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Prevalence of Sexual Harassment Against Women in the Workplace

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Abstract

Sexual harassment against women in the workplace persists as a widespread violation of dignity, equality, and safety, affecting women across industries, socio-economic classes, and national boundaries. Despite decades of legal reforms, rising public consciousness, and institutional guidelines, the phenomenon remains deeply embedded in organizational cultures and social structures. Research consistently demonstrates that women encounter a spectrum of unwelcome behaviours ranging from verbal comments and suggestive gestures to coercive advances and hostile working conditions that significantly hinder their psychological well-being and career prospects (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014; Graf, 2018). Yet, most cases remain unreported due to fear of retaliation, stigma, normalization of misconduct, and limited confidence in reporting mechanisms. This paper synthesizes global and Indian evidence to highlight the extent of workplace sexual harassment, explore its conceptual foundations, examine definitions provided by international bodies, and discuss its structural causes and consequences. Through an integrative review of literature, the paper contributes to scholarship by clarifying definitional ambiguities, reporting prevalence trends across regions, and analyzing socio-cultural and organizational factors that perpetuate sexual harassment across the world.

Keywords: sexual harassment, workplace discrimination, gender inequality, global prevalence, women, hostile work environment.

1. Introduction

The increasing participation of women in public and professional life marks a significant milestone in the evolution of modern societies. Historically, women were confined largely to domestic roles, while public and economic spaces were dominated by men. As women began entering formal employment, they encountered workplaces shaped by patriarchal norms, male authority, and hierarchical structures that had not evolved to accommodate gender diversity (MacKinnon, 1979). This transition exposed women to new vulnerabilities, including sexual harassment an enduring manifestation of unequal power dynamics.

Sexual harassment is not merely a behavioural deviation but a structural and gendered practice. It emerges in contexts where authority and power are unequally distributed, enabling those in dominant positions often men to leverage their status through unwelcome sexual conduct directed at women. The problem is exacerbated in male-dominated professions where women's presence challenges established gender roles. As women increasingly occupy authority positions, harassment may intensify as a means of reinforcing patriarchal control (McLaughlin et al., 2012).

Despite increased awareness and legislative frameworks in many countries, sexual harassment remains underreported. Women often refrain from reporting incidents due to fear of retaliation, job insecurity, emotional distress, concerns about credibility, and organizational indifference (Bhatnagar & Rajadhyaksha, 2020). The absence of supportive mechanisms and the persistence of victim-blaming further deepen silence around the issue. Consequently, the true magnitude of workplace sexual harassment is significantly underestimated.

Worldwide, the visibility of this issue has risen through advocacy movements, research, and media coverage, yet fundamental challenges remain. Tackling sexual harassment requires a multidimensional approach that addresses societal norms, organizational cultures, and structural inequalities that sustain gendered power imbalances. This paper integrates global and regional evidence to present a comprehensive account of the prevalence of sexual harassment and the sociocultural factors contributing to its persistence.

Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives

The theoretical and conceptual literature provides critical insights into why sexual harassment persists despite legal reforms, shifting social norms, and increasing female participation in the workforce. This section expands upon foundational feminist, sociological, organizational, and psychological theories to deepen understanding of the structural forces that sustain harassment across contexts.

A foundational theoretical contribution comes from MacKinnon (1979), who conceptualized sexual harassment as a form of sex discrimination embedded in the patriarchal organization of workplaces. MacKinnon argued that harassment is not primarily about sexuality but about power, functioning as a mechanism through which men maintain dominance in occupational environments historically shaped by male interests and norms. According to this framework, harassment serves to enforce gender hierarchy by discouraging women from entering or advancing within male-dominated fields, regulating their participation, and penalizing challenges to male authority.

Building on this foundational feminist legal framework, McLaughlin et al. (2012) advanced the "gendered power control" model, highlighting that harassment often intensifies when women enter positions of authority or break into traditionally male occupations. Here, harassment functions as a disciplinary tool aimed at re-establishing gender boundaries and defending male occupational privilege. This aligns with research showing that women in supervisory or leadership roles frequently face targeted harassment designed to undermine their legitimacy or force them out of influential positions.

Complementing these feminist theories, sociological perspectives emphasize the role of structural inequalities and institutional arrangements in shaping harassment. According to Kanter's (1977) theory of tokenism, women who constitute a numerical minority within an organization experience heightened visibility, performance pressure, and stereotyping, which increase vulnerability to harassment. Such environments magnify gendered dynamics by framing women as "outsiders" whose presence disrupts normative expectations, prompting attempts to ostracize, demean, or sexualize them. Studies in male-dominated fields such as policing, construction, and the military, provide empirical support for this model,

demonstrating that numerical gender imbalance and homosocial male bonding often facilitate cultures permissive of harassment.

Another influential sociological model is the socio-ecological framework, which situates harassment within interacting layers of influence: individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and societal. At the individual level, factors such as perpetrators' attitudes toward gender, prior misconduct, and entitlement beliefs contribute to harassment. Interpersonal dynamics including hierarchical authority and team-based power relations shape opportunities for harassment. At the organizational level, permissive cultures, weak reporting systems, and unclear norms are significant predictors of harassment incidence. Community norms and broader patriarchal values further reinforce tolerance for discriminatory behaviour. This multilayered perspective illustrates why interventions must target not only individuals but also organizational structures and societal norms.

Organizational behaviour theories offer additional insights into the conditions enabling workplace sexual harassment. Chamberlain et al. (2008) highlight how ambiguous policies, lack of managerial oversight, hierarchical rigidity, and tolerance for sexism create climates where harassment thrives. The "organizational climate for sexual harassment" model posits that workplaces vary in their informal norms regarding gendered behaviour and that permissive climates predict not only higher incidence of harassment but also lower reporting rates. This aligns with evidence from Ethiopia, Bangladesh, South Africa, and India showing that workplaces with weak accountability mechanisms, precarious employment arrangements, and male-dominated management structures experience particularly high levels of harassment.

The power–dependence theory of Emerson (1962) also provides an important conceptual lens. Power imbalances occur when individuals depend on others for employment, income, opportunities, or social validation. In workplaces where women lack bargaining power or job security, such as informal sectors, low-wage occupations, and migrant labour markets power asymmetries create environments conducive to coercion. Harassment here becomes a method of exploiting dependence. This is especially visible in industries such as domestic work, hospitality, and garment manufacturing, where women may rely heavily on employers or supervisors and therefore experience limited capacity to refuse advances or report misconduct.

Psychological theories further illuminate individual and relational dynamics that contribute to harassment. The "social dominance orientation"(Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) asserts that individuals who endorse hierarchical social structures and male dominance are more likely to engage in harassment. Similarly, the hostile sexism and benevolent sexism framework (Glick & Fiske, 1996) explains how gendered stereotypes—either derogatory or paternalistic—can motivate harassment. Harassers may rationalize their behaviour through gender-essentialist beliefs that view women as subordinate or as sexual objects, reinforcing workplace inequities.

Together, these conceptual frameworks demonstrate that workplace sexual harassment is not merely the result of individual deviance but emerges from an interplay of gendered power relations, organizational climates, sociocultural norms, and structural inequalities. Addressing harassment therefore requires multi-

level interventions that confront not only individual behaviours but also the institutional and societal configurations that sustain gendered violence in workplaces.

Definitions of Sexual Harassment

The United Nations, through CEDAW (1979), defines sexual harassment as any unwelcome sexual conduct ranging from physical advances and sexually suggestive comments to the display of pornography or demands for sexual favours that undermines a woman's dignity, safety, or security of employment. This position is further clarified in CEDAW General Recommendation No. 19, which recognizes sexual harassment as a form of gender-based violence, particularly when a woman has reasonable grounds to believe that refusing or objecting to such behaviour may negatively impact her employment or work-related conditions. Together, these instruments establish sexual harassment as both a discriminatory practice and a violation of fundamental human rights.

International Labour Organization

The ILO defines sexual harassment as any unwelcome sexual conduct, verbal, non-verbal, or physical that affects an individual's dignity or creates a hostile, intimidating, or humiliating work environment.

US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)

The EEOC classifies sexual harassment as a form of sex discrimination, encompassing unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature (EEOC, 2019).

European Commission Code of Practice

The EC defines harassment as any unwanted sexual conduct affecting the dignity of women and men at work, including unwelcome physical, verbal, or non-verbal acts.

Although these definitions vary in scope, they converge on core elements: unwelcome behaviour, sexual or gendered nature, power dynamics, and creation of a hostile or humiliating work environment.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, integrative literature review methodology designed to synthesize existing global and regional research on workplace sexual harassment. Sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, survey reports, government publications, international organizational documents, and empirical studies published between 1990 and 2024. Databases such as JSTOR, PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar were searched.

Analytical procedures involved thematic synthesis, enabling identification of patterns across diverse datasets and geographic contexts. The approach allowed cross-comparison of findings from North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and South Asia.

Global Prevalence of Workplace Sexual Harassment

Research across regions consistently demonstrates that workplace sexual harassment at workplace is a pervasive global problem affecting women across socio-economic groups, occupations, and organizational hierarchies, with large-scale studies reporting alarming prevalence rates that persist regardless of national wealth, legal frameworks, or cultural norms.

Europe

Across Europe, research consistently highlights the widespread nature of sexual harassment against women in workplace and educational settings. A major European Union survey reported that more than half of all women approximately 55% had encountered some form of sexual harassment during their lifetime (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). In the United Kingdom, nearly one-third of employees about 29% reported encountering sexual harassment in their workplace or in a work-related setting within the preceding year, according to the 2020 Sexual Harassment Survey (Government Equalities Office,2020). Evidence from Switzerland, where research remains limited, similarly indicates significant concerns. The only national study investigating sexism and sexual harassment among Swiss medical students found that 22.5% of female students and 9.8% of male students had personally experienced such behaviour, while reports of witnessing harassment did not differ by gender (Najjar et al., 2022).

A broader perspective is provided by a meta-analysis of 74 studies conducted across 11 EU member states, which revealed substantial variability in prevalence, ranging from 17% to 81% of employed women reporting sexual harassment (Timmerman & Bajema, 1999). Lowest prevalence estimates were noted in Sweden (2%), Denmark (11%), and Luxembourg (17%), whereas Austria (80%) and Germany (72%) demonstrated markedly higher levels likely reflecting broader or more inclusive definitions of harassment used in those studies. Additional research from Western Europe indicates that 40–50% of women experience harassment, with verbal forms being most common but physical and coercive behaviours also reported (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2003).

Data from Central and Eastern Europe further confirm substantial prevalence, including rates of 60% in Russia, 25% in the Czech Republic, and 12.6% in Belarus, alongside documented quid pro quo harassment in Bulgaria and Poland(European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights,2014). Within highly structured and traditionally male-dominated institutions such as the military and legal professions, gender harassment appears especially common; Leskinen et al. (2011) found that nearly 90% of women in these fields had been subjected to gender-based hostility. Additional European studies also reinforce these concerns: 19.6% of Finnish women reported harassment within the last year (Heiskanen & Piispa, 1998); 8.3% of women in France and 15% of those in Paris reported harassment in work or public spaces (Jaspard et al., 2001); and in Italy, 24.4% of women aged 14–59 experienced some form of sexual harassment in the preceding three years (Sabbadini, 1998). Collectively, these findings reveal that sexual harassment in Europe remains a pervasive issue, cutting across regions, employment sectors, and institutional structures.

United States

In North American research reflects equally concerning trends: in the United States, 40–60% of women reported harassment during their careers (Fitzgerald, 1998), with more recent surveys indicating lifetime prevalence as high as 81% (Kearl, 2018), while sector-specific studies highlight heightened vulnerability in low-wage industries such as hospitality and retail (Frye, 2017). In higher education, Wood et al. (2021) found that 19% of students across eight U.S. universities experienced harassment by faculty or staff, with 78% of perpetrators being male, underscoring persistent power imbalances.

Canada

Canadian data similarly illustrate systemic concerns, with 54% of employed women—including legal professionals experiencing harassment (Insights West, 2017) and 30% of employees overall reporting such behaviour (Government of Canada, 2017). Among women in the Canadian Armed Forces, 30% faced sexualized or discriminatory behaviour, while 5% reported sexual assault (Cotter, 2019).

Asia

Across Asia, prevalence remains high; in China, 31% of working women reported harassment (China Youth Daily, 2016), while Fang and Li (2021) found that 68% of women surveyed had been harassed, 65% remained silent, and only 35% sought help, with most incidents involving superior–subordinate dynamics. A study in China by Parish et al. (2006) found that 12.5% of all women and 15.1% of urban women were exposed to sexual harassment in the past year. Japan reported harassment among two-thirds of surveyed women (Haspels et al., 2001). In Nepal, 90% of women using Kathmandu public transport experienced harassment (Neupane & Chesney-Lind, 2013), 28.9% of nursing students were harassed during clinical postings (Gaihre et al., 2018), and 79.6% of healthcare students faced harassment in the previous six months (Mishra & Lamichhane, 2018). In Nepal, 53.8% of women workers reported harassment (International Labour Office & Forum for Women, 2004). Bangladesh's garment industry displays some of the world's highest rates, with 80% of female workers reporting harassment, 54% remaining silent, and 17% experiencing direct physical contact from managers (ActionAid, 2019). In Bangladesh, rising female labour force participation correlates with increased harassment reports (Nari, 2003).

Australia

In Australia, 27% of employees reported workplace sexual harassment, including 3% within just the past year (Perales et al., 2024), showing that even strong legal protections do not eliminate harassment. Social Research Centre (2021) conducted a National Student Safety Survey (NSSS) in Australia, reported high levels of sexual harassment among university students. The survey found that almost one in two students (48.0%) had experienced sexual harassment at least once in their lifetime. Prevalence was significantly higher among female students (62.9%) and transgender students (62.8%), compared with male students (26.0%).

Africa

African studies likewise show severe prevalence, particularly in hospitality and service sectors; in Ethiopia, Worke et al. (2025) reported that 81.5% of women in Bahir Dar's hospitality industry experienced harassment, with managers responsible for 60.5% of incidents and factors such as precarious employment, gender imbalance, neuroticism, and limited education influencing risk. Other African contexts report similarly high rates: Cameroon (98.8%), Zimbabwe (78%), and Ghana (49.4%) (Akoku et al., 2019; Mkono, 2010; Mensah, 2019). In South Africa, 30% of women and 18% of men experienced unwanted advances, with only 16% reporting cases to HR and 10% to authorities (News24 Survey, 2018).

Middle East

Middle Eastern studies further reinforce the global pattern, with 91% of Israeli nurses reporting harassment (Bronner et al., 2003), 62% of Saudi medical staff identifying themselves as victims (Aljerian et al., 2017), and 28% of hospitality workers in Lebanon reporting harassment (Hussin, 2015).

India

Evidence from India demonstrates that sexual harassment is pervasive across both formal and informal employment sectors, affecting women in diverse occupational settings. One of the early empirical investigations by Unnikrishnan et al. (2010) reported that approximately 28% of surveyed women had encountered some form of workplace harassment, with younger women disproportionately affected—37% of those reporting incidents were under the age of 25. The authors suggested that younger women may be particularly vulnerable due to limited workplace experience, uncertainty regarding job expectations, fear of job loss, or concerns about triggering a hostile work environment if they speak out. Broader national assessments similarly indicate troublingly high prevalence rates, with between 38% and 80% of Indian women reporting harassment depending on the sector assessed (ActionAid, 2019). Sector-specific studies reveal substantial risks among marginalized occupational groups: for example, 74% of women employed in construction work in Kolkata described experiencing harassment (Rai & Sarkar, 2012), while 28% of domestic workers reported similar incidents (UN Women, 2020). Healthcare settings also emerge as high-risk environments, with nurses and other female medical staff frequently subjected to sexual advances or inappropriate behaviour from superiors, colleagues, and even patients (Karthikeyan & Devi, 2018; Kumar et al., 2020). Collectively, these findings underscore the structural, cultural, and institutional vulnerabilities that continue to expose Indian women to significant levels of workplace sexual harassment.

Discussion

The global evidence synthesized in this paper illustrates that sexual harassment at workplace is not a discrete behavioural aberration but a deeply embedded structural phenomenon rooted in gendered power relations, organizational cultures, and societal norms. Although prevalence rates differ across countries and occupational sectors, their magnitude and persistence reveal a common underlying pattern: women, particularly those positioned at the nexus of economic vulnerability and institutional subordination, continue to face disproportionate levels of harassment irrespective of geography, economic development,

or legislative context. This widespread consistency suggests that sexual harassment at workplace is driven less by individual misconduct and more by the institutional reproduction of gender hierarchies.

Across regions, a central structural driver of sexual harassment at workplace is the enduring asymmetry of power within workplaces. Whether in European corporate environments, North American academia, South Asian garment factories, African hospitality sectors, or Indian healthcare and construction industries, harassment disproportionately originates from individuals in elevated positions of authority. Such patterns affirm longstanding feminist arguments that sexual harassment functions as a mechanism to reinforce male dominance rather than an expression of personal attraction or interpersonal conflict. The recurrence of harassment within male-dominated professions and hierarchical institutional settings underscores how deeply entrenched gendered authority structures continue to shape workplace interactions. Women entering new occupational spaces or advancing into supervisory roles often become targets of harassment designed to undermine their legitimacy, test their endurance, or deter their upward mobility, revealing harassment as a disciplinary practice that polices gender boundaries.

Organizational cultures also play a decisive role in shaping both the incidence of harassment and the likelihood of reporting. Environments that lack clear reporting mechanisms, fail to sanction misconduct, or tolerate casual sexism create permissive climates where harassment becomes normalized. Many of the studies reviewed show that women refrain from reporting harassment not because incidents are trivial, but because institutional responses are perceived as inadequate or punitive. Fear of retaliation, job loss, reputational harm, and distrust in grievance procedures remain universal deterrents, from China and Bangladesh to South Africa and India. This pervasive silence reproduces a cycle in which perpetrators remain unchallenged, organizational accountability remains weak, and hostile climates become self-sustaining. Even in contexts with comprehensive legislation such as India's POSH Act or the European Union's anti-discrimination frameworks, the translation of policy into practice remains inconsistent, revealing a structural gap between legal protections and organizational implementation.

The paper also highlights pronounced intersectional vulnerabilities that intensify women's risk of harassment. Harassment is not evenly distributed among women; rather, it disproportionately affects those situated in marginalized occupations, lower socio-economic strata, or precarious employment arrangements. Workers in construction, domestic labour, garment manufacturing, hospitality, and nursing face elevated risks not simply because of individual susceptibility but because of the structural features of their work: economic dependency, low unionization, high supervisory control, public-facing responsibilities, and lack of institutional safeguards. Younger women, especially those entering the workforce for the first time, represent another high-risk group, reflecting unequal power relations and limited agency. These patterns demonstrate that sexual harassment at workplace operates along intersecting axes of gender, class, age, and occupational status, reinforcing broader social hierarchies and limiting women's access to safe and equitable employment.

The consequences of sexual harassment at workplace are similarly far-reaching. Psychological distress, emotional exhaustion, decreased job satisfaction, erosion of self-efficacy, and withdrawal from career advancement opportunities emerge consistently across global studies. At the organizational level, harassment contributes to reduced productivity, absenteeism, high turnover, and reputational harm. At the

societal level, persistent harassment discourages women from participating fully in the labour force, reinforcing gender gaps in employment, leadership, and earnings. These consequences demonstrate that sexual harassment at workplace is not merely a workplace concern but a barrier to gender equality, economic development, and public health.

Finally, the persistence of sexual harassment at workplace despite decades of advocacy and legislative reform signals the limitations of measures that focus solely on formal policy compliance. While legal frameworks are essential, they cannot transform organizational cultures or dismantle entrenched gendered power structures on their own. Effective prevention requires sustained institutional commitment, gender-sensitive leadership, robust accountability systems, and proactive cultural change. It also requires shifting social norms that continue to trivialize harassment, blame victims, or normalize gendered subordination. Global movements such as #MeToo have expanded public awareness and emboldened many women to speak out, yet the prevalence patterns show that symbolic cultural shifts must be accompanied by structural interventions to produce lasting change.

Taken together, the evidence demonstrates that workplace sexual harassment is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon requiring equally comprehensive strategies. Preventing harassment necessitates addressing not only individual behaviours but the organizational, cultural, and structural systems that enable and reproduce gender inequality. Without confronting these deeper foundations, progress will remain incremental, and workplaces will continue to fall short of providing safe, equitable environments for women. The evidence synthesized across global and Indian contexts demonstrates that workplace sexual harassment is a pervasive and deeply structural issue rooted in gender inequality and organizational power dynamics. The paper reveals that sexual harassment at workplace is sustained not by isolated acts of deviance but by enduring structural conditions that normalize gendered power imbalances across occupational settings. Although prevalence estimates vary across regions and methodologies, the consistency with which women report exposure to unwelcome sexual behaviours signals a systemic phenomenon rather than a circumstantial one.

Conclusion

Sexual harassment persists globally as a manifestation of gender inequality embedded in workplaces and society. Despite increased visibility and decades of research, it continues to undermine women's safety, dignity, and professional advancement. Addressing this pervasive issue requires cultural transformation, stronger organizational accountability, improved grievance systems, and broader societal commitment to gender justice.

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