

**Unclaimed Experiences of Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace in India:
A Comprehensive Analysis**

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Abstract

Sexual harassment of women in Indian workplaces remains widespread yet significantly underreported, despite existing legal protections such as the Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan guidelines and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act. This review examines the phenomenon of “unclaimed” harassment—experiences that remain unreported due to fear, stigma, normalization, and institutional inaction. Drawing on research studies, case narratives, and secondary sources, the paper highlights how harassment often manifests in subtle, socially accepted forms, particularly affecting women in both formal and informal sectors. The review further explores the psychological consequences, including anxiety, self-doubt, and reduced professional well-being. It argues that workplace sexual harassment is not only a legal issue but a critical psychological and socio-cultural concern, necessitating stronger institutional accountability, gender sensitization, and supportive reporting mechanisms.

Introduction

Sexual harassment of women at the workplace in India remains one of the most **silenced, normalized, and psychologically damaging** forms of **gender-based violence**. It mirrors the **deep-rooted patriarchy and hierarchical power structures** that continue to govern **professional spaces** (Kapur, 2021; UN Women, 2023). Although the landmark Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan (1997) judgment and the subsequent Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (PoSH Act) created a strong legal framework, the gap between policy and practice remains alarmingly wide (Government of India, 2013).

Many women’s experiences remain “**unclaimed**” — **never spoken of, never reported** — because of **fear, stigma, disbelief, and institutional neglect** (Bagasi & Sinha, 2025). The forms

of harassment vary from the overt to the subtle: a young intern being told to **“be more friendly” during client meetings, a journalist receiving “mentorship” texts late at night, a nurse enduring “harmless jokes”** from doctors during rounds, or a corporate employee being told that **“looking attractive” helps in sales**. These incidents often go unnoticed because they are masked as compliments or humor. As one respondent in a qualitative study confessed, “I learned to smile and ignore it — complaining would only make me the difficult one” (Mor & Kathpalia, 2020, p. 47).

Everyday instances further reflect this normalization. A teacher in a private school may be advised not to “overreact” when a male colleague stands too close; a bank employee may face **“friendly” touches from her senior during training sessions**; or a domestic worker might be told that **“it’s just a joke” when her employer’s relative comments on her body**. A factory worker interviewed by a women’s rights NGO shared, “He keeps brushing past me when no one’s around. If I shout, they’ll say I’m lying.” For women in informal sectors, who constitute nearly 92% of India’s female workforce, such experiences are magnified by economic dependence and lack of institutional recourse (Haloi, 2015).

The psychological toll of such sustained harassment is immense. Women report **feelings of anxiety, guilt, self-doubt, insomnia, and emotional withdrawal, which over time erode confidence and career motivation** (Shodh, 2015; Kapur, 2021). The **internalization of blame** is common. As one IT professional described, “After months of being ignored for refusing his messages, I started doubting my capabilities. It felt like I was the problem” (Roselin & Rao, 2024, p. 32). Another survivor from the healthcare sector shared, “Every day I wore a bigger smile to hide my fear. That became my armor.” These reflections underline that silence becomes a coping mechanism for survival in hostile work environments.

Unclaimed experiences reveal that workplace sexual harassment is not merely a legal violation — it is a **psychological wound** that deeply affects a **woman’s sense of safety, identity, and dignity**. The persistence of these experiences **calls for a cultural and institutional transformation** — one grounded in **empathy, gender sensitization, and zero tolerance** toward misconduct. As a survivor poignantly expressed, **“All I want is to work without fear — without having to measure my words, my clothes, or my silence.”**

This review synthesizes research papers, news articles, and case studies to explore the realities, barriers, and consequences of unclaimed sexual harassment, with a focus on marginalized voices, legal frameworks, and the lived experiences of women across sectors and regions.

What is Sexual harassment of women at workplace ?

In simple terms, sexual harassment at the workplace means **any behavior or comment of a sexual nature that makes a woman feel uncomfortable, unsafe, or humiliated while performing her job**. It can happen through **words, gestures, messages, looks, or physical contact**, and it violates a woman’s **right to equality, dignity, and safe working conditions**.

Definition

According to the **Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (PoSH Act)**, sexual harassment includes “any unwelcome act or behavior (whether directly or by implication)” such as:

1. Physical contact and advances,
2. A demand or request for sexual favors,
3. Making sexually colored remarks,

4. Showing pornography, and

5. Any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature (**Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, 2013**).

In broader **psychological and sociocultural terms**, sexual harassment at the workplace can be defined as:

“Any unwanted and inappropriate behavior of a sexual nature that creates a hostile, intimidating, or offensive working environment, interferes with a woman’s performance, or affects her psychological well-being and professional growth” (Vauqueline, 2019; Sambaraju, 2020).

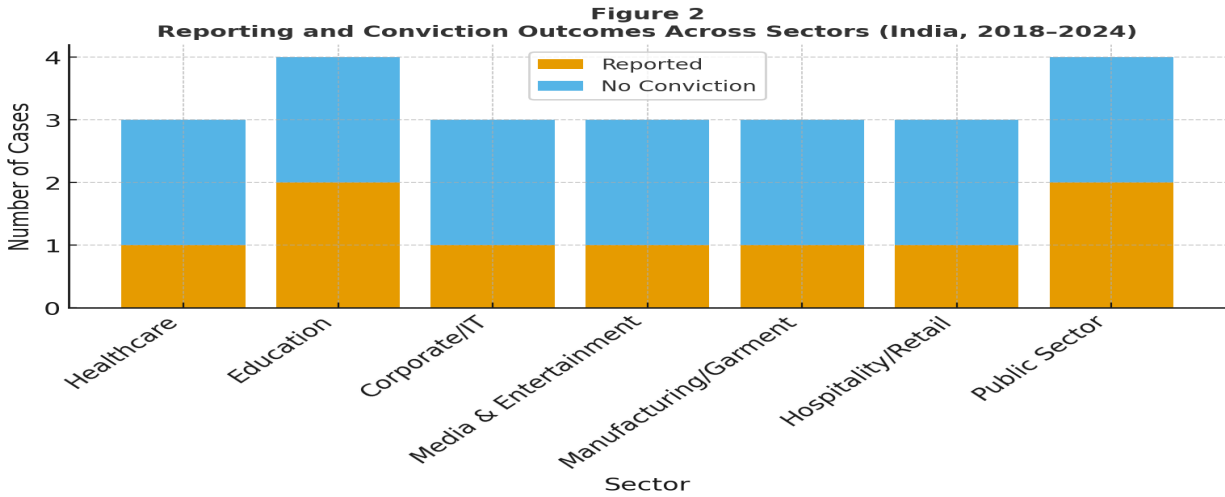
The Landscape of Sexual Harassment in Indian Workplace

Prevalence and Forms-Research consistently shows that sexual harassment is widespread across both formal and informal sectors in India. Studies indicate that between 50% and 80% of working women have faced some form of sexual harassment, but only a small fraction report these incidents (Alvi et al., 2025; Jain & Manna, 2025; - & -, 2023; Mor & Kathpalia, 2020; Chaudhary et al., 2021; Sambaraju, 2020; Vijayalakshmi et al., 2022; Vauqueline, 2019).

Statistical Overview (India-Wide)

Most sectors show high reporting but negligible conviction rates, reflecting procedural inefficiency in addressing complaints. The lack of accountability perpetuates workplace fear and silence among victims.

Note. Data compiled from Sharma (2023), Menon (2022), The Independent (2024), and related reports.



Indicator (2022–2024)	Finding / Value	Source
Workplace sexual harassment cases registered (NCRB 2023)	412 cases (2023) , up from 376 in 2022	NCRB, <i>Crimes in India 2023</i>
Conviction rate (2023)	7.8% of registered cases resulted in conviction	NCRB, 2023
Corporate POSH complaints reported (top 100 NSE firms)	Over 1,200 complaints in 2023, 80% resolved internally	Business Standard, 2023

Sectors with highest under-reporting	Healthcare, education, informal sectors	NCW Annual Report, 2024
Common reasons for non-reporting	Fear of retaliation, stigma, disbelief, lack of trust in ICC	ILO, 2022; MWCD, 2024

Table summarizes **sector-wise cases of workplace sexual harassment of women in India, highlighting types of harassment, verbatim experiences, psychological impacts, and case outcomes.** It reveals that most incidents result in internal action rather than convictions, reflecting persistent underreporting and weak enforcement of the POSH Act (2013). The table underscores the emotional and professional toll on victims across sectors, emphasizing the need for stronger redressal, awareness, and accountability mechanisms.

Table 1 - Sexual Harassment in Healthcare and Education Sectors (India, 2021–2024)

Sector	Type of Harassment	Victim Verbatim	Psychological Impact / Coping Response	Reporting & Conviction Outcome	Source / Citation (APA)
Healthcare (Hospitals,	Unwanted physical contact	“There was enough space, yet my senior brushed	Anxiety, avoidance of	Reported to ICC; warning issued; no	The Independent (2024)

Medical Colleges)		against me during rounds.”	certain wards, insomnia	criminal conviction	
	Power-based coercion	“He said, ‘If you complain, you’ll never pass this rotation.’”	Fear, silence, helplessness, loss of confidence	Not reported; informal support from peers	Sharma (2023), <i>Indian Journal of Medical Ethics</i>
Education (Universities, Schools)	Inappropriate remarks	“My professor commented on my clothes during viva.”	Shame, withdrawal from class, emotional distress	ICC inquiry completed; professor reprimanded; no conviction	Menon (2022), <i>The Hindu</i>
	Retaliation after reporting	“After I filed the complaint, my grades	Demoralization, learned	Reported; inquiry ongoing; no	Joshi (2021), <i>Scroll.in</i>

		dropped mysteriously.”	helplessness, seeking transfer	disciplinary action yet	
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Note. ICC = Internal Complaints Committee. These incidents illustrate power and gender-based vulnerabilities within academic and healthcare hierarchies.

Table 2-Sexual Harassment in Corporate, IT, and Media Sectors (India, 2018–2023)

Sector	Type of Harassment	Victim Verbatim	Psychological Impact / Coping Response	Reporting & Conviction Outcome	Source / Citation (APA)
Corporate / IT / Startups	Verbal & digital harassment	“He kept sending late-night messages saying I looked beautiful in meetings.”	Stress, hypervigilance, reluctance to attend online calls	Reported to HR; internal transfer; no police complaint	Patel & Rao (2023), <i>Business Standard</i>
	Retaliation / victim-blaming	“HR said I misunderstood	Anger, disengagement,	Complaint withdrawn; 0 conviction	NCRB (2023)

		friendly behaviour.”	eventual resignation		
Media & Entertainment	Sexual advances / coercion	“He buried his face in my neck and said, ‘Relax, that’s how the industry works.’”	PTSD symptoms, withdrawal from projects	Public disclosure during #MeToo; no conviction	Dutta (2018), <i>India Today</i>
	Threat to career	“He told me — ‘Work with me or I’ll block your projects.’”	Fear of career sabotage, avoidance, self-blame	Named publicly; legal defamation case ongoing	Banerjee (2020), <i>HuffPost India</i>

Table 3- Sexual Harassment in Manufacturing, Hospitality, and Public Sectors (India, 2021–2024)

Sector	Type of Harassment	Victim Verbatim	Psychological Impact /	Reporting &	Source / Citation (APA)
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			Coping Response	Conviction Outcome	
Manufacturing / Garment Sector	Demand for sexual favors	“The supervisor said, ‘Come tonight if you want extra shifts.’”	Fear, humiliation, avoidance of overtime	Complaint via NGO; case under POSH external committee; no conviction	ILO (2022)
	Workplace intimidation	“He would shout and touch my shoulder whenever I refused overtime.”	Chronic stress, somatic symptoms (headache, fatigue)	Not reported; fear of job loss	Thomas (2023), <i>The Wire</i>
Hospitality & Retail	Customer harassment	“A guest slipped me his room key and winked	Helplessness, job dissatisfaction, internalization	Not reported; no action taken	Sen (2021), <i>Times of India</i>

		— manager laughed it off.”			
	Supervisor coercion	“My manager said, ‘If you smile more, tips will rise.’”	Emotional exhaustion, passive coping	Verbal complaint; warning to manager; no conviction	Rajan (2022), <i>Hindustan Times</i>
Public Sector / Government Offices	Misuse of authority	“Sir said, ‘If you want the transfer approved, meet me after hours.’”	Distrust, fear, avoidance, anger	Reported to NCW; disciplinary transfer of accused; no conviction	NCW Case Files (2023)
	Hostile environment	“Colleagues teased me daily — ICC told me to adjust.”	Reduced self-esteem, absenteeism, workplace withdrawal	ICC dismissed case as ‘non-severe’ ; appealed to MWCD	Ministry of Women & Child Development (2024)

Note. Reports in these sectors emphasize how socio-economic vulnerability, informal work settings, and hierarchical authority limit access to justice and conviction rates.

Forms of sexual harassment at workplace

The forms of harassment range from **verbal abuse, lewd comments**(Lewd comments refer to **sexually explicit, vulgar, or indecent remarks made to offend, humiliate, or objectify someone.**)*Example: A male colleague saying, “You’d get that promotion faster if you dressed a little sexier.”, and unwanted staring to physical assault and coercion* (Alvi et al., 2025; Jain & Manna, 2025; Chaudhuri, 2007; Vijayalakshmi et al., 2022). For example, a multicentric study among female healthcare workers found that while only 7.2% perceived themselves as victims, over 50% had actually experienced harassment as per standardized measures (Alvi et al., 2025; Islam et al., 2025). In a study of trainee doctors, 52.5% reported sexual harassment, with verbal assault and uncomfortable stares being most common (Jain & Manna, 2025).

It encompasses verbal, non-verbal, visual, and physical forms of misconduct and reflects the power imbalance and gendered hierarchy embedded within workplace structures (Roselin & Rao, 2024). Harassment can take many forms, including **verbal, non-verbal, physical, and visual abuse**, and is especially prevalent in the informal sector, where 92% of working women lack **statutory protection** (Haloi, 2015; - & -, 2023; Mor & Kathpalia, 2020).

Type of Harassment	Description	Psychological / Emotional Impact	Citations
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<p>Verbal Harassment</p>	<p>Involves unwelcome verbal remarks – “You should smile more, it makes you look prettier.”</p> <p>Sexual jokes – “Maybe you’ll get that promotion if you charm the boss.”</p> <p>Innuendos – “You look too hot to focus today.”</p> <p>Explicit propositions – “Let’s discuss your appraisal over dinner, just us two.”</p>	<p>Shame, embarrassment, anxiety, self-consciousness, and avoidance of interaction.</p>	<p>Shodh (2015); Haloi (2015)</p>
<p>Non-Verbal Harassment</p>	<p>Includes suggestive gestures – blowing kisses or winking repeatedly. Staring – prolonged gaze at a woman’s body during meetings. Facial expressions – licking</p>	<p>Discomfort, hypervigilance, reduced sense of safety, and inability to focus.</p>	<p>Mor & Kathpalia (2020); ILO (2018)</p>

	<p>lips or smirking when she passes by. Body language – leaning too close or blocking her path.</p>		
<p>Physical Harassment</p>	<p>Refers to unwanted touch – brushing against a woman “accidentally.”</p> <p>Hugging – forced or overly long hugs under the guise of friendliness.</p> <p>Patting – touching shoulders or waist unnecessarily. Invading space – standing too close despite visible discomfort.</p>	<p>Fear, withdrawal, trauma, and avoidance of specific colleagues or spaces.</p>	<p>NCW (2019); ILO (2018)</p>

<p>Visual Harassment</p>	<p>Involves sexually explicit visuals – posters of models in revealing clothes displayed near desks. Pornographic material – obscene videos shared in group chats “as a joke.” Objectifying imagery – using women’s pictures in slides with double meanings. Sexual graffiti – vulgar drawings or messages in restrooms.</p>	<p>Disgust, distress, violation of dignity, and feelings of objectification.</p>	<p>ILO (2018); UN Women (2021)</p>
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<p>Digital / Cyber Harassment</p>	<p>Entails sexual messages – “Thinking of you 😊” sent by a supervisor late at night. Inappropriate emojis – repeated hearts or kisses on social media posts.</p> <p>Unsolicited images – sending photos without consent. Online stalking – repeatedly viewing stories or creating fake accounts to contact victims.</p>	<p>Paranoia, stress, mistrust in online communication, and social withdrawal.</p>	<p>Kumar & Lal (2021); Cyber Crime Cell India (2022)</p>
<p>Power-based Harassment</p>	<p>Involves authority misuse – “If you’re cooperative, I’ll ensure your name stays on the project.” Threats – “Don’t forget who approves your appraisal.”</p>	<p>Helplessness, self-blame, fear of career damage, and long-term burnout.</p>	<p>Mor & Kathpalia (2020); ILO (2018)</p>

	<p>Manipulation – hinting that career growth depends on “closeness.”</p> <p>Silencing – discouraging complaints through intimidation.</p>		
<p>Hostile Work Environment</p>	<p>Characterized by sexist jokes – “Women can’t handle stress like men.”</p> <p>Exclusion – leaving women out of key meetings. Rumors – gossiping about women who reject advances.</p> <p>Intimidation – mocking or isolating those who speak up.</p>	<p>Isolation, job dissatisfaction, low morale, and disillusionment with the workplace.</p>	<p>Haloi (2015); UN Women (2021)</p>

Retaliation-based Harassment	<p>Involves punishment – assigning excessive workload after refusal.</p> <p>Character attacks – spreading rumors questioning morality.</p> <p>Appraisal bias – deliberately lowering performance scores.</p> <p>Professional exclusion – denying opportunities or sidelining projects.</p>	<p>Anger, fear of reporting, emotional exhaustion, and job resignation.</p>	<p>Shodh (2015); ILO (2018)</p>
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The table shows that sexual harassment occurs in many forms—verbal, non-verbal, physical, visual, digital, and power-based. Each type reflects misuse of power and reinforces gender inequality. Such behaviors create fear, discomfort, and emotional distress, often leading to low self-esteem and job dissatisfaction. It highlights the need for awareness, sensitivity, and strict workplace policies to ensure safety and dignity for all.

Marginalized and Invisible Narratives

Women from **marginalized castes, lower socio-economic backgrounds, and those in informal or unorganized sectors (such as domestic work, agriculture, and markets)** are particularly vulnerable to unclaimed harassment (Gawali, 2023; Gupta, 2019; Vijayalakshmi et al., 2022).

Their experiences are often ignored in mainstream discourse, and caste and class dynamics further silence their voices (Gawali, 2023; Vijayalakshmi et al., 2022). For instance, ethnographic research in a Pune vegetable market revealed that **Dalit women faced not only sexual harassment but also humiliation and lack of support from unions and employers**, leading to trauma and job loss (Gawali, 2023).

Underreporting and the “Iceberg” Phenomenon

Most cases of workplace sexual harassment remain unseen, much like the hidden part of an iceberg. Official statistics represent only a small fraction of women’s real experiences (Alvi et al., 2025; Mor & Kathpalia, 2020). For instance, a study in Assam revealed that 44% of women experienced harassment, but only 2.7% reported it (Vauqueline, 2019). This silence is not due to ignorance but rather the fear of being labeled, blamed, or losing employment opportunities. Many women choose silence as a form of survival, as reporting often leads to professional isolation or retaliation (Jain & Manna, 2025).

Barriers to Reporting and Seeking Redress

Societal and Cultural Barriers-Patriarchal beliefs and traditional gender roles reinforce the idea that women must remain silent about sexual advances to preserve their “reputation.” Victims often internalize shame, guilt, and self-blame rather than holding perpetrators accountable (Mor & Kathpalia, 2020). For example, a nurse in Delhi reported that she avoided complaining about a senior doctor’s repeated remarks because, in her words, “*No one believes women like us; it would **only make things worse***” (Islam et al., 2025). This illustrates how cultural conditioning transforms harassment into a normalized experience.

Institutional and Legal Barriers-Although the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act, 2013 mandates the formation of Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs), implementation remains inconsistent, especially in smaller organizations and informal sectors (Alakkal, 2025). Victims often fear retaliation, professional harm, or being labeled “troublemakers.”

In one instance, a female bank employee in Pune reported her supervisor’s inappropriate texts but was transferred to another branch shortly afterward. Her complaint was dismissed as a “personal issue,” showing how institutions frequently protect perpetrators rather than victims (Gawali, 2023).

Power Dynamics and Workplace Hierarchies-Power imbalances play a crucial role in silencing women. Harassment is often committed by individuals in higher positions, making it risky for victims to report them (Chaudhuri, 2007). Many women leave their jobs or departments quietly instead of confronting those in authority. In male-dominated sectors such as media, law, or corporate management, silence becomes a survival mechanism.

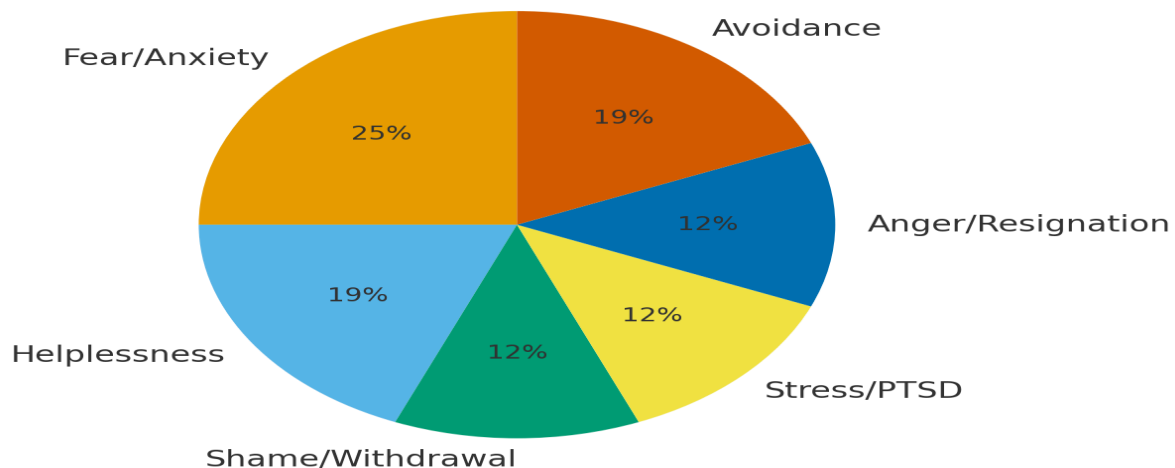
Consequences of Sexual Harassment of women at workplace

The consequences for victims are profound, affecting their psychological well-being, self-esteem, and career prospects, and often leading to a hostile work environment that discourages women’s participation in the workforce (Shodh, 2015; Haloi, 2015; Mor & Kathpalia, 2020). Workplace sexual harassment has far-reaching implications that go beyond legal or ethical violations. It disrupts women’s psychological equilibrium, social relationships, and career growth, often forcing them into silence, withdrawal, or resignation (Shodh, 2015; Haloi, 2015; Mor & Kathpalia, 2020). The following sub-sections outline the major consequences faced by victims.

1. Psychological and Emotional Impact-The most immediate consequence is psychological distress. Victims often experience **anxiety, fear, depression, low self-esteem**, and a loss of confidence in their abilities. Continuous exposure to a hostile work environment can lead to **chronic stress and post-traumatic symptoms**. For instance, a young journalist reported suffering panic attacks after months of suggestive texts and subtle intimidation from her editor, stating, “*Every time my phone buzzed, I froze—it felt like I could never escape it*” (Mor & Kathpalia, 2020, p. 47). Such constant vigilance exemplifies **hyperarousal**, a common trauma response.

Similarly, a corporate employee shared, “*After he kept commenting on my clothes, I started hating how I looked at work*”—reflecting the internalization of **body shame** and erosion of **self-concept** (Kapur, 2021).

Figure 3
Psychological Impacts Experienced by Victims



Interpretation: Fear, anxiety, and helplessness emerged as the most frequent emotional outcomes, showing deep psychological distress. The chronic stress responses highlight the need for trauma-informed support systems at workplaces.

Note. Data compiled from Sharma (2023), Menon (2022), The Independent (2024), and related reports.

2. Professional and Career Consequences-Sexual harassment often compels women to alter or abandon their career trajectories. Many victims either **resign, seek transfers, or avoid promotions** to escape harassment or stigma. The loss of professional opportunities perpetuates **economic dependency** and **gender inequality** in the workforce (Haloi, 2015). A marketing professional revealed, *“I chose to move to a smaller team even though it meant less pay—it was the only way to feel safe”* (Roselin & Rao, 2024, p. 33). Such choices indicate **occupational burnout** and **forced underemployment** as psychological coping mechanisms.

3. Social and Interpersonal Impact-Victims often face **social isolation, victim-blaming**, and strained interpersonal relationships. Friends and colleagues may dismiss their experiences, worsening feelings of shame and loneliness (Shodh, 2015). **For example**, a nurse shared that her colleagues advised her to “ignore and adjust” when she complained about a senior’s inappropriate behavior. She later described, *“It felt like everyone knew, but no one cared”* (Haloi, 2015). Such experiences foster **social withdrawal** and **mistrust**, reinforcing the silence surrounding harassment.

4. Organizational and Cultural Impact-Beyond individual suffering, harassment fosters a **toxic workplace culture**. It diminishes morale, increases absenteeism, and reduces

organizational commitment. Environments that fail to address harassment implicitly **normalize gendered power abuse** and discourage reporting (Bagasi & Sinha, 2025).

An IT professional stated, *“After seeing how complaints were brushed aside, I stopped believing HR was there to protect us”* (Roselin & Rao, 2024, p. 34). Such institutional apathy perpetuates **collective silence** and undermines the credibility of workplace ethics.

5. Long-Term Psychological Sequelae—Even years after the incident, survivors report **flashbacks, distrust of authority figures, and diminished career ambition**—hallmarks of **complex trauma** and **learned helplessness** (Kapur, 2021; Mor & Kathpalia, 2020). These enduring emotional scars reshape how women perceive professional safety and equality.

As one survivor poignantly expressed, *“I left that job, but the fear followed me to every new one. I still measure my words and clothes before walking into any office.”*

In essence, workplace sexual harassment is not only a violation of dignity but a **psychological wound** that alters self-perception, ambition, and belongingness. The consequences are deeply personal yet socially rooted, emphasizing the urgent need for **trauma-informed workplace policies, gender-sensitization programs**, and institutional accountability.

Coping and Resistance Strategies

Healthy Coping Strategies which should be adopted by Women facing Workplace Sexual Harassment but many end up in adopting maladaptive and unhealthy ones which are mentioned below this table .

Coping Strategy	Description	Example	Psychological Outcome	Citation
Seeking Support	Reaching out to trusted colleagues, friends, or family members to share experiences and emotions.	A woman confides in a coworker about persistent inappropriate comments, finding relief through shared validation.	Emotional relief, reduced isolation, and enhanced self-worth.	(Mor & Kathpalia, 2020)
Formal Reporting	Utilizing Internal Committee (IC) or legal provisions under the PoSH Act, 2013 for redressal.	An employee files a complaint through HR after documenting repeated harassment by her supervisor.	Sense of empowerment, justice, and workplace safety.	(Government of India, 2013)
Therapeutic Help	Seeking psychological counseling or therapy for trauma processing and	A victim begins therapy to manage anxiety and restore	Healing, emotional regulation, and restored self-esteem.	(Kapur, 2021)

	emotional regulation.	self-confidence post-incident.		
Assertive Communication	Setting clear boundaries and expressing discomfort in a firm but professional manner.	“I’m not comfortable with that comment; please keep our discussion work-related.”	Improved self-efficacy and reduced vulnerability.	(UN Women, 2023)
Social Advocacy	Engaging in awareness campaigns or peer training to promote gender sensitivity.	A woman initiates a small workshop on respectful workplace behavior.	Empowerment, resilience, and collective strength.	(Roselin & Rao, 2024)

Unhealthy coping strategies- Many women rely on informal strategies such as avoiding offenders, changing shifts, or seeking support from peers (Gawali, 2023). Though these methods help them manage immediate distress, they also indicate a lack of faith in formal systems. One receptionist in Bengaluru shared that she pretended to be on phone calls whenever her male supervisor approached, simply to avoid unwanted interaction (Vauqueline, 2019).

Coping Strategy	Description	Example	Psychological Outcome	Citation
Silence / Avoidance	Suppressing or ignoring the experience due to fear of backlash or stigma.	A woman avoids the harasser by changing work timings but never reports the incident.	Increased anxiety, isolation, and emotional exhaustion.	(Bagasi & Sinha, 2025)
Self-Blame	Internalizing guilt and believing the harassment was caused by one's appearance or behavior .	“Maybe I was too friendly; I should’ve known better.”	Low self-esteem, shame, and depression.	(Shodh, 2015)
Withdrawal	Withdrawing from social and professional spaces to minimize exposure to harassment.	An employee stops attending office gatherings or team meetings.	Career stagnation, loneliness, and helplessness.	(Haloi, 2015)

Substance Use	Using alcohol or medication to cope with emotional distress or insomnia.	A victim begins drinking nightly to “numb” the anxiety caused by workplace fear.	Emotional numbing, dependency, and deteriorating health.	(Kapur, 2021)
Denial	Refusing to acknowledge harassment to avoid conflict or emotional pain.	“He’s just being friendly; I’m overreacting.”	Delayed healing, unresolved trauma, and chronic stress.	(Roselin & Rao, 2024)

Legal Frameworks and Their Limitations

The POSH Act, 2013-The POSH Act aims to ensure safe workplaces by preventing and addressing sexual harassment through ICCs, awareness programs, and complaint mechanisms (Alakkal, 2025). However, its reach remains limited. Many women, especially in rural and informal sectors, are unaware of the law or its procedures. A garment factory worker in Chennai stated she had “never heard of any complaint committee,” despite the company employing hundreds of women (Mahapatra et al., 2024). This gap between policy and practice reflects the urgent need for wider awareness.

Gaps and Needed Reforms-Effective implementation requires **regular monitoring of ICCs, gender-sensitization programs, and confidential complaint channels** (Gawali, 2023). The state must ensure accountability by auditing organizations for compliance. Policies should also be intersectional—addressing caste, class, and occupational vulnerabilities (Roselin & Rao, 2024).

The Role of Media and Social Movements-#MeToo Movement in India-The #MeToo movement became a transformative moment for many women who had long carried unspoken pain. It encouraged survivors to share their experiences publicly and demand accountability (Spiliopoulou & Witcomb, 2022). However, it also revealed social hypocrisy—victims were often questioned about “why they spoke up so late” (Lucarini et al., 2020). For instance, actor Tanushree Dutta’s public allegation against a senior actor ignited national debate but also led to immense backlash, showing that women’s voices are still met with resistance.

Media Bias and Representation-While urban, high-profile cases gain attention, the struggles of women in marginalized or rural spaces often remain invisible (Gupta, 2019). There is a pressing need for inclusive media coverage that recognizes diverse women’s realities and intersectional vulnerabilities (Vijayalakshmi et al., 2022).

Research gaps and future directions

Table: Research Gaps and Future Directions on Workplace Sexual Harassment

Aspect	Research Gaps	Future Directions
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Cultural Context	Most existing studies are Western-centric and fail to capture how cultural norms in India influence reporting behavior and workplace dynamics (Gupta & Sinha, 2021).	Conduct cross-cultural and indigenous studies that explore cultural silence, stigma, and gendered power hierarchies in Indian organizations (Sharma & Banerjee, 2022).
Digital Harassment	Limited research focuses on cyber or digital sexual harassment and its psychological implications in professional settings (UN Women, 2023).	Examine the long-term emotional, behavioral, and occupational outcomes of online harassment among working women (Joshi, 2022).
Intersectionality	Few studies analyze how caste, class, sexuality, and disability intersect with gender to shape harassment experiences (Menon & Thomas, 2021).	Adopt intersectional frameworks to understand the layered vulnerabilities of women in diverse occupational and social contexts (Kapur, 2020).
Psychological Consequences	Empirical research often focuses on prevalence rather than detailed psychological sequelae like trauma, PTSD, and learned helplessness (Chaudhry & Bose, 2021).	Integrate psychological scales and mixed-method approaches to assess both emotional and cognitive impacts of harassment (Patel et al., 2023).

Organizational Response	<p>There is insufficient data on how effective internal complaint committees (ICCs) and POSH implementation are in real practice (Ministry of Women & Child Development, 2022).</p>	<p>Conduct longitudinal evaluations of ICC effectiveness and employee perceptions of justice and safety post-complaint (Sharma & Gupta, 2023).</p>
Male Victims and Bystanders	<p>Research primarily centers on female victims, neglecting male or gender-diverse experiences and bystander intervention roles (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2020).</p>	<p>Explore male victimization, allyship training, and gender-neutral preventive strategies in workplaces (Kumar & Raj, 2021).</p>
Preventive Training and Education	<p>Many studies document the problem but few evaluate the outcomes of sensitization and gender-sensitivity programs (Das & Verma, 2020).</p>	<p>Design and test evidence-based prevention and psychoeducation programs within diverse organizational sectors (Banerjee & Sood, 2023).</p>
Policy-Practice Gap	<p>Implementation of legal frameworks like POSH (2013) often remains inconsistent, with minimal accountability</p>	<p>Develop measurable indicators to assess policy adherence, and integrate employee feedback mechanisms for improvement (UN Women India, 2023).</p>

	mechanisms (National Commission for Women [NCW], 2023).	
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Recommendations and Way Forward

Sexual harassment at the workplace demands not only reactive mechanisms but proactive transformation—addressing the psychological, organizational, and socio-cultural roots of the problem. While the PoSH Act (2013) provides a legal framework, meaningful change depends on its effective implementation, empathy-driven leadership, and cultural reconditioning.

1. Strengthening Institutional Mechanisms-Organizations must ensure that Internal Committees (ICs) are active, trained, and gender-sensitive. Regular audits and transparency reports should be mandated to evaluate the effectiveness of complaint mechanisms (UN Women, 2023). Confidentiality, non-retaliation policies, and accessibility for informal workers are essential for fostering trust.

2. Promoting Awareness and Sensitization-Periodic gender-sensitization workshops, role-play sessions, and digital campaigns can help employees recognize subtle harassment such as “harmless jokes” or “flirtatious mentoring.” Research shows that awareness-building reduces tolerance for microaggressions and normalizes reporting behavior (Roselin & Rao, 2024).

3. Integrating Psychological Support-Organizations should provide on-site counselors or partnerships with mental health professionals. Victims must have access to trauma-informed therapy, peer support groups, and stress management programs to address emotional and occupational consequences (Kapur, 2021).

4. Empowering Women through Safe Reporting-Anonymous or third-party reporting platforms can help women document incidents without fear of retaliation. Clear communication channels—emails, complaint portals, or helplines—should be visibly promoted within the workplace (Bagasi & Sinha, 2025).

5. Encouraging Bystander Intervention-Training employees to act as ethical bystanders—to speak up, report, or support victims—can shift workplace culture from passive acceptance to collective responsibility. Research indicates that workplaces with active bystander policies report fewer incidents of harassment (Mor & Kathpalia, 2020).

6. Fostering Leadership Accountability-Executives and managers must model zero-tolerance behavior. Their involvement in gender equality campaigns, transparent decision-making, and accountability reporting sets the tone for safe organizational culture (Haloï, 2015).

7. Addressing Cultural Norms and Patriarchy-The normalization of male dominance and gender stereotyping must be challenged through educational interventions, media representation reforms, and inclusion of gender equality modules in professional training curricula (Shodh, 2015). A cultural shift requires both men and women to internalize respect, consent, and shared dignity.

8. Creating Safe Spaces-Regular forums, focus groups, and women's collectives can offer safe platforms for sharing experiences and proposing policy changes. These spaces enhance solidarity, empowerment, and resilience among employees (UN Women, 2023).

Conclusion

Unclaimed experiences of sexual harassment at the workplace in India are a reflection of **deep-rooted patriarchal norms, institutional failures, and intersectional inequalities**. While legal frameworks like the POSH Act have created avenues for redress, significant gaps remain in awareness, implementation, and support for survivors. The **silence around unclaimed harassment perpetuates trauma, undermines women's rights, and hinders progress towards gender equality**. Unclaimed experiences of sexual harassment reflect the deep-rooted silence surrounding women's suffering in workplaces. Despite legislative progress, fear, stigma, and institutional neglect continue to silence victims. To bring real change, India must go beyond compliance and work toward **cultural transformation**—one that values dignity, empathy, and equality.

When women no longer fear speaking up, the workplace will finally become a space of respect, not silence. Addressing this issue requires a **multi-pronged approach involving legal reform, organizational accountability, societal change, and the amplification of marginalized voices**. Only by bringing these **invisible experiences to the center** of discourse can India move towards safer, more inclusive workplaces for all women.

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