

#MeToo at the Workplace: Exploring Sexual Harassment Experienced by Female Employees in Private Sector Organisations in Delhi-NCR

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ABSTRACT

This study explores sexual harassment experiences of female employees in private sector organisations in Delhi-NCR. Adopting a mixed methods approach, a 3-part survey tool was used to gather data from 206 female employees. The experiences of 20 participants who had reported sexual harassment were then qualitatively explored through semi-structured interviews. While significant differences in the experience of sexual harassment were found across marital status and age groups, no significant difference were found between women at different designation levels. Although high levels of awareness were found (80.1%), several social, attitudinal and systemic barriers prevented women from accessing complaints mechanisms and taking action. A lack of trust in the system, a tendency to normalise sexual harassment, and to change one's own demeanour at work to prevent harassment was also observed. This indicates the need to bring about a shift in both societal and organisational attitudes to implement anti sexual harassment policies successfully.

Keywords: Workplace Sexual Harassment, Barriers, Age, Marital Status

INTRODUCTION

The complex, new world that the modern-day employee inhabits is chequered with challenges of all sorts. Cutting across industries -

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entertainment, healthcare, military, finance, there is hardly any sector that has not witnessed a flurry of sexual harassment allegations and victims who have broken the floodgates to voice their anguish and seek legal and social redressal. On 16th October, 2017, Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano encouraged women to publicly voice their sexual harassment experiences and denounce sexual assault by posting the hashtag “MeToo” on social media platforms. While the popularisation of the hashtag “MeToo” can be traced to Hollywood, it was used more than 500,00 times on Twitter and in 12 million Facebook posts by users worldwide within the first 24 hours (Serres, 2017), giving a glimpse into the magnitude of the problem and making it amply clear that the malaise of sexual harassment had spread far beyond showbiz. With more and more women claiming their right over safe workplaces and joining in the chorus of “#MeToo”, the movement has well and truly entered the non-Hollywood world of work. This paper acknowledges the voices of the female participants in this mixed methods study, who came forward to share their experiences of sexual harassment at workplace, claiming their space in what is now a global movement against sexual harassment across contexts.

Today, the ramifications of sexual harassment lawsuits and the impact of harassment on employee well-being, has forced organisations across the world to sit up and take notice of this real and urgent concern. Merely paying lip service is no longer sufficient, and swift and stern response to grievances regarding sexual harassment has become a critical HR function. What makes this study particularly pertinent is that despite India being a signatory to the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and its commitment to the Constitutional doctrine of equality and personal liberty enshrined in Articles 14, 15 and 21, sexual harassment at workplace continues to be one of the most closeted and under reported forms of gender discrimination in India (Shukla, 2002). This is particularly worrisome in the context of the falling participation of women in the labour force. Considered a driver of growth of economy, female labour force participation declined from 31.1% in 2013-14 to 27.4% in 2015-16 (Verick, 2017) While the decline is attributed to complex interactions among various economic and social factors operating at both the household and macro-level, analysts highlight that legal rights and protections, including those around sexual harassment that affect the participation of women in the public domain must be examined to tackle this discouraging trend.

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 defines Sexual Harassment as, “any

one or more of the following unwelcome acts or behaviour (whether directly or by implication), namely: physical contact or advances; a demand or request for sexual favours; making sexually coloured remarks; showing pornography; any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature” (pp. 9). In addition, the guidelines place the responsibility on employers to provide a safe work environment to their women employees and include both preventive and remedial measures to make the work environment safe. The guidelines also direct the establishment of redressal mechanism in the form of Complaints Committee and elaborate on the provisions therein. The guidelines extend to all kinds of employment, from paid to voluntary, across the public and private sectors. Despite these measures, the malaise of workplace sexual harassment is rampant.

Fitzgerald and Shullman (1985) identified three forms that sexual harassment can take at the workplace. The first, called gender harassment, is a kind of a hostile environment harassment which includes a variety of verbal and non-verbal behaviours, aimed at degrading, insulting and creating a hostile work environment. The aim here is not sexual cooperation but intimidation. Berdahl (2007) argues that it is not just the desirable women who meet feminine ideals that are targeted, but more so the ‘uppity’ women who are seen as ‘role-deviants’ that are targeted by harassers. When men experience a threat to their male identity by ‘masculine’ women, they may be motivated to derogate them by engaging in gender harassment. The second type, called unwanted sexual attention refers to sexually charged verbal and nonverbal behaviour that is offensive, unwanted, and unreciprocated. The third category is that of sexual coercion which refers to forceful attempts to get sexual compliance by offering bribes or engaging in threats.

Different models have been proposed to explain sexual harassment, namely; natural-biological model that locates harassment in the natural desire of men towards women (Studd & Gattiker, 1991), power models that argue that sexual harassment is a result of men’s economic power over women (Evans, 1978), and sex role spill over theory that views sexual harassment as a product of spillover, the carryover of irrelevant or inappropriate gender-based expectations for behaviour into the workplace (Gutek & Bruce, 1982). Another model by Fitzgerald et al. (1997) established that both job gender context and organisational tolerance for sexual harassment predict co-employee harassment, which in turn adversely impacts job satisfaction, physical and mental health. O’Hare

and O'Donohue (1998) outlined four sets of factors that are met for sexual harassment to occur: motivation of the harasser, overcoming internal inhibition (such as the harasser's empathy towards the victim, sense of morality etc.), overcoming external inhibitions against harassment (such as grievance procedures, sex-ratio and explicit warnings and consequences), and finally overcoming victim resistance, which includes the victim's sex-role and job status.

Sexual harassment at the workplace can have very serious consequences for the victim, the organisation as well as for other working women who experience it second hand. Sexual harassment has a cumulative, demoralising effect that discourages women from asserting themselves within the workplace, while among men it reinforces sexist stereotypes about appropriate gender behaviour even at the place of work. Pervasive sexual harassment in certain types of businesses creates a hostile or intimidating environment that causes women to leave their jobs or discourages them from seeking those jobs in the first place. The documented effects of sexual harassment are reduced mental health, stress, anxiety, loss of self-esteem, and depressive symptoms even after a decade (Houle et al., 2011), deteriorating relationships with co-workers, physical health issues, such as loss of appetite, headaches, weight fluctuations, and sleep disturbances, work outcomes such as job dissatisfaction and disengagement, routinely made visible by tardiness, absenteeism, project neglect and employee distraction, financial challenges, and career disruption (McLaughlin, Uggen, & Blackstone, 2017). The potential cost to business and society is also huge. Each year, millions are lost due to absenteeism, low productivity, employee turnover, low morale, and legal costs stemming from sexual harassment. The economy also suffers due to premature retirement and higher insurance costs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In India, research in this area has sought to examine definitional issues, prevalence of sexual harassment at workplace, causes, consequences and suggested preventive steps that organisations can adopt to combat workplace sexual harassment (See, for instance, report by Yugantar Educational Society, 2003). The data around prevalence has been varied depending upon factors such as the industry, the sector and demographic factors (Sahgal & Dang, 2017). An article published by The Hindu (15th November, 2010) reported a survey on 600 female employees of the KPO/

BPO sector, conducted by the Centre for Transforming India. The survey found that 47% participants did not know where to report, while 91% cent did not report for fear of consequences. 82% of the incidents took place outside office premises, and in nearly 72% of the incidents the perpetrator was a superior. 60% of the respondents did not know about workplace sexual harassment policies of their organisations. Subsequent reports by The Economic Times (6th August, 2017) reported that sexual harassment data has started to 'come out of corporate closets' following the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 and the regulations framed by SEBI (Securities and Exchange Board of India), that mandate the disclosure of the total number of sexual harassment complaints and the pendency data by all listed companies at the end of the financial year.

In addition to highlighting the gravity of the scenario, researchers have also attempted to empirically identify factors leading to workplace sexual harassment. Bhat and Deshpande (2017) identified male dominance, inferior job position and lesser job opportunities to be the leading causes of violation of women's basic immunities at the workplace. Unnikrishnan et al. (2010) in their sample of 160 women employees from Mangalore reported that 28% women had experienced some form of harassment, out of which 37% were less than 25 years of age, and 48.8% revealed that they had been harassed within a year of joining their jobs. The perceived reasons for harassment were their being more efficient than their male colleagues (45.7%), followed by being beautiful (23.9%). Other aggravating factors identified are age (Saxena, 2016), skewed sex-ratio at workplace (Mc. Laughlin et al., 2012), marital status and perceived friendliness (Sahgal & Dang, 2017). Nauman and Abbasi (2014) research on the banking sector in Pakistan reported that attractiveness, privacy allowed in the office and work ethics significantly predict the level of sexual harassment at workplace.

Ironically, sexual harassment policies only play a marginally significant role in aggravating or limiting harassment. Sarpotdar (2013) pointed out that privately-owned organisations are not receptive to complaints of sexual harassment. Despite enactment of the law, there is unwillingness in organisations to streamline policies or set up appropriate mechanisms. Chaudhari (2008) asserts that it is not sufficient to have a grievance mechanism in place, as the power dynamics against a woman if she dares to make a formal report, or the status of the perpetrator, often result in the complaint getting invalidated. Considering the social taboos

still associated with sexual harassment and the long pendency in courts; provisions on sexual harassment have never been successfully invoked. On the other hand, Gruber (1998) found that organisations that take proactive steps, have visible and accessible redressal mechanisms are more successful in curtailing the problem of sexual harassment.

The above highlights urgency of further research on examining both the nature of workplace sexual harassment across contexts and the gaps between intent and action. The present study responds to this need and seeks to explore sexual harassment experiences of one segment of India's workforce - female employees in private sector organisations in Delhi-NCR. It aims to study the relationship between personal characteristics such as marital status, age, designation of victim and sexual harassment at workplace. It also aims to analyze the qualitative experience of harassment, awareness of policy, and action taken by the victims of harassment.

Hypotheses

Review of literature revealed that there is a difference in the experience of sexual harassment among married and single women (De Coster et al., 1999; Sahgal & Dang, 2017), and both age (Unnikrishnan et al., 2010), workplace power (McLaughlin, Uggen, & Blackstone, 2012) and designation of women (Saxena, 2016) have been found to be aggravating factors for sexual harassment at the workplace. Based on this, the following hypotheses were formulated:

Hypothesis 1. There would be a significant difference between married and single women employees on experience of sexual harassment.

Hypothesis 2. Age of the woman employee will have a significant effect on experience of sexual harassment.

Hypothesis 3. Designation of the woman employee will have a significant effect on experience of sexual harassment.

METHOD

Design

The present study uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine sexual harassment experiences of female employees. Survey method was used to first collect data from a sample of 206 female employees across various private organisations in Delhi NCR. A three-part tool which included demographic details, the Sexual Experiences

Questionnaire (SEQ) and closed ended questions about the harasser/harassment was mailed to participants. This was followed by face to face/telephonic interviews with those participants who reported harassment. The quantitative data were analyzed with the help of SPSS version 16.0, and the qualitative data using thematic analyses.

Sample

The participants for this study were identified through convenience sampling. Only women employees in private sector organisations in Delhi/NCR, employed for a minimum period of 1 year were chosen. 206 participants were drawn from varied private organisations, ranging from design houses, media houses, MNCs, banking and other financial sector organisations. They were from middle/upper socio-economic strata, residing in Delhi/NCR region. 49% of the sample worked in Gurugram, 23.79% in South Delhi and the remaining were spread across North/East/West Delhi, Noida, Faridabad and Ghaziabad. About 95% of the present sample was at least a graduate, 43% being post graduates. On an average, their tenure in the present organisation was 2 years and 11 months. 161 participants were below 30 years, 25 between 31-40 years and 20 above 41 years of age.

Procedure

The study was conducted in two phases from January to April, 2018. In the first phase, survey questionnaire was mailed to 206 participants. In the second phase, 38 participants who had reported harassment were identified. These were then followed up for a personal interview. Of these, 18 refused to be interviewed and only 20 agreed. Thus, interview data was obtained from 20 participants. The participants were assured of confidentiality and assured that their responses shall only be used for research purposes.

Measures

Demographic Sheet: This contained closed ended questions seeking demographic information regarding: age, marital status, level of education, living arrangements, designation, location of workplace, tenure, gender of supervisor, work hours, type of company, and nature of job.

Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ): This questionnaire developed by Fitzgerald et al. (1988) is a 16 item, 5-point Likert scale (never =

0, once or twice = 1, sometimes = 2, often = 3 and many times = 4). SEQ has been divided into 3 dimensions by Fitzgerald and Shullman (1985), namely gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion, with 4, 7 and 5 items, respectively. It has a reported internal consistency coefficient of .92, and has demonstrated relationships to both psychological states and physical health and has been used extensively in previous researches.

About the Harasser/Harassment: This contained closed ended questions on location of harassment, characteristics of the harasser, nature of action taken, outcome of action, and awareness about sexual harassment policies at workplace.

Interview Schedule: The interview sought to explore the participant's experience of the harassment episode, both in terms of their emotional reaction to it, how they cognized it and made sense of it. Further, the impact of the harassment and their efforts towards redressal were explored.

ANALYSIS

Quantitative Analysis

Frequency count and percentages were calculated to examine the extent of harassment and participants' awareness of Supreme Court Guidelines about prevention of sexual harassment. Data from six participants was subsequently discarded due to incomplete responses, making the total to 200 participants. The effect of personal characteristics such as marital status on sexual harassment at workplace was examined by conducting a t test for independent means. The effect of age and designation on sexual harassment was examined by conducting a one-way Analysis of Variance.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis of interview transcripts was carried out using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Although we largely followed a deductive approach to code and interpret data, as pointed out by Braun and Clarke (2006), "in reality coding and analysis often uses a combination of both an inductive and deductive approach." (p. 57). The 6-step procedure of familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes and finally, producing the report was followed. In following these steps, conceptual categories were arrived at by combining similar codes. For example, 'men's privilege' and 'misogyny' were combined

into the concept of ‘prevailing social conditions’. Concepts that emerged frequently across interview transcripts were developed into themes and those that were not well represented were removed. The 3 researchers considered all verbatims under 24 conceptual categories to arrive at 9 themes that emerged across participants.

RESULTS

Prevalence of Sexual Harassment

38 out of 206 participants (18.45%) reported being harassed at the workplace. Out of the various dimensions of sexual harassment, gender harassment was found to be the highest, followed closely by unwanted sexual attention. Sexual coercion was found to be very low in the present sample. Only 9 out of 206 women reported some aspect of coercion (being bribed/threatened/implied better treatment in return for sexual favours).

Awareness of Policy for Prevention of Sexual Harassment

165 participants (80.1%) were aware that there was a policy on sexual harassment in their workplace; 19 (9.22%) did not know, and the remaining 22 (10.68%) were unsure. 180 (87.37%) participants were aware that the Supreme Court mandates the setting up of committees to enquire into complaints of sexual harassment in the workplace, while only 26 (12.62%) were not. This indicates adequate awareness in the present sample.

Personal Characteristics and Sexual Harassment

A significant difference was found in the experience of sexual harassment between married and single women, with the latter experiencing higher levels of harassment (Table 1). Hypothesis 1 that there would be a significant difference between married and single women employees on experience of sexual harassment is accepted.

Table 1: Comparison of Sexual Harassment between Married and Single Employees

	Single (n = 149)	Married (n = 51)	t-score	p-value	Cohen's d
Mean	3.006	1.117	3.029	.0028	0.52
SD	4.53	2.42			

One-way ANOVA was conducted in order to determine the impact of age on sexual harassment (Refer Tables 2 and 3). This effect was found to be significant ($F = 4.385$, $p = 0.014$, $\eta^2 = 0.30$). Hypothesis 2 that age of the woman employee will have a significant effect on experience of sexual harassment is accepted. Games Howell post hoc comparisons demonstrated a significant difference between sexual harassment reported by women employees below 31 years and between 31-40 years (Games Howell $p < .001$) and below 31 and above 41 years (Games Howell $p < .001$).

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations on Sexual Harassment as a Function of Age

Groups	N	Mean	SD
1. Below 31 years	159	2.962	4.558
2. 31 years - 40 years	22	0.818	1.181
3. Above 41 years	19	0.842	1.501
Total Group	200	2.525	4.194

Table 3: One Way ANOVA Comparisons of Sexual Harassment Across Three Different Age Groups

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	P	η^2
Between Groups	148.302	2	74.151	4.385	.014	.30
Within Groups	3351.573	197	17.013			
Total	3499.875	199				

One-way ANOVA was conducted in order to determine the impact of designation on sexual harassment. No significant difference was found between sexual harassment reported by participants across the three levels of designation- junior, middle or senior (Refer Table 4 and 5). Hypothesis 3 that designation of the woman employee will have a significant effect on experience of sexual harassment is rejected.

Table 4: Means and Standard Deviations on Sexual Harassment as a Function of Designation

Groups	N	Mean	SD
1. Junior Management	58	2.966	4.668
2. Middle Management	104	2.289	3.810
3. Senior Management	38	2.5	4.489
Total Group	200	2.525	4.194

**Table 5: One way ANOVA comparisons of Sexual Harassment
Across three Different Designation Groups**

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	P
Between Groups	17.098	2	8.549	0.483	0.61
Within Groups	482.777	197	17.679		
Total	3499.875	199			

Experiences of Sexual Harassment

Thematic analysis led to the identification of 9 themes that ran across the participants' experiences of sexual harassment (Refer Table 6).

Table 6: List of Themes

Understanding Sexual harassment: 'What' happens
Understanding Sexual harassment: 'Where' it happens
Understanding Sexual harassment: 'Who' are involved
The Harasser
The Victim
The emotional experience of sexual harassment
Making sense of sexual harassment
Chosen Courses
Barriers Faced
Professional Ramifications
Personal Reverberations

Understanding Sexual Harassment: 'What' Happens

Our analysis revealed a wide range of harassment incidents, all sharing one common feature - the discomfort experienced by the victim. In some instances, harassment was verbal in nature, such as passing sexual comments, sending lewd messages, maligning the character of the victim and fat shaming. One participant shared, *"I still remember what he said. You used to look so hot earlier, now you seem to be piling on weight everywhere, how will you continue wearing dresses like this?"* Another participant described, *"Some senior male colleagues started cracking sexual jokes which made me feel uncomfortable. They do it like once in 2 weeks."* Seemingly casual conversations at the workplace with sexual undertones were reported. One participant said, *"He talks about his co-workers wives, and about how the office has become 'pleasing to eye'*

because of 'you ladies'." Talking about being coerced into socialising outside work, one participant described, *"this guy always bothered me and forced me to meet him privately after work."*

10 out of 20 participants who were interviewed reported being touched inappropriately or being forced into physical acts such as kissing. One participant said, *"Whenever I used to be alone, he would cling to me and once he talked about his sexual relations with his wife."* Incidents of being touched on the shoulder or the waist while apparently leaning over to help with some work were reported frequently. Describing a physical incident of sexual harassment one participant said, *"I was shaken by this one incident where he tried to adjust my dupatta while deliberately running his fingers through my brassiere strap."*

Apart from verbal and physical harassment, 6 participants reported being stared at. One such participant said, *"I also feel very uncomfortable when people (seniors) talk to me and they're very clearly staring at my chest and talking."*

Understanding Sexual Harassment: 'Where' It Happens

Participants revealed that most harassment incidents do not necessarily take place in office, often taking place in off work settings where the women are vulnerable or are outnumbered by men. One participant said, *"At the office things are fine, but at the plant, the number of females is very low as compared to the males, so this creates an environment. They just pass lewd comments without even realising that they are doing it."* Another participant shared how office parties become the location of such incidents. She said, *"at these parties there is a hook up culture, so they consider it to be an opportunity. People get drunk and some men get seriously 'handsy'".* Speaking about harassment during commute, a participant said, *"we used to get off the office bus at the same stop. Every day he would ask me if we could go out for dinner or someplace. It was really awkward."*

Understanding Sexual Harassment: 'Who' are Involved

The Harasser

The participants revealed certain typical characteristics of the harassers. All the harassers were males, and most were seniors. No clear links with the marital status of the harasser could be ascertained, although some

harassers were reportedly married. 10 out of 20 participants reported that their harasser was a repeat offender. One participant disclosed, *“He was just that kind of a person. Someone else also reported a case against him”*. Another one said, *“He had a wandering eye. If 10 girls wore skirts, he would stare at all 10.”* Four participants reported that their harasser had been reported by someone else on previous occasions, indicating a tendency for harassers to continue unabated, especially when stern action was not taken at the very first offense.

The Victim

The typical profile of the victim was a new recruit, usually unmarried, someone who could not assert herself without the fear of losing her job and someone over whom the harasser enjoyed power. What also emerged is that the victims recognised that these features made them vulnerable to sexual assault, possibly making them think of sexual harassment as a rite of passage that all young women have to go through at work. One participant also linked it to her educational background and said, *“I think it happened to me because I was new to the organisation, plus if you are from a fashion college in Delhi, people have those ugly presumptions about you that you’ll be an easy prey or target.”* Considering age as a factor, one participant said, *“It happens because we are young. Like just 2-3 years out of college.”* Yet another participant felt that being friendly was misconstrued as an invitation. She said, *“If a girl talks sweetly, men think she is interested in you”*.

The Emotional Experience of Sexual Harassment

The most commonly reported emotional reaction was that of anger, reported by nearly 50% of the participants. One participant said, *“I still regret why I did not punch him in face right there.”* Following closely was feeling shocked and feeling disgusted. Some participants said that they could not categorise their discomfort about the incident in any way other than calling it ‘weird’ or ‘uncomfortable’. Articulating this confluence of negative emotions, one participant said, *“Initially, I had no idea how to react to this. I was just shocked. But later I felt so embarrassed and powerless. I got disgusted at myself the more I kept thinking about it.”* One participant described the sense of confusion in identifying an incident as ‘harassment’. She said, *“At first I was scared but it did not seem like complete harassment. Soon it became a regular thing.”*

Making Sense of Sexual Harassment

Following the initial reaction, all victims attempted to attribute reasons to why the incident(s) happened with them. Four sub themes arose from the analysis. Over half of the participants talked about the character of the harasser. One participant put this as, *"Some men are like that...just perverted."*

The second sub theme was that of workplace rivalries and included personal agenda, jealousy and competitiveness. One participant said that she was harassed by her colleague who spread rumours about her affair with a senior. She said, *"I think it was primarily jealousy. So, if I'm doing good and gaining visibility, they'll do it."*

The most prominent sub theme was the victim's perception of their own characteristics, such as vulnerability, inexperience, friendliness, where they hailed from and even the clothes they wore. One participant said, *"I was new to the office... I was alone in my cabin when he came and said these inappropriate things to me."* In some of these responses, a tendency to internalise the blame was evident. For e.g., one participant said, *"the top I was wearing was fitted so that might have invited comments."* Yet another participant said, *"I think I faced harassment because after all, I am a woman. Maybe I am attractive so they do this."*

The fourth sub theme was that of prevailing social conditions, such as male privilege, misogyny and status of women in society. One said, *"Men don't leave opportunity for stuff like this. I think it's more a societal issue, the sexism and misogyny"*. Highlighting how sexual harassment happens everywhere, one participant said, *"Similar things happen at our homes too. All a man needs to see is a woman (to act this way)."* While many participants shared that skewed sex ratio at their workplaces could be a reason, one put it as, *"at the plant, there are many labourers. It is very male dominated...Even if we dress simply, they keep staring at us."*

Chosen Course of Action

Although participants unanimously expressed displeasure over the harassment episode, not all of them chose to or were able to take action. Among the 6 participants who took action, 4 asked a colleague or supervisor to intervene. One participant said, *"A colleague of mine saw me slap this guy while he was trying to force himself upon me. After that, I went to my supervisor with her as a witness."* Only two participants took the official channel of raising a complaint with the HR department. One of them said, *"I discussed it with my family, and with a colleague of mine"*

in the office. After realising that the right step to be taken is to officially report the same, I approached the HR department with a complaint."

It must be noted here, that 14 out of 20 participants chose to avoid the harasser and not report the incident. Most of these participants believed that their complaint would not have any effect. One of them said, *"What will come of it? HR can't shut people's mouths. These things will still continue to happen."*

Barriers Faced

The most frequently felt barrier was a fear of the outcome, both for the self as well as for the perpetrator. One participant said, *"Losing reputation in office is my major concern. I might end up losing respect among my colleagues."* Explaining her choice, one participant said, *"I knew that if I complain about my senior, it would affect my career growth."* Yet another participant said, *"I was scared that it will be blown out of proportion. The guy might lose his job."*

While some participants felt that the incident was not serious enough to warrant action, some could not take action due to the absence of an internal complaints cell (ICC) or any such provision through the HR department. One participant said, *"There's no formal HR, no Sexual Harassment Cell, no ICC."* She added, *"The only woman employee who is senior is the boss's wife! I can't complain to her about her husband!"* Three participants said that they did not feel that the incident warranted action. One participant experienced people's unhelpful attitudes and their tendency to blame the victim as a barrier in raising a complaint.

Professional Ramifications

Majority of the participants did not feel that the harassment episode impacted their professional life. However, participants reported a sense of discomfort and increased vigilance following what they experienced. One participant said, *"I have started to be more careful now while befriending any male colleague."* Another said, *"I tend to maintain low visibility and talk to lesser people."* Avoiding taking on projects with the harasser was yet another method adopted to 'stay out of trouble'. In these responses, it was evident that the women had taken the onus of preventing sexual harassment upon their own selves.

Personal Reverberations

Participants shared that following the incident, they consciously changed certain aspects of their own behaviour, for e.g., dressing more

conservatively. One participant said, *"I think twice now on what I wear and avoid wearing what draws attention."* Increased vigilance and conscious decisions to avoid certain social events were evident. Interestingly, a few participants said that they emerged stronger after what they had been through. One such participant said, *"I would only say that it has made me more vigilant, yet stronger than ever."*

DISCUSSION

The present study found that the prevalence rate of sexual harassment as reported by women employees in private organisations in Delhi-NCR was 18.45%. Our findings are similar to Sahgal and Dang (2017), who found that 15% of the women managers from diverse industries reported being sexually harassed at work. Chaudhari (2008), on the other hand, reported a staggering 57% prevalence of sexual harassment of women in the health sector in Kolkata, West Bengal. Leslie and Hauck (2005) report prevalence to be as high as 73.6% in the fashion retail industry. As discussed earlier, differences in prevalence are attributable to a range of factors such as location, socio-economic conditions and the industry. It is also to be noted that the prevalence of gender harassment, the objective of which is not sexual gratification but intimidation, is higher than that of unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion. It seems that much of the harassment women face at the workplace is not "sexual", but assertion of power, the motive behind these behaviours is to declare work as a domain of masculine mastery (Maas et al., 2003). This seems to be truer for masculine cultures like India and emerging economies which report the highest rates of harassment, where women have been late entrants at the workplace (Gekoski et al., 2017).

Regarding women employees' awareness about the policy on sexual harassment in their organisation, it was found that 80.1% participants were aware that there was a policy on sexual harassment in their workplace. Further, 87.37% were aware about the complaints mechanism outlined by the Supreme Court. These figures are much higher than 14.8% awareness reported by Chaudhari (2008). This could be a promising indicator of the steps being taken by corporate India in the wake of the 2013 Act. Many of our participants reported attending orientation sessions and training workshops, discussing the nature, impact and the provisions to curb sexual harassment at work. This is encouraging, especially in the light of research such as that of Gruber (1998) who found that organisations that take

pro-active steps have visible and accessible redressal mechanisms are more successful in curtailing workplace sexual harassment. However, one must be careful in interpreting what ‘awareness’ actually means, whether it implies complete knowledge, trust in the mechanism, and whether it empowers the harassed to take action. This incongruity was evident in some of our interviews where the same participants who reported sound ICC mechanisms and awareness trainings at their workplaces, conveyed a sense of distrust in the mechanism and asked “what can the HR really do?”

We also assessed the relationship between personal characteristics and sexual harassment at workplace. A significant difference was found in the experience of sexual harassment between married and single women, with the latter experiencing higher levels of harassment ($t = 3.029$, $p = 0.0028$, *Cohen's d* = 0.52). This is in line with previous studies that have established a relationship between the victim's marital status and sexual harassment as workplace (Laxman, 2003; Sahgal & Dang, 2017). One line of reasoning is that the perceived ‘availability’ of single women, which includes the divorced, widowed or unmarried, increases their vulnerability to sexual harassment. Rotundo et al. (2001) posit that women who are single may be the targets of sexual harassment due to the harassers' perception of their actions as a form of flattery or flirtation. Our participants revealed how office parties often have a “hook up” culture, and suggestions about seeing these parties as “an extension of college life” is made to young and single employees by perpetrators. Another line of reasoning suggests that single women may be viewed as social outliers and ‘role-deviant’ and be targeted more due to power-threat; or they may be perceived as less protected by traditional family structures and thereby be subjected to more harassment as vulnerable victims (De Coster & Estes, 1999).

In our study, the effect of age on sexual harassment was found to be significant ($F = 4.385$, $p = 0.014$, *Cohen's d* = 0.42). Younger women faced greater sexual harassment as compared to older women. As evident in our interviews, perception of the victim as available and considering one's behaviour as harmless flirtation are also possible reasons why younger women are harassed more. These findings are in line with previous findings (De Coster & Estes, 1999) and resonate with our participants who shared that as young women, they were considered fresh out of college and more ready and willing to engage in casual sex. Considering age as a factor, one participant said, “*It happens because we are young. Like just 2-3 years out of college*”.

With respect to designation, insignificant differences were found in sexual harassment between junior, middle, and senior level employees ($F = 0.483$; $p = 0.617$). This is in contrast to previous research which suggested that women employees who hold lower positions with less power and authority are more likely to experience sexual harassment (Bhat and Deshpande, 2017). Although significant differences were not found, responses around fear of the harasser's 'seniority' and perceived vulnerability on account of being 'junior' or 'new' emerged in our interviews.

We also attempted to understand the experience of sexual harassment of women employees and examine the action taken by the victims of harassment. In-depth analysis of the experiences shared by our 20 interview participants revealed nine themes described in the previous section. Delving into participants' voices allowed a range of insights to emerge. It was evident that much of the harassment created a hostile work environment for the victims through sexual comments, lewd messages, maligning the character of the victim and fat shaming. Verbal forms of gender harassment outweighed physical sexual coercion. Although incidents such as inappropriate touching, kissing, groping were reported, such behavior often took place at off-sites, factory floors, office parties, office bus etc., possibly construed by the harasser as something they were doing outside office.

Even though participants described the character of their harassers as "*pervverted*" and described them using phrases such as "*has a roving eye*", "*does it to all women, not just me*" etc., participants felt that societal conditions that allowed men to exercise power over women and feel entitled to privileges, including sexual ones, were responsible for making men turn into harassers. One participant, in particular, shared how what happens at work is no different from what happens in families. The same was resonated in views that "*men are stupid, they do not let go of such opportunities*". The social sanction combined with skewed sex-ratio at workplaces and harassers being in authority positions create a potent power imbalance and isolates women, making them vulnerable to sexual harassment (Gutek & Bruce, 1982, Mc. Laughlin et al., 2012). Many of our participants described their workplaces as '*male-dominated*', with "*hardly any women*". They had come to treat sexual harassment as an 'occupational hazard' (Evans, 1978), normalizing and accepting it as something they would have to live with as female employees in a gender unfair society. "*It happens to all the girls, not just me*" was a refrain that emerged frequently.

In addition to the characteristics of the harasser, this study also examined characteristics of the victims. Here, both women, one who met feminine ideals of docility, quietness and subservience; as well as women who were seen as not meeting feminine ideals, such as those perceived as loud, friendly, boisterous, outgoing were targets of sexual harassment, providing evidence for two contrasting hypotheses often forwarded by sexual harassment literature (Berdahl, 2007). All the characteristics of harassers and victims that emerged from the participant interviews align closely with the four-factor model proposed by O'Hare and O'Donohue (1998).

The narratives of the victims gave a rich picture of the myriad emotions they experienced, wherein anger was the most prominent. Yugantar Educational Society (2003) noted that 42.85% participants reported anger as being the most frequent emotional reaction to sexual harassment. Considering the initial anger, it was paradoxical to note a tendency on part of some victims to not describe sexual harassment experiences as problems. This has been previously documented by studies (De Coster & Estes, 1999). While this could be rooted in an erroneous 'just-world' belief, it could also be an attempt to save oneself from the stigma and humiliation of being a victim of sexual harassment. This tendency may also explain the low prevalence of reported sexual harassment in most studies and the views of our participants who chose not to take action because, "*It was not a big deal*".

One striking aspect of how participants responded to sexual harassment was the coping mechanisms they developed. Some participants described discussing problems with their colleagues while others dressed conservatively at work, interacted less with colleagues, reduced participation in post-work socialising and opted out of projects where they might have to work alongside the harasser. Again, the onus was not on the harasser but on the victim to circumvent any potential harassment. These efforts also indicate a resistance to access the complaints mechanism, despite fairly high awareness in the sample studied (80.1%). Attitudinal barriers, fears about reputation, low-status at work, male-dominated workplaces, fear of consequences and a general lack of trust in the complaints mechanism, were the main barriers discussed by the participants in this study. In the few cases that women chose to take action, empathetic attitude of colleagues that acted as a social support was evident.

Finally, the participants spoke of the impact of the sexual harassment experience on their professional and personal lives. Yet again, there

appeared to be a tendency to minimise the impact. In-depth exploration, however, revealed that some of them had opted out of projects, chosen to disengage with people at work, had stopped making male friends, dressed differently, travelled with a companion and preferred to be 'simple'. That these were described as 'natural' choices indicates the true gap between being aware of provisions and feeling empowered to take action and speak up against sexual harassment.

The study suffers from certain limitations that the researchers would like to acknowledge. Since the sample was taken only from private sector organisations in Delhi-NCR region, the results are not generalizable to other samples such as employees in public sector organisations and unorganised sector in other parts of India. In talking about sexual harassment using self-report measures, we cannot be sure if social stigma prevented our participants from sharing their views honestly or whether sexual harassment was underreported. In order to reduce these biases, the researchers assured the participants of anonymity, obtained informed consent, and debriefed the participants at the end. In this study, the impact of sexual harassment on the psychological health of victims could not be ascertained and needs to be explored further.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Workplace sexual harassment can no longer be dismissed as a moral transgression, but as a violation of the fundamental right to equality. Organisations have to ensure that this right remains intact, through a fair, informed, user-friendly process of redress. While awareness that there was a policy on sexual harassment in their workplace was adequate amongst the present participants, lack of confidence in the complaints mechanisms, combined with power dynamics and fear of job related consequences prevented victims from taking action. This highlights the need for stricter vigilance, consistent gender sensitisation programs, especially for male employees, better sex-ratios, and safeguarding the victim when harassment is reported. ICC members in organisations should be given training on how to handle victim anger as well (since anger was the most predominant response of women who reported harassment).

The policy against sexual harassment must be "effectively" communicated to all workers, irrespective of whether they are paid, interns or volunteers whether they have white or blue collar jobs. Organisations must have contact numbers put up on boards/websites and mentioned

in handbooks with regard to contacting them to share the occurrence of such an incident. Men and women should be included in building a culture which not only has zero tolerance for sexual harassment, but also promotes gender equality. Such a culture will go a long way in preventing both #MeToo and #MenToo.

SCOPE OF FUTURE WORK

The true extent of sexual harassment is often hidden, disguised by the conspiracy of silence which shrouds the issues. Future research can examine antecedents such as length of service, work timings and level of education, in addition to studying sexual harassment in contexts other than that of this study and the long-term impact of sexual harassment. In the current study, questions that pertained to the awareness of ICC, compliant mechanism, guidelines etc., were simple yes or no questions. Efforts can perhaps be made to delve into those components to truly understand if participants know what they entail. Future research work could also compare the prevalence of sexual harassment reported by employees in companies that have clearly communicated guidelines, versus those which do not. Sexual harassment faced by men can also be examined, which continues to remain a largely ignored area.

CONCLUSION

The present study found the prevalence of sexual harassment of women employees in private sector organisations in Delhi-NCR to be 18.45%. Although high levels of awareness were found in this study (80.1%), qualitative exploration revealed that several social, attitudinal and systemic barriers prevented women from accessing complaints mechanisms and taking action against the harasser. A tendency to normalise workplace sexual harassment, to treat it as a given for women, and to change one's own behaviour and demeanour at work to prevent harassment from occurring was also observed. This indicates a need to bring about a shift in societal attitudes if anti sexual harassment policies are to be implemented successfully. While the law puts the onus of the responsibility for providing safe workplaces on organisations, lack of trust in the system and unsupportive social conditions force victims to take the responsibility of preventing and dealing with harassment, on themselves. At the organisational level, the need for stricter vigilance, consistent training

programs, better sex-ratios and safeguarding the victim when harassment is reported may help combating this problem. If this is not handled seriously, very soon in addition to #MeToo and #MosqueMeToo campaigns, we shall have #WorkplaceMeToo taking the corporate world by storm.

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APPENDIX

Interview Schedule

1. Can you briefly describe the incident? (what occurred/what was said)
2. Please describe how you felt right after the 'incident'?
3. If you recall the 'incident', can you think of why it happened to you?
4. Can you speak a little bit about what you did following the 'incident' as in what was your course of action?
 - a. Did you take any action?
 - b. If yes, can you describe the steps taken (whom did you approach, what was the outcome?)
 - c. If no, what prevented you from taking action? (probe for barriers)
 - d. The person who harassed you, had they been reported/complained about by anyone else earlier?
5. Do you think this incident/series of incidents impacted you professionally?
6. Do you think this incident/series of incidents impacted you personally?