, including its academic staff, non-academic staff, and students, should be protected from sexual harassment, threatening behaviour, and exploitation while they are associated with the campus under the new law in India regarding the safety of women in the workplace, which has strict provisions for awareness and preventive measures. Our goal is to establish a culture in which every woman has the right to be free from sexual harassment and the right to work in a place free from all forms of sexual harassment.

III. Institutions Accountability: Issue and Challenges

Although educational institutions are supposed to be places of intellectual and social development, harassment frequently produces hostile atmospheres that negatively impact women's academic achievement, mental health, and career prospects. With the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 and the University Grants Commission Regulations on Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal of Sexual Harassment of Women Employees and Students in Higher Educational Institutions, 2015, the Indian legal system has expanded protections against sexual harassment in acknowledgment of women's vulnerability in educational institutions. This regulation hold educational institutions accountable for keeping their campuses secure by imposing specific requirements on them. The legal, administrative, and ethical obligation of educational institutions to guarantee the protection of female students, teachers, staff, and researchers against sexual harassment can be described as educational institutional accountability. Accountability also includes: Prevention of sexual harassment through awareness initiatives; creation of efficient channels for complaints; promptly looking into grievances; safeguarding complainants from reprisals; Counselling and support services are offered; disciplinary actions are taken against violators; and campus safety is constantly under review.

The education system combines institutional systems, regulatory oversight, legal compliance, and preventive measures to handle workplace sexual harassment of women. The following laws are applied to every educational institution for protecting women from sexual harassment

- The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act 2013.

- The UGC (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal of Sexual Harassment of women employees and students in higher educational institutions) Regulations 2015.
- Articles 14, 15, and 21 of the Constitution.

These laws require institutional authorities to prohibit sexual harassment and offer efficient redressal methods, and this rule includes universities, colleges and research institutes as "workplaces." In addition, the University Grants Commission has advised Higher Education Institutions (HEI) to abide by the University Grants Commission (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal of Sexual Harassment of Women Employees and Students in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations, 2015. In order to eradicate sexual harassment, the institution needs to upload the Internal Complaints Committee's constitutional details and member contact details, including name, phone number, address, etc.⁹ Employers and employees must be made aware of sexual harassment in the workplace, its different manifestations, and the options available to address it. The institutions should adopt preventive actions like Gender-sensitization workshops, campus safety audits, anti-harassment policy displays, staff and student orientation programs, and the incorporation of gender equality ideas into institutional culture. Faculty, Staff and students must have access to training programs that educate them how to resolve these kinds of issues in a positive manner. Culture needs to shift in order to eradicate sexual harassment. Acknowledging the right to be free from sexual harassment is essential to the nation's progress. Institutions must have a victim-centred perspective by offering temporary relief in the form of leave, providing defence against abuse and reprisals, making counselling and psychological support. One of the biggest obstacles to reporting sexual harassment at universities are the fear of repercussions for one's career or academic achievement. Because they fear victim-blaming, academic consequences, social stigma, and a lack of trust in institutional systems, many victims choose not to report harassment. Sometimes, the preservation of an institution's reputation takes precedence above the protection of victims. This could result in insufficient disciplinary action, delayed investigations, or the concealment of complaints. There are frequently large power imbalances in relationships between instructors, administrators, supervisors, and students. Such disparities could deter victims from complaining. It is common for students, faculty and staff to be ignorant of the legal safeguards and complaint procedures that are accessible. Internal Complaints Committees may not have sufficient resources, independence, or training, and they may only exist formally in a number of institutions. A successful committee ought to: maintain secrecy; adhere to natural justice principles; finish inquiries within the allotted time; prevent victimization of complainants and suggest suitable disciplinary actions. Institutional neglect is evidenced by the inability to create or effectively run such committees. It is the duty of educational institutions to make sure that students' educational possibilities are not hampered by harassment.

Sexual harassment can lead to: decreased academic achievement; absence from class; withdrawal from classes, postponed degree completion, and total cessation of education or quit the job in the educational institution. Therefore, institutional accountability goes beyond disciplinary measures to include protecting academic advancement and educational access. Anti-harassment rules must be closely monitored by university administrations. Among the responsibilities of administration are: keeping track of complaints; evaluating committee performance; regularly evaluating policies; and making sure legal obligations are met. Instead of viewing compliance as a formality, institutional administrator should show their dedication to gender-neutral governance and

- To take steps to promote a social, physical, and psychological situation that will increase awareness of and discourage sexual harassment of women.

⁹ UGC Notice Dated :30th April 2024, available at https://www.ugc.gov.in/pdfnews/3002996_Sexual-Harassment-English-Advisory.pdf accessed on 24th august 2025

b) To guarantee that the policy is implemented in letter and spirit by taking all suitable and required actions, such as forming committees for promoting gender awareness and investigating sexual harassment complaints.

IV. Obligation of Institutions under UGC regulation 2015

The UGC Regulations, 2015 strengthen protection for female students and staff by placing them under institutional obligation. Higher education institutions are required by the regulations to: create a committee for internal complaints; create policies that prohibit sexual harassment; organize sensitization and awareness campaigns; make sure campus governance is gender-sensitive; offer victims support services; and file compliance documents to regulatory bodies. These rules recognize that students have an equal right to be protected from sexual harassment, even though they are not employees.

Educational organization need to be proactive in preventing harassment by raising awareness of appropriate conduct and potential legal repercussions. Since prevention deals with the underlying reasons of harassment, it is the first and most crucial component of responsibility.

The main channel for handling problems is the Internal complaints Committee. The committee must operate autonomously, impartially, and effectively in order to maintain institutional responsibility.

V. Complaint Procedure as per Statute

Women who are related to the educational institutions, such as teachers, administrative personnel, contract workers, students and researchers, are protected under the POSH Act. It is mandatory for educational establishments to create Internal complaint Committees (ICC) and guarantee efficient grievance redressal procedures. Within three months following any incident of sexual harassment, a woman who feels wronged should submit a written complaint to the Internal Committee or Local Committee.¹⁰ When there are multiple events, the statute of limitations is determined based on the most recent incidence. If there is a good reason for the delay, the Committee may extend the statute of limitations by an extra three months. The Committee must offer appropriate help if the complainant is unable to file a written complaint. One of the most important aspects of the Act is the inquiry process, which establishes an internal system that can handle complaints. Only at the woman's request the Internal Committee will begin conciliation before doing an inquiry.¹¹ The Act specifically forbids using financial settlement as the foundation for conciliation. If a settlement is made, the Committee documents the terms and doesn't look into the matter further unless there are violations. The conciliation process seeks to resolve disputes quickly and amicably. The Internal Committee will launch a formal investigation if conciliation is not attempted or is unsuccessful.¹² A fair chance to present evidence, call witnesses, and be heard must be granted to each party. The investigation shall follow relevant service regulations and natural justice principles. The Complaint Committee may suggest temporary actions while the inquiry is ongoing.¹³ These actions could consist of: transfer of the respondent or the complaint; granting the complaint up to three months of absence; any additional relief required to guarantee safety and avoid reprisals. After the inquiry is over, the Committee sends the employer its report. If the accusations are proven true, the respondent may face disciplinary action, such as a warning, suspension, termination, or salary deduction to compensate the lady who was harmed. The complaint may be dropped if the accusations are not validated. According to the Act, the inquiry must be finished within ninety days, and the recommendations must be put into effect within sixty days. This avoids lengthy legal proceedings and encourages quick justice. Confidentiality is highly valued under the POSH Act. Public disclosure of information about the complaint, witnesses, proceedings, and recommendations is prohibited. The Act may impose fines for confidentiality violations. The act ensures procedural accountability and protects the interests of both parties by offering a right of appeal against the Committee's recommendations.¹⁴

¹⁰ Sec 9 of Posh Act

¹¹ Sec 10 of Posh Act

¹² Sec 11 of Posh Act

¹³ Sec 12 of Posh Act.

¹⁴ Sec 18 of Posh Act

The Internal Committee or the Local Committee, as applicable, may advise the employer or the District Officer, as applicable, to take action against the complainant if it finds that the allegation against the respondent is malicious, that the aggrieved woman or any other person making the complaint made the complaint knowing it to be false, or that the aggrieved woman or any other person making the complaint has produced any forged or misleading document. The act, outlines some obligations that each employer must fulfil.¹⁵ The law mandates that all employers create an internal committee, offer a safe workplace, and post a notice about the legal consequences of sexual harassment in any conspicuous area of the workplace. This committee is responsible for routinely planning orientation programs for its members as well as workshops and awareness campaigns to inform staff members with the provisions of the Act. Additionally, all facilities must be made available, and witnesses must appear before the Internal Committee or the Local Committee to provide any information that may be needed in relation to the sexual harassment allegation.

Furthermore, the employer must support the woman if she chooses to file a complaint about the offense under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS)2023, cause action to be taken against the perpetrator under the BNS or any other law currently in effect, or if the aggrieved woman so chooses, in the workplace where the sexual harassment incident occurred; treat sexual harassment as a misconduct under the service rules and take action for such violation; and track timely filing of reports by the Internal Committee. Internal complaints Committees (ICCs) may operate under the influence of university authorities, especially when allegations concern senior academics or administrators. ICCs must be independent, unbiased, and free from administrative pressure. Credibility and survivor trust depend on maintaining independence through external members, rotating committee leadership, and safeguarding against reprisals. Universities and colleges should institutionalize regular and mandatory training for ICC members. ICCs face the risk of making procedural mistakes that could undermine the redressal process and prompt court intervention if they are not properly trained.

VI. Judicial view

After the gang rape case of a social worker from Rajasthan who was targeted for her attempts to prevent child weddings, India's legal history of workplace harassment underwent a sea change. The incident highlighted women's vulnerability in the workplace and demanded the creation of a system for protection. There were relatively few legal remedies available to women who experienced workplace harassment, and society sometimes discouraged them from seeking justice at all. By delivering judgments that are fair and protect the interests of the society, the judiciary is supposed to play a dynamic role in society. By issuing instructions for preventing sexual harassment at work in the *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan* case, the judiciary significantly contributed to societal change regarding the particular issue of sexual harassment of women at workplace. In **Apparel Export Promotion Council v. A.K. Chopra**¹⁶ case the apex court expanded the definition of sexual harassment by including any direct or indirect action or gesture which tendency to outrage the modesty of a female employee are also come within the ambit of sexual harassment. In **Railway board v. Chandrima Das**, the court held that according to Article 21 of the Constitution, she was entitled to both the protection of her person and to be treated with dignity. She was not allowed to be treated with disrespect as a citizen of another nation, nor could she be subjected to physical violence by government workers who insulted her modesty. Thus, her right under Article 21 was infringed.¹⁷ In **Medha Kotwal Lele and others v. Union of India**,¹⁸ The court reaffirmed the necessity of correctly implementing the ruled of *Vishaka* case not only in form but in both substance and spirit.

In a case the apex court said that the complaints committee will take into consideration permitting cross-examination via written questionnaires keeping in mind that the verbal cross-examination by the respondent may be intimidating for the complainant. The witnesses may be subject to the same cross-examination process

¹⁵ Sec 19 of Posh Act

¹⁶ *Apparel Export Promotion Council v. A.K. Chopra*, AIR 1999 SC 625.

¹⁷ *Railway board v. Chandrima Das* AIR 2000 SUPREME COURT 988, 2000 (2) SCC 465, available at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/113663/>

¹⁸ *Medha Kotwal Lele and Others v. Union of India*, (2013) 1 SCC 297.

without disclosing their identities.¹⁹In another case the Delhi High Court has upheld the compulsory retirement of a professor of a Delhi-based university who was found guilty by the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) of sexual harassment allegation filed by a number of students and an alumnus.²⁰

VII. Conclusion

Legal requirements by themselves are insufficient to guarantee safe learning environments, as seen by the prevalence of sexual harassment issues. Universities must move from official compliance to actual, survivor-centric implementation of the POSH Act and UGC regulations is needed if they are to truly be free from sexual harassment. Institutional accountability acknowledges that educational institutions are accountable for fostering an environment that discourages harassment rather than just being passive places where it happens. ICC strengthening is essential to this process and continues to be an important topic for institutional reform and further study. Accessibility, confidentiality, and prompt resolution are given top priority in the progressive framework of the POSH Act's complaint system. Workplace justice is strengthened by the measures pertaining to conciliation, temporary remedies, appeal, and support in submitting complaints. A balanced strategy is needed to address workplace sexual harassment of women. Establishing transparent policies, continuous training, and secure reporting systems must be top priorities for organizations. Organizations may create an atmosphere where women feel strong, safe, and supported by cultivating a culture of equality and respect. Every employee, including those watching, must take an active role in stopping and dealing with sexual harassment. By working together, we can eradicate this widespread problem and establish workplaces free from harassment and bias. Many organizations either conduct inquiries without following procedural fairness guidelines or fail to form appropriately trained internal committees. The mechanism's efficacy is frequently compromised by employee ignorance, institutional unwillingness to disclose instances, and worries about reprisal. Additionally, in circumstances where victims need longer time to report harassment, the statutory duration of limitation may discourage complainants.

As a result, even if the POSH Act's complaint mechanism offers a thorough legal structure, its success rests on its efficient execution, Committee members' frequent training, institutional transparency, and constant surveillance by regulatory bodies. The POSH Act of 2013 and UGC regulation 2015's complaint process is a big step in the direction of guaranteeing women have secure and respectable environment in the educational institution. The Act aims at maintaining the rights of complainants and respondents by creating Internal and Local Committees, defining a systematic inquiry procedure, and guaranteeing secrecy and appellate remedies. However, the mechanism's actual efficacy depends not just on the statutory provisions but also on how consistently and fairly they are applied. To achieve the goals of the Act and promote educational institution free from sexual harassment, institutional accountability and awareness must be raised.

VIII. Suggestion

Awareness has a major role in preventing sexual harassment in higher educational institution. So, Institutions of higher learning should provide that:

- All newly appointed staff, faculty and students must receive orientation on sexual harassment laws.
- Ongoing awareness initiatives using internet platforms, posters, and workshops.
- Clearly communicating ICC contact information and complaint procedures.
- Institutions should release yearly reports on the following topics to help close the gap between law and its implementation: quantity and type of complaints received, the time it took to resolve them, and the actions taken.
- To guarantee accountability and consistency among educational institutions, the UGC should keep a close eye on these reports.

¹⁹ Bidyug Chakraborty v. Delhi University SLP (C) No.23060/2009.

²⁰Nupur Thapliyal “ Delhi High Court Upholds ICC Verdict Finding DU Professor Guilty Of Sexual Harassment”, Live Law.in (26/07/2025) available at <https://www.livelaw.in/amp/high-court/delhi-high-court/delhi-high-court-upholds-icc-verdict-finding-du-professor-guilty-of-sexual-harassment-298871> accessed on 23rd may 2026

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