

Seventy Percent: The Reality of Workplace Harassment in India

Survey findings show how workplace harassment affects women's safety, careers, and earnings

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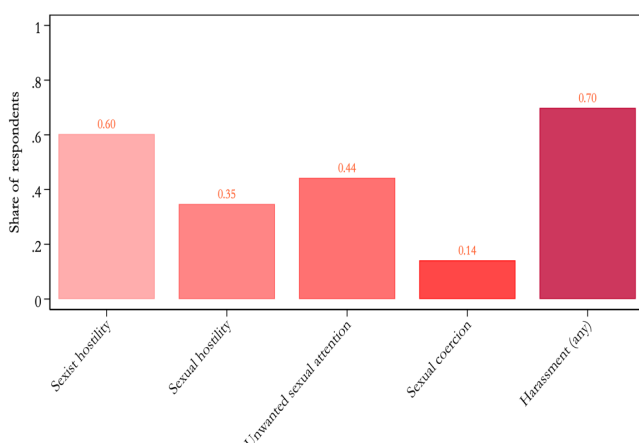


70% of women in corporate India face harassment and would give up a share of income for a harassment-free workplace.

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Topic at a Glance

Sexual harassment remains a widespread challenge in workplaces across the world. Despite being illegal and a violation of human rights, it remains prevalent. A LinkedIn survey among women in corporate firms across India reveals that nearly 70% have experienced at least one form of workplace harassment in the past year. The most common is sexist hostility (60%), followed by unwanted sexual attention (44%), many women also report criminalized acts like unwelcome touching and indecent exposure. One in three women never report incidents, fearing retaliation, while many change jobs, carry items for self-defense, or leave the workforce altogether. These experiences impose a "harassment tax": women are willing to forgo nearly 19% of wages for a safer workplace. Tackling harassment requires shifting responsibility to organizations as well as men to create safer workplaces for women.



Caption: Prevalence of workplace harassment among women in corporate India - Seven in ten women report any form of workplace harassment, most often sexist hostility and unwanted sexual attention.

New Insights

Sexual harassment remains a widespread challenge in workplaces across the world. Despite being illegal and a violation of human rights, it persists and proves difficult to address. The #metoo movement brought this to the forefront. Numbers from administrative datasets barely scratch the surface of the prevalence of sexual harassment and its implication on labor market outcomes of women.

Police records and company reports, such as those used in recent economics papers by Adams-Prassl et al. (2022) and Folke and Rickne (2022), capture mostly extreme cases. What goes unreported in these data sources are the subtle but relentless forms of harassment that women face, such as sexist jokes, unwanted attention, and coercive remarks.

A LinkedIn survey shedding light on the hidden experiences.

Data from our survey directly targeted at female employees via LinkedIn sheds light on accounts of workplace harassment faced by women in India, their coping strategies, and how such experiences shape their careers. We used targeted ads to recruit women for an online survey. Our respondents work in medium-sized firms (200–500 employees), typically in the technology, education, finance and consulting sectors. They are aged 18–49 and have 1–5 years of work experience at their current firm.

Collecting accurate data on harassment is challenging. To encourage disclosure, we asked 15 specific behaviors rather than a single yes/no question about harassment (Fitzgerald, Gelfand and Drasgow, 1995; Fitzgerald and Cortina, 2018). This method reduces ambiguity and avoids relying on individual interpretations.

Preliminary results from our survey reveal that nearly 70 percent of women report experiencing at least one form of workplace harassment in the past year. The most common category is sexist hostility, reported by 60% women, which often takes the form of being condescended, or subjected to offensive remarks simply because of their gender. Around 44 percent report unwanted sexual attention, including cat-calling, groping, indecent exposure, persistent staring or ogling as well as repeated advances for dates despite clear refusals. 35 percent experience sexual hostility, such as, intrusive comments about physical appearance, or crude sexual remarks. Finally, 14 percent of women face coercion, which

implied threats of retaliation and promises of career advancement in exchange for compliance. Alarming, women also describe incidents of indecent exposure (10%) and unwelcome touching (13%), acts that are criminalized in most countries, including India under the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act of 2013. These findings highlight that harassment is not limited to isolated extreme cases, it is also embedded in the everyday experiences of working women. The numbers are unsurprisingly higher than those in administrative datasets such as the recent ILO's "Experiences of violence and harassment at work: A global first survey" in 2022.

A double burden: enduring harassment while undertaking actions to avoid it.

Among women who have faced sexual harassment, 32% percent of women did not bring incidents to their employers, often fearing retaliation or believing nothing will change to make the workplace safer for women. Reassuringly, 50% of women do feel their companies are responsive. Women do undertake costly actions in order to feel safer in the workplace: one in four switch roles or workplaces, another quarter carry something for self-defense and nearly one in five leave their company entirely. These choices show the heavy double burden women face, enduring harassment while also bearing the cost of avoiding it. Placing additional psychological and cognitive costs on women.

Harassment does not just harm individual women, it reshapes the labor market.

Women with 2-5 years of work experience are 14 pp more likely to face harassment than those recently joined the firm or who have had 5 or more years of work experience. Unsurprisingly, we find a strong negative correlation between job satisfaction and experiences of sexual harassment.

In a discrete choice experiment, we find a large negative valuation of work environments with a history of sexual harassment — the equivalent of a 19% lower wage in the full sample. Even when no information is provided about work environment, 45% of women assume harassment is likely to occur. When benchmarked against findings from Sweden by Folke and Rickne (2022), Indian women's willingness to trade earnings for safety is about double in magnitude. This "harassment tax" could contribute to sustaining the gender wage gap.

Policy Recommendations

Given the high prevalence of sexual harassment faced by women and its implications for labor market outcomes and women's well-being, reducing workplace harassment must be a priority for both firms and public policy. Addressing it requires shifting the responsibility away from women alone and engaging organizations and men as part of the solution.

Lower barriers to reporting. Strengthen confidential and independent grievance mechanisms and simplify procedures. When the prevalence of sexual coercion is high, as our data indicate,

these channels must prioritize confidentiality and ensure strong protection against retaliation.

Engage men directly. Building on our evidence, our next step is a large-scale cluster randomized control trial in India. In this intervention, five million social media advertisements about workplace harassment will be shown to 800,000 men in firms assigned to the treatment arm via LinkedIn. We will use statistics generated in the baseline to raise awareness among men about the experiences of women. We then assess changes in men's attitudes and behaviour—and how these, in turn, influence the workplace experiences of women. This approach recognizes that men must be central to the solution for reducing harassment at work.

Limitations

First, while our survey captures experiences often missing from official data, it is limited to medium-sized firms in India's corporate sector. Patterns of harassment and reporting may differ among smaller firms, informal workers, or in the public sector, underscoring the need for nationally representative data to better understand prevalence.

Second, our willingness-to-pay estimates are derived from a discrete choice experiment. While this approach allows us to isolate and examine the value women place on a harassment-free workplace, real-world choices may be complex; shaped by factors such as job availability, social norms, and the salience of attributes.

Finally, while our upcoming trial focuses on changing men's behavior through social media messaging, this represents only one dimension of behavioral change that could reduce harassment. At present, there are few rigorously evaluated interventions aimed at reducing workplace harassment, particularly in developing-country contexts. Expanding this evidence base is critical to understanding what works and scaling effective approaches.

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