



INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY
Initiative in Education & Lifelong Learning

Appreciation Programme

Prevention of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace

Module – IV

Making Workplaces Safe: Prevention of Sexual Harassment

The development of Appreciation Programmes has been made possible through the technical and financial support of DVV International, SDC, FORD Foundation, University of Victoria (UVic) and PRIA

Prevention of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace

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Introduction & Objectives

Introduction

The Sexual Harassment of Women in the Workplace Act (2013) makes it very clear that the primary responsibility for the prevention of sexual harassment at the workplace lies with the employer. This module will also discuss the roles that various other stakeholders can play in the prevention of sexual harassment within different workplace contexts, as laid down by the law.

Unit 1 discusses the role of the employers in the prevention of sexual harassment at the workplace

Unit 2 suggests additional ways that employers may adopt in preventing sexual harassment within workplaces

Unit 3 discusses the role of various stakeholders in preventing and addressing sexual harassment at the workplace

Objectives:

On completing this Module, the learner will gain an understanding on:

- Roles that employers and other stakeholders can play in the prevention and redressal of sexual harassment
- Various measures to prevent sexual harassment within workplaces

Unit 1: Role of the Employer in the Prevention of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace

In India, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013 has very categorically placed the responsibility of preventing and resolving sexual harassment in the workplace on organisations, and institutions. It clearly mandates that the primary responsibility for the prevention of sexual harassment at the workplace lies with the employer. By doing so, the Act imposes several obligations upon employers or other responsible persons in workplaces to prevent or deter the commission of acts of sexual harassment in the workplace. These include:

- Providing a safe working environment at the workplace which shall include safety from sexual harassment from third party (outsiders), entering workplaces
- Display penal consequences of sexual harassment
- Display information about the Internal Committee, especially constituted to address specific cases of sexual harassment within their workplace
- Organise orientation programmes for the committee members, and awareness programmes for staff regarding the definition of sexual harassment and the provisions of the Act
- Where necessary to provide assistance to the aggrieved woman, to file a complaint under the Indian Penal Code or other law in force
- Treat sexual harassment as misconduct under the service rules and initiate action for such misconduct accordingly.
- Monitor timely submission of the report by the Internal Complaints Committee

The Act outlines that every employer must adhere to the following:

a) Observe guidelines to prevent or deter the commission of acts of sexual harassment within the workplace, and

b) Provide the procedures for the resolution, settlement or prosecution of acts of sexual harassment by taking all required steps.

As one of the largest employers of women in India today, specific guidelines have been established for the appropriate government authorities under the Act. In addition to following the guidelines established for employers, government offices are also responsible for the following:

- Advancement of public awareness and understanding of the Act's provisions
- Make rules for carrying out the provisions of the Act by notification of the same in the Official Gazette (responsibility of the central government)
- Lay the rules made by them under this Act before each House of Parliament, while it is in session
- Formulate orientation and training programmes for members of the Local Complaints Committee
- Monitor the implementation of the Act and initiate necessary actions to ensure that all workers are protected from sexual harassment
- Maintain data on the number of cases of sexual harassment that have been filed and disposed of. (ILO & PRIA, 2013)

1.1 Operationalise Organisational Commitment towards Prevention of Sexual Harassment within the Workplace

There are several steps that need to be followed in addressing and preventing sexual harassment in the workplace:

- The first step is to comply with the law of the land and thereby, setting up an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC)
- The next, to formulate an anti-sexual harassment policy

Orientation programmes for the ICC on:

- a) provisions of the Act
 - b) definition of what constitutes sexual harassment at the workplace
 - c) how to deal with cases of sexual harassment
 - d) the procedures to be followed in compliance with the Act and the policy of the organisation in this context
- Organising workshops, seminars and other awareness raising programmes for the entire staff, wherein they:
 - a) understand the definition of sexual harassment and what constitutes a workplace
 - b) procedures that will be followed when a complaint is filed with the ICC
 - c) penalties that will be imposed in such matters
 - d) develop a sensitivity on the issue of sexual harassment within workplaces and their roles as colleagues and peers to support others in the event that such incidents occur
 - e) to also develop gender sensitivity and awareness and understand that sexual harassment and all other forms of violence against women, are part of overall discrimination against women and the denial of their rights
 - To ensure that all measures are taken to create a safe working environment – proper lighting, security systems (CCTVs, guards) safety factors in parking lots, elevators, restrooms etc.

However, more important than policies or committees is the commitment of the organisation, the management and its staff to create a conducive work environment, where there is zero tolerance towards sexual harassment and such behaviour is non-negotiable and will not be condoned. The commitment of the organisation to prevent and address sexual harassment in the workplace implies earmarking financial and other resources for all these activities.

1.2 Adopting a comprehensive anti-sexual harassment policy

Having an anti-sexual harassment policy is a useful strategy to deal with this issue in the workplace. Simply put, the policy will consist of a set of coherent decisions with a common long-term purpose of addressing Sexual Harassment at the Workplace. These decisions should be based on a definite course of action that is decided upon in the context of the situation, events that determine not only the present but also how the issue will be dealt with in the future.

For example:

- The decision to address Sexual Harassment at the Workplace is supported by the action of setting up a committee.
- Ensuring the effective functioning of the committee lies in developing clear guidelines on the procedures to be adopted in the handling of a case
- The decision to increase awareness on the issue of SHW, is translated into a capacity building event for the staff

The efficacy of the policy is to ensure its dissemination to all staff; care should also be taken that the policy does not become a static document. The policy should be regularly reviewed and revised through a consultative and participatory process in the context of changing gender relations with employees so that they also feel a sense of ownership towards the policy.

1.2.1 Drafting an anti-sexual harassment policy

A basic policy should consist of a set of coherent decisions with a common long-term purpose to address sexual harassment within the workplace.

While drafting a policy, it is essential to set forth the following:

- An express commitment to prevent and address sexual harassment

- A definition of sexual harassment, including quid pro quo, hostile work environment and human rights violation, citing examples to ensure clarity of the issue
- A detailed outline of the grievance procedure employees should use
- A clear statement that anyone found guilty of harassment after investigation will be subject to immediate and appropriate disciplinary action, including dismissal
- An explanation of penalties (including termination) the employer will impose for substantiated sexual harassment conduct
- A detailed outline of the grievance procedure employees should use
- A clear statement that anyone found guilty of harassment after investigation will be subject to immediate and appropriate disciplinary action, including dismissal
- A clear understanding and strict rules regarding harassment of or by third parties like clients, customers, etc.
- Additional resource or contact persons available for support and consultation
- A written commitment to keep all sexual harassment complaints and procedures confidential and time bound
- Adequate provisions for training of employees at all levels; and
- An anti-retaliation policy providing protection against retaliation to complainants, witnesses, committee members and other employees involved in prevention and complaints resolution
- There should be adequate safeguards in the policy to ensure that the recommendations of the Internal Complaints Committee are implemented by the management of the organisation (Raymond, 2003; Farrell, Pathak, Thekkudan, & Saxena, 2007)

1.3 Communicating and enforcing the anti-sexual harassment policy

Apart from formulating a strong and vibrant policy, it is critical to disseminate information about its existence and contents to all the employees. This may be done either through inclusion of the policy in the employee handbook or in the form of a memo to all employees.

Further, it could also be provided along with the appointment letter to each employee. The employees could also sign such notifications to acknowledge that they received and have read the policy. In addition, the policy may also be posted on the notice board, website or intra-net of the organisation.

To make the procedure more inclusive, the documents have to be signed in vernacular languages to suit people whose primary language is not English. Since the Act also applies to people who are external to the organization but are associated with it (like vendors, cleaners, suppliers etc.), the onus falls on the employer to make them aware of the rules. Implementation of the policy in accordance with its letter, as well as the spirit in which it was formulated is important to reinforce the commitment of the organisation to address sexual harassment in the workplace. A critical step in this direction is to ensure that all complaints of sexual harassment are taken seriously and investigated quickly, thoroughly and professionally within the specific time frame.

Unit 2: Measures to Prevent Sexual Harassment in Workplaces

2.1 Capacity Building on Prevention of Sexual Harassment

The workplace needs to be developed into an conducive environment which is gender sensitive and inclusive of the sentiments and needs of all employees, especially women. This requires environment building as well as developing capacities and sensitivities of the staff towards gender issues, including sexual harassment.

Capacity building in the form of training is the systematic development of knowledge, skills and the attitudes required to bring about change in the thinking of individuals, as well as the organisation as a whole. One of the purposes of training is to reduce the learning time, while developing best practices within people. The issues that are raised in training programmes should address sexual harassment and its various dimensions and ramifications. The training must also include other forms of discrimination and violence against women, impacts of patriarchy, socialisation patterns and processes that affect our thinking, choices and decisions in life, stereotyping of gender roles, the role of the media, literature, policies and laws that can perpetuate, as well as help individuals break free from gender biased behaviour and which all go into creating a holistic perspective of how gender affects our lives. As important as the issues are in themselves, it is the way in which they are presented to the staff members that creates an environment that encourages change in a positive and non-threatening manner.

2.1.1 Designing a capacity building programme on the prevention of sexual harassment at the workplace

Effective training programmes are essential for sensitizing all staff members to recognize sexual harassment, to prevent it, and to deal with it when it occurs. Training programmes are the best way to ensure proper understanding and implementation of the organization's policy on sexual harassment.

It is the best forum to communicate to employees what behaviour is acceptable and what is not, in a non-threatening atmosphere of mutual learning. Training of the members of the Complaints Committee and others, who are going to be instrumental in implementing the policy, is very essential.

Training should include a component on gender sensitization, along with the procedures for taking complaints and enquiry. Sexual harassment training for all employees should address perceptions and understanding of sexual harassment, impact of sexual harassment on individuals and workplace, understanding the policy and complaint mechanism.

The training for Complaints Committee should address, in addition to these, the procedures of investigation, skills necessary for enquiries and the documentation of the procedures. (Farrell, Pathak, Thekkudan, & Saxena, 2007)

The learning and sharing programmes should be so designed that employees are able to discuss the issue, understand and accept the definition of appropriate behaviour, within the workplace. All of these training programmes and other forums should:

- Be conducted in a non-threatening atmosphere of mutual trust and respect for each other;
- Reassure staff that all complaints of sexual harassment will be addressed, irrespective of the stature of the persons concerned – both the aggrieved woman as well as the offender;
- Reinforce the fact that all cases will be dealt with, by following the principles of natural justice and each party will get a chance to speak and put forth their point of view;
- Assure women that they will not suffer any negative consequences if they register a complaint of sexual harassment;
- Assure male staff that strict action will be taken against any individual who has registered a false complaint; and

- Ensure that an atmosphere of comfort and ease is maintained amongst colleagues, as they are more aware of following appropriate patterns of behaviour.

2.2 Other ways of preventing sexual harassment at the workplace

2.2.1 Conducting periodic surveys

Conducting periodic surveys is useful in identifying and preventing factors leading to incidence of sexual harassment. These anonymous surveys should be very simple and merely ask the employees (male or female) if they have experienced any form of sexual harassment during the past year. This gives data on what is happening within the organisation, as well as reinforces the fact that the organisation is actively engaged in preventing and correcting sexual harassment (Farrell, Pathak, Thekkudan, & Saxena, 2007).

2.2.2 Gender mainstreaming within institutions

While, it is not possible to address and prevent issues of sexual harassment in the workplace, without contextualizing the same within the framework of gender discrimination, neither is it possible to bring about relevant change and reach equality, unless this is discussed in the context of gender discrimination.

Gender mainstreaming in institutions is a strategy, a process and a method of bringing about change in organizations by bringing together the experiences, knowledge and interests, of both men and women to have a positive impact upon the functioning of the workplace.

Definition of Gender mainstreaming

UNDP - "Gender mainstreaming is taking account of gender equality concerns, in all policy, programme, administrative and financial activities, and in organisational procedures, thereby contributing to organisational transformation. This includes core policy decisions as well as the small everyday decisions of programme implementation."

Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC, 1997)- " It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality."

It is based on the principle of gender equality and implies providing equal opportunity for men and women in leadership management and indeed in all spheres and activities of the organisation.

Gender Mainstreaming takes into account the two most important aspects of social integration and social cohesion that are integral in an individual's life –a) the home and family, on the one hand, and b) the workplace, on the other.

Principles of mainstreaming gender take into account:

- Current social constructs
- Requirements of both the home and the workplace
- Needs of the male and female worker
- Opportunities for better work distribution
- Stress on equality, freedom and empowerment

Gender Mainstreaming can take many different forms in the workplace. They may include but are not limited to:

- Developing of various policies such as Gender Policies, Equal Opportunity Policies and Anti-Sexual Harassment Policies that take into consideration the specific needs and challenges that women face in workplaces and steps by which they may be resolved.
- Incorporation of principles of 'Gender Responsive Budgeting' into financial practices
- Gender training and capacity building across all levels of the organisation.
- Career Counseling and appropriate skill building

Other actions that the employer can adopt can include:

- *Demonstrating a strong commitment to prevent and address sexual harassment by developing and adopting a policy on sexual harassment*
- *Raising awareness on the subject among member companies, by organizing workshops and seminars*
- *Providing legal advice to member companies on law compliance*
- *Developing and sharing an employer's guide or a sample company policy with member companies to prevent and address sexual harassment at the workplace*
- *Promoting a safe work environment by introducing practical measures and good practices from member companies at knowledge sharing forums or through newsletters*

Unit 3: Role of stakeholders in addressing sexual harassment at the workplace

As discussed in earlier Modules, patriarchal mindsets and attitudes remain the greatest challenges for the implementation of any laws or provisions concerning women. The success of any exercise for creating a conducive workplace environment is largely dependent on the involvement of all individuals within any particular workplace and various stakeholders need to prioritise preventative measures, acting before problems occur.

3.1 Role of Aggrieved – what should you do if you are harassed

Most women themselves fail to recognize sexual harassment and treat it as trivial and routine. If you experience sexual harassment, take action to stop it.

- **Speak up at the time:** Be sure to say "NO" clearly, firmly and without smiling when you experience sexual harassment it is the best way to let the harasser know that his or her behaviour is offensive. If you are asked to go places, do things, respond to questions, or engage in situations that make you uncomfortable, say "NO" emphatically and clearly and do not worry about offending the other person or hurting his or her feelings. Objecting to the behaviour when it takes place helps, if you decide to file charges later.
- **Keep records:** Keep track of what happens in a journal or diary and keep any letters or notes or other documents you receive. Keep copies of any offensive material at the workplace. Write down the dates, times (including frequency of offensive encounters), places, and an account of what happened. Write down the names of any witnesses. Every document that you use during trial must be authenticated by a witness. Keep this in mind during the investigations, when the Committee asks from where you obtained a document. If you are not clear about where you got the document, and who can authenticate it, you might not be able to use it as evidence.

In many cases where women have filed cases of sexual harassment, there have been allegations that these charges are false and a case is being made to counter her poor

performance. Therefore, keep all letters of commendation, awards, 'thank you notes and anything at all that will corroborate your positive job performance. Pay special attention to documents that your superiors have provided, lauding you and your work. If possible, ask your clients, staff, and peers for letters of commendation, in the event that you have to file a case of sexual harassment.

- *Talk to someone you can trust*: Being quiet or tolerant about sexual harassment gives it the space and opportunity to continue. Talk to other co-workers, union members, family members or friends whom you can trust. You may not be the only one harassed by this person.
- *Create a witness*: Inform a trusted colleague and try to ensure that s/he is an eye or ear witness to a situation where you are being sexually harassed. This will be useful later if you chose to file a formal complaint.
- *Report sexual harassment to the appropriate person in the organization*: Explore the different avenues available to you and file a formal complaint. If your organization does not have a policy, ensure that your employer formulates an anti-sexual harassment policy and carries out all the connected tasks.
- *Get a medical check-up*: If you have been raped or physically assaulted, go for a medical check-up. Obtain a medical report. This is important, should you decide to pursue a legal case (UNDP, 2001).

3.2 Role of Supervisors

Supervisors play a key role in promoting the organization's sexual harassment policy to ensure that the workplace is free from sexual harassment. They also need to monitor the working environment by closely scrutinizing performance and morale of all employees and assessing changes in employees' behavior patterns such as high turnover.

As a supervisor, one must never trivialize anyone who approaches you with a complaint because Sexual Harassment is a reality and needs to be dealt with seriously, therefore under no circumstances must any complaint be trivialised or dismissed.

All investigations must be made with an unbiased perspective; this implies putting aside all personal relationships with the aggrieved or the alleged and maintaining an impartial and rational approach to the incident.

All action has to be time bound. As an old saying goes, “Justice delayed is justice denied”. Immediate action would also ensure that employees realise that the organization has a strict anti-sexual harassment policy and is committed to maintaining a zero tolerance approach in dealing with sexual harassment in the workplace.

If it is determined that sexual harassment has occurred, the organization must take immediate and appropriate corrective action. At this time, it might also be advisable to reissue the organization’s policy and conduct refresher programmes on sexual harassment training for all employees.

Keep in mind that in cases involving sexual harassment, the courts look at the following:

- What happened?
- What did management do when they became aware of the situation?
- Did the committee follow principles of natural justice in dealing with a case?
- What was the rationale and justification for the recommended penalty?

Be on the alert for off-coloured remarks, jokes or inappropriate behaviour. If you see or hear something that could contribute to a hostile work environment - do something to stop it! Don’t wait for the employee to complain (Raymond, 2003)

3.3 Role of peers and colleagues

- Spread information about sexual harassment in the workplace, its prevalence and the new Act
- Read the Act carefully to know your rights
- Support and encourage a colleague facing sexual harassment to speak out about the matter
- Do not disbelieve your colleague when she shares about harassment
- Remember sexual harassment is 'unwelcome' behaviour
- Do not trivialise the matter
- Encourage the recipient to tell the offender that she does not welcome such behaviour
- Offer to accompany the recipient to the offending person and the Internal Complaints Committee to file a formal complaint.
- Take responsibility to see that sexual harassment is stopped and there is no reprisal.
- Approach your employer and push for a redress mechanism/sexual harassment policy, if you do not have one in place already; ensure that the existing policy complies with the Supreme Court guidelines.

3.4 Role of other stakeholders

1) Role of District Officers

The duties and powers of the District Officers as specified in the Act are to:

- Monitor the timely submission of reports furnished by the Local Committee
- Take necessary measures to engage non-governmental organizations to create awareness on sexual harassment
- Prepare and forward brief report based on annual reports to the State Government
- Monitor the number of cases being filed and dealt with by the LCC
- Authorize any officer to make inspection of the records and workplace in relation to sexual harassment, who shall in return submit a report of the inspection within the specified time period.

2) Role of Labour Commissioners

The Ministry of Labour and Employment is responsible for establishing policies in respect to labour matters. Labour matters include industrial relations, co-operation between labour and management, settlement of labour disputes, regulation of wages and other conditions of work and safety, women's labour, child labour, labour welfare and social security. Broadly, Labour Commissioners are entrusted with enforcing various labour legislations for the welfare of the workforce, meanwhile maintaining industrial peace, harmony and congenial working atmospheres.

The following key roles of the Labour Commissioner can be interpreted in the prevention of sexual harassment:

i. Enforcement

The various Acts under which a Labour Officer can take preventive action, as well as ensure the redressal of sexual harassment at the workplace are as follows:

- Industrial Disputes Act, 1947
- The Factories Act, 1948
- The Mines Act 1952
- Shops and Commercial Establishments Act, 1958

For example, benefits of separate washing facilities, rest rooms and toilets were provided for women under these acts to ensure their privacy, safety and security. These could be understood as a positive step towards creating an enabling environment at the workplace and the prevention of sexual harassment at the workplace towards

ii. Conciliation

As a nodal agency, the Labour Commissioner may be appointed as the appropriate authority to play the role of a conciliation officer. In cases of sexual harassment, it can be effective in explaining to both parties the legal mandate of the Supreme Court in the particular instance.

Even after the report of the Internal Complaints Committee, if either of the parties is not satisfied with the decision of the committee, the matter should be referred for compulsory resolution to the labour court or industrial tribunal (after preparing the failure report of conciliation proceedings).

iii. Research and Analysis

The Labour Commissioner may also obtain and use information from Socio Economic Surveys of Different Segments of Labour (SESDSL), which are conducted for different sectors of industries, to ascertain the working and living conditions of workers employed therein. Of the four components, the two most relevant in the context of creating a more conducive work place are (i) Socio-economic conditions of women workers in industries and (ii) Working and living conditions of workers engaged in unorganized sector industries/employments. This information can be used as a basis for developing plans that ensures the safety and security of women in all kinds of workplaces.

2) Role of Trade Unions

There are a number of measures that unions can take to combat sexual harassment. The goal is to make union members sensitive to the problem and to create a climate that condemns sexual harassment but at the same time creates an environment where the aggrieved women feels comfortable in turning to the union for assistance. Trade union members can:

- Help the aggrieved in filing a complaint with the appropriate authority
- Work with employers to conduct training programmes and educate staff office bearers/seniors who are likely to get involved in complaint resolution about the issue
- Determine the extent of the problem in the workplace. A survey of the members may be useful. Inform the management on the survey and discuss measures in developing

Trade Unions in the unorganised sector can play a definite and vital role, in setting up complaints mechanisms and instituting systems/channels that could provide forum for receiving complaints of sexual harassment in the unorganised sector.

and supporting an environment free from gender discrimination and sexual harassment.

- Ensure that the employer has an anti-sexual harassment policy that is prominently posted and effectively communicated to all employees. (Raymond, 2003).

Summary

- The Indian Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013 clearly mandates that the primary responsibility for the prevention of sexual harassment at the workplace lies with the employer. The Act outlines that every employer must adhere to the following:
- Observe guidelines to prevent or deter the commission of acts of sexual harassment within the workplace, and
- Provide the procedures for the resolution, settlement or prosecution of acts of sexual harassment by taking all required steps.
- Most important is the commitment of the organisation, the management and its staff to recognise the importance of this issue in the workplace and pledge to counter it at every step.
- Adopting a comprehensive policy on the prevention of sexual harassment aimed to bring about changes in the behaviour and attitude towards women (and men) at the workplace, can be considered as a starting point to prevent sexual harassment at the workplace
- A basic policy should consist of a set of coherent decisions with a common long-term purpose to address sexual harassment within the workplace. It is critical to communicate its existence and contents to all the employees.
- Effective training programmes are essential for sensitizing all staff members to recognize sexual harassment, to prevent it, and to deal with it when it occurs.
- Gender mainstreaming in institutions is a strategy, a process, a method of bringing about change in organizations by bringing together the experiences, knowledge and interests, of both men and women to have a positive impact upon the functioning of the workplace.

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