

## Workplace Sexual Harassment: *New Variants through the Pandemic*

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### Abstract

*And you thought that I don't have to meet that male colleague anymore, I don't need to travel with my boss anymore, I can stay away from the bus commute - I'm Safe! Are you kidding me?! And you thought it was only the Covid-19 virus that could mutate itself, that could have many variants, and could change with changing times? Think again! Unofficial data reveals that workplace sexism, harassment, discrimination, bullying, and sexual offenses have been the way of life for close to 90% of women in India, only less than a third of them even talk about it and a fraction of them report it (primary research conducted by Durga India). Yet, in India, we have the most powerful, holistic, and well-thought-through feminist laws against workplace harassment (POSH Act of 2013). It all does not add up.*

**Keywords:** Pandemic; COVID-19; Sexual Harassment

Sexual Harassment is an issue that girls are familiar with and experience from the time they start understanding things. They normalize it, as a recurring feature or worse still blame themselves for it - "perhaps it's my dress", "I think I should not wear red lipstick", "I guess when I laughed too much he felt I was keen on him" and the list goes on. Open forums and honest conversations about this have always failed or never taken place. It's honestly a waste of time to discuss what happens to us, all the time, especially when we know we can avoid it altogether! Avoid it how? I can dress modestly from head to toe, I can stop talking to boys altogether, I should stay home late evenings, I won't party, I will stay away from the internet, I will work close to home or study a course that's in my town alone...the list goes on.

The issue has also been normalized by us to a large extent. How many times have parents sat with children and discussed the issue of everyday forms of harassment and sexual violence? Mothers largely worry for their daughters and tell them to dress modestly, cover their chest and not look up at a possible perpetrator. Girls are also told to bear the shame and not talk about it. In some sense, girls are made to believe that they asked for it, it's their mistake, it's an inter-generational problem, and that nothing can be done about it. In such a scenario, how will one even begin to think of solutions? Where are safe spaces to talk about this problem?

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Sexual harassment at the workplace eats into our lives, our thinking, our being, and our rights altogether. Imagine a man who is employed in an organization, and is preparing for a life-changing presentation. What will he do? He will prepare for the presentation all through the week, get dressed, and make the presentation to the best ability. Now, let's explore what a woman employee will do in his place. She first needed to prove herself on the double to even be eligible to make it to the same presentation, will prepare for the presentation, think about her clothes for the day, ensure the dress is not short, and her cleavage is not seen, prepares meals for her family at home, takes a transport that's safe, leaves home earlier for it, makes the presentation and gets interrupted by the men a million times during the presentation! Sexism, discrimination, harassment, mansplaining... you name it and they experience it!

So come the pandemic, the women sighed with relief that they can be at home (work from home Baba!), take calls and meetings and for once feel like their men counterparts - visible for performance and invisible for commodification! That remained only a distant dream. At Durga ([www.durgaindia.org](http://www.durgaindia.org)) we have had many women reach out to us to mitigate workplace harassment at their homes. Managers insist that the women employees keep their cameras switched on at all times. Managers make comments about the decor of the house, even asking if they are sitting on their beds or chairs. A manager even went on to ask the woman employee to wear lipstick so that he can experience the same professionalism if she were at the office! Seriously?! Has any manager ever worried about the looks and dress of the men team members this much? Why not? "That blue tie is what you should wear for all the team meetings, as it oozes reliability"! Try saying that the next time.

Sexual comments have started flooding WhatsApp, personal email accounts, and other forms of digital communication channels too. Young girls have been bombarded with friend requests, trolling, and lewd comments, making online spaces a nightmare. One of the girls at a Durga Safety workshop described it as "a nightmare to even live". Imagine the trauma she must be experiencing to say this.

The work timings have also extended beyond any normal hours we had experienced before. It anyway works from home, so meetings start in the wee hours and goes on through late nights. Women employees have been constantly chided to say "as a woman will you be able to attend this" and even some meeting opportunities with global clients have been taken away and offered on a plate for their men counterparts!

Like the workplace, as if sexual offenses were not enough sexism has taken another form too. Women are being asked to work different hours as they are now to cook and clean at home too and hence will not be considered productive at regular office hours. The downsizing weapon has been used one too many times on women and more women have lost jobs in the last couple of years. I recognize that men have lost jobs too, but the odds of women coming back to work are far bleaker in the near future.

The redressal committees and the ways to raise complaints have not been able to meet the demands. The committees in a way have also been a burden on the women. They are already bombarded with work and then the number of cases piling up is not helping at all. Also, because of the inability to clearly categorize the forms of harassment, the stigma associated with it, and the perpetual doubts women have on the issue, not many have been able to find any relief on issues they have faced. Women have also been silenced by managers saying that the world is suffering and

the organization is struggling. It was already felt that maternity leave, menstrual leave, and the icing on the cake the “me too” movement have all come in the way of increasing women hires in the organization. On one end it has become a joke for the HR team and the men that, why to hire women and get into issues, and on the other, it has reduced the chances of women getting into a level-playing field for women in general. In fact, there have been anecdotes of men commenting that they will refrain from hiring more women lest they slap a “me too” case of them. It’s all a big joke!

If we now move to the informal workspaces from the formal ones, it’s another hell hole there. Garment factories (most of them being unregistered) have done away with their women’s teams since March 2020 itself. These women have not been paid for the last month of work too. Because of the lack of childcare facilities for most working mothers and schools remaining shut through the period, women have had limited support for childcare and hence have had to quit work too. Age being a limiting factor, many women post 35 years of age have also lost jobs at garment houses, as they are not considered productive enough.

The life and workspaces of domestic help are full of perpetual harassment and exploitation. They work in our homes and for you and I, yes. No paid leave, no social security, no health benefits, exploitative work timings, the penalty for not being to work during the lockdowns, and the custodian of all our frustrations at our own workplaces! What a life! And then no benefits of working from home too!

One of the issues that have not been given any importance is that of the mental health of people, particularly of working women. Lack of safe spaces to share, intense work at home and at the office, additional burdens of job losses, men folk staying home, the burden of losing jobs, and children staying home have all fallen on the lives of women. Women have also been the crusaders of health response at home, the first to respond to the health needs of the family and the last to get health support too.

The variants keep coming now and then, both the pandemic as well as patriarchy. We have vaccinations and boosters for one, we have our own will, strength, and resilience for the other. What we must have for the latter perhaps is impatience, annoyance, and frustration, so we give it up and give it back!