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Unmasking the Reality: Confronting Harassment of Women

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Abstract:

This article focuses on the widespread phenomenon of harassment in various aspects of women's lives: at work, outdoors, and online. This paper presents various forms of harassment from verbal abuse, physical actions like giving the stiff arm, staring down and head turning, to cyber bullying and their effects on psychological and social well being of victims. There can scarcely be any subject that elicits as much interest as the problems of women, among researchers in social sciences, government, planning groups, social workers and reformers. This is a field of study, or in other words the study of women's problems cuts across gerontology, psychiatry and even criminology. But one issue which directly concerns women and which has been neglected and avoided most conveniently is the issue on crime against women. That's why This article also explores the cultural, legal, and systematic factors that contribute to harassment and how it requires a reform and change on different spheres and levels. The case studies and current statistics used in the piece advocate for the enhancement of the legal authority and actions, the public health campaigns to raise awareness, and people's joint effort to promote the environment that would be safer and less invasive for women.

Keywords: Harassment, Violence Against Women, Gender Equality, Cultural Norms, Verbal Harassment, Physical Harassment, Sexual Harassment, Cyber Harassment, Institutional Harassment.

1. Introduction: "Women are getting affected by various kind of violence almost every day, which is disrupting the society. Women are increasingly victims of violence because of increasing crime against women. According to National Crime Records Bureau report 2018:

- a) The Number of crimes committed against women increased in 2017 by six per cent as compared to 2016 figures and by nine per cent compared to 2015 figures.

- b) Women reported almost 34,000 rapes in India. One woman reported a rape every 15 minutes.
- c) 'Cruelty by husband or relatives' was the most reported crime against women, accounting for 33 per cent of all crimes, followed by assault on woman with intent to outrage her modesty, kidnapping and rape".¹

Harassment of women is a pervasive and deeply ingrained issue that affects countless lives across the globe. Despite significant progress in gender equality, harassment remains a major barrier to women's safety, dignity, and equality. This article seeks to unmask the reality of harassment, exploring its various forms, underlying causes, and the impact it has on individuals and society. It also examines the steps being taken to confront and address this issue, while emphasizing the need for continued action and reform.

2. Understanding Harassment: Harassment encompasses a wide range of behaviors that undermine an individual's dignity, safety, and well-being. For women, harassment can occur in various settings, including workplaces, educational institutions, public spaces, and online environments. Crimes against women are not a recent development. Indian women have faced sexual harassment, torture, and abuse for as long as documented history exists. It can be argued that many women in India have historically been subjugated and oppressed by their male counterparts. Today, women are gradually being recognized as valuable, influential, and significant contributors to society, but just a few decades ago, their situation was dire. Ideologies, institutional practices, and societal norms have played a pervasive role in their harassment, with some of these harmful behaviors still persisting. Despite India's independence, legislative efforts to safeguard women's rights, the spread of education, and women's increasing financial independence, many continue to suffer violence. Women are still beaten, drugged, raped, set on fire, and killed. According to the latest data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), crimes against women in India have risen by 7.1% since 2010. Harassment, at minimum, is improper behaviour directed at and which is offensive to a person by another person who reasonably knew the behaviour was offensive. This includes objectionable or unacceptable conduct that demeans, belittles or causes personal humiliation or embarrassment to an individual. (Source: United Nations. Policy on Prevention of Harassment)

3. Forms of Harassment: Harassment of women can be categorized into several types:

Verbal Harassment: This includes unwanted comments, jokes, or threats that are derogatory or demeaning. Examples include sexist remarks, catcalling, and offensive jokes. Verbal harassment can create a hostile environment and impact women's mental health and self-esteem. In their Article Identifying Hidden Factors for Verbal Harassment Comments on Social Media Mrinmoy Karmokar, & Moshfiq-Us-Saleheen Chowdhury, & Marshia Mim, & Hamed Taherdoost, says that, "Verbal abuse is a specific type of psychological or emotional abuse. Verbal abuse is the use of derogatory, negative language to harm another

¹ Ram Ahuja, *Social Problems in India*, P-283
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person. Verbal abuse harbors hidden aggression and is extremely manipulative, often through insults disguised as caring comments. Verbal abuse can be overt or covert, but it is always related to controlling and manipulating the victim. Victims are blamed for the abuser's behavior. Verbal abuse can be communicated by silence, damaging gossip, and other passive-aggressive behaviors. Verbal abuse may consist of shouting, insulting, intimidating, threatening, shaming, demeaning, or name calling.”²

Physical Harassment: This involves any form of physical contact or intimidation, such as unwanted touching, assault, or sexual advances. Physical harassment not only causes immediate harm but can also lead to long-term psychological trauma. Harassment may be verbal or non-verbal and may be physical in nature. Harassment may take the form of words, gestures or actions which tend to annoy, alarm, abuse, demean, intimidate, belittle, humiliate or embarrass another person or persons or which create an intimidating, hostile and/or offensive work environment. Harassment does not have to be intentional or deliberate; rather it exists when it is perceived as offensive by a reasonable individual.

Examples of physical harassment include:

- a) homophobic slurs, jokes or comments, leering or staring at a person in a sexual manner, whistling, commenting on a person's sexual attributes, or prancing in a sexual way.
- b) Contact one's maybe punch, hit, shove, slap, kick, or bite another person.
- c) Tripping another person;
- d) Assaulting another person with an object by throwing it at the person.

Sexual Harassment: A specific form of harassment that involves unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. Sexual harassment can occur in workplaces, educational institutions, and other environments where power dynamics are at play. The EEOC has defined sexual harassment in its guidelines as: Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when: Submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment, or Submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as a basis for employment decisions affecting such individual, or Such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment. Unwelcome sexual advances or repeated solicitations of a sexual nature, unwarranted and persistent inquiries about a person's private life, obscene material in writing, indecent gestures, comments or jokes, or unwarranted physical contact with a person are all violations. It can also include showing

² Karmokar, Mrinmoy & Chowdhury, Moshfiq-Us-Saleheen & Mim, Marshia & Taherdoost, Hamed. (2024). Identifying Hidden Factors for Verbal Harassment Comments on Social Media. 10.1007/978-981-99-8937-9_55.

sexual materials, belittling someone's sexual experience, or threatening to reward compliance. But more serious acts like rape or assault are counted as crimes.

Cyber Harassment: With the rise of digital communication, cyber harassment has become increasingly prevalent. This includes online bullying, stalking, and the dissemination of harmful or threatening content via social media, emails, or other digital platforms. Many of the articles acknowledge the lack of definitional consistency of cyber stalking and harassment (or cyber bullying). A significant difference is the specification (or absence) of how frequently the offence must occur to be deemed stalking or harassment. For example, one study defines cyber stalking generally as "The Internet and online applications have become fundamental parts of society. While undoubtedly beneficial, they also present threats to children, adolescents and adults alike. Cyber stalking and cyber harassment are two of these dangers."³ Cyber stalking can be defined as "the use of the Internet, e-mail or other electronic communications devices to stalk another person".⁴ Cyber harassment and cyber bullying have been used analogously⁵, with cyber bullying defined as "the repeated and intentional use of various forms of technology such as cell phones, pagers, e-mail, instant messaging, and Web sites by individuals or groups to harm others".⁶

Institutional Harassment: This occurs when systems, policies, or practices within organizations perpetuate or tolerate harassment. It includes inadequate responses to complaints, lack of support for victims, and environments that foster discriminatory behavior. On the website, *the mend project* says that, Institutional abuse occurs when there is the mistreatment of a person from a system of power, such as a corporation, hospital, nursing facility, school, or religious organization. It can also take place within sports organizations, fraternities or sororities, or various extracurricular clubs and groups. Commonly it happens in the form of institutional child abuse, elder abuse, or financial abuse. It is a very powerful form of abuse and is extremely damaging to victims. Institutional harassment can take various forms, including Neglect, Physical abuse, Psychological abuse, Verbal abuse, Financial abuse, Sexual abuse, or Discriminatory abuse based on a person's race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age or religion.⁷

4. Impact on Victims: The effects of harassment are usually severe and long term in women suffering from the vice. We hereby state that this season has an appalling impact on their psychological and emotional health and also their physiologic and occupational health.

³ Pittaro, M., L. (2007) Cyber stalking: An Analysis of Online Harassment and intimidation, *International Journal of Cyber Criminology*, 1(2), 180-197

⁴ Hinduja, S and Patchin, J., W. (2008) Cyberbullying: An Exploratory Analysis of Factors Related to Offending and Victimization, *Deviant Behavior*, 29(2): 129-156

⁵ Beran, T. and Li, Q. (2005) Cyber-harassment: A study of a new method for an old behaviour, *J. Educational Computing Research*, 32 (3), 265-277

⁶ Patchin, J. W. and Hinduja, S. (2006) Bullies Move Beyond the Schoolyard: A Preliminary Look at Cyberbullying, *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 4(2), 148-169

⁷ <https://themendproject.com/institutional-abuse/>

But in their article, Qayyum, Sara & Ul Haq, Muhammad Hasham & Rafiq, Hassan & Yasin, Fouzan & Ahmed, Ayesha writes that, Harassment, the act of bothering or aggressively intimidating someone can cause major consequences for the people who are affected by it, leaving them scarred for the rest of their lives. A person experiencing harassment often finds himself vulnerable and unable to retaliate back due to the simple fact of them being too scared to fight back and feeling helplessness, thus suffering in silence, and eventually giving up on life all together⁸. Harassment has been proven to be a major driving force towards the development of depressive symptoms, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder⁹, they incur weight loss and a loss or gain of appetite. Like most women, harassment poses a adverse effect on the women's psychological, physical, and occupational health. The impacts are anxiety, depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, decrease in self-esteem and problems in relationships. The stress and trauma may lead to insomnia headache and digestive system disorders and chronic stress increases health risks. Employment offenses depress job contentment and productivity and increase truancy; legally, harassment may compel women to lose their employment or educational status decreasing their career and income levels.

5. Underlying Causes of Harassment: To effectively combat harassment, it is essential to identify the underlying factors that contribute to its occurrence. People from certain cultures, especially male chauvinistic societies enhance harassment because of the lap gained in demeaning the female gender. The tyranny of power operates in work places and other social interactions where the powerful continually prey on the weak since reporting the cases is rare due to einige fears of revenge. Also, a fairly exploratory topic regarding harassment as well as low knowledge of what exactly can be considered harassment ensures no strong disapprovals toward the behaviours hence fostering the practice. Last but not least, there are serious problems with legal protection and, in particular, its enforcement, which makes it difficult to fight harassment; there may be either weak legal framework and/or unfriendly judiciary system. The prevention of such issues simply cannot be accomplished through education, awareness, and enhanced legislation and policy.

6. Confronting Harassment: Current Efforts and Strategies: Combating harassment must be a multi-faceted strategy, which encompasses juridification, regulationordes, the introduction of new policies, widespread acceptance of new ideas, and the provision of support to the victims. In attempting to build up the wall, regulatory pedagles are central, with measures like the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act in India meant to avail the women recourse and ensure that the bad apples face justice. Employers are adopting workplace policies on reporting, investigating and providing assistance to people who are harassed at their workplace besides offering training on the same.

⁸ Funk, C. (2016, February 12). Bookboon.com. Retrieved from <https://bookboon.com/blog/2016/02/harassment-and-its-effects/> on 17/12/20

⁹ Houle, J. N. (2011). The Impact Of Sexual Harassment On Depressive Symptoms During The Early Occupational Career. NCBI.

Social change is achieved across the culture with awareness campaigns including the 'Me Too',¹⁰ or the TimesUp which attempt to result in the modification of civilizing norms of acceptable behaviour. The other strategies that have not been mentioned but are equally useful in driving down harassment are also enforcing gender equality, actively combating negative norms.

Victim assistance entails every aspect that will help her or him to heal and be directed on what to do next, this is counseling, legal assistance and support groups. Whistleblower protection procedures are important in that it allows the victims of the incidences to report the cases without repercussions. Also, the Local effectorism and coalitions of governments, organisations and communities develop the advocacy and the exchange of the resources and improves accountability. These complex approaches function synergistically to respond to harassment on different levels, as well as to establish safer contexts. According to UNICEF Responding to harassment involves three main stages. First, individuals assess their experiences, gather information on possible actions, and define their options. In the second stage, they decide on either an informal or formal approach. The informal approach may involve personal action or support from an Ombudsman, while the formal approach includes investigation and potential disciplinary measures if misconduct is proven. The choice between these approaches depends on the situation's context and severity. In the third stage, follow-up is crucial to ensure that harassment ceases and does not recur, with managers working to maintain staff morale.

7. Challenges and Future Directions: Women's harassment remains a serious issue around the world, driven by cultural norms, weak legal frameworks, and developing challenges such as digital abuse. Deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and victim blaming frequently normalize harassment, silencing victims and prolonging cycles of violence. Despite legal frameworks, enforcement is weak, with survivors experiencing delays, shame, and intimidation during judicial proceedings. Underreporting is common owing to fear of punishment and a lack of faith in authorities. The increase of cyber harassment complicates matters, as attackers' anonymity makes it tougher to track out. Intersectional difficulties are significant because marginalized women endure additional prejudice based on race, class, or disability.

To solve these difficulties, legal institutions must be strengthened to ensure timely enforcement and victim-centered court proceedings. Awareness campaigns and gender sensitization programs in schools and workplaces can help to break down preconceptions and promote respect. Empowering women via education, financial independence, and leadership opportunities is critical to breaking the cycle of dependence and vulnerability.

¹⁰ The 'me too.' movement was founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke to support survivors of sexual violence, particularly young women of color from low-wealth communities, to find pathways to healing

Digital safety must be prioritized by creating solutions to combat cyberbullying and promote online privacy. Community-based initiatives can break down cultural barriers by involving men and boys in challenging toxic masculinity and promoting gender equality. To effectively address the unique needs of oppressed populations, policies must take an intersectional approach.

It also an important aspect which helps to identify tendencies in harassment and develop policies based on available information. International cooperation can help to curb harassment by sharing information, lessons learned and available tools and benchmark strategies.

The issue of combating harassment should involve cross-sectoral collaborations: education, power to the victims, and changes. The underlying concerns and observation presented and information given in this outline show that society can strive for a safer environment and for women's rights by eliminating risks from their sources and by cultivating a receptive environment for women.

8. Conclusion: Harassment of women is a deeply entrenched issue that demands a comprehensive and sustained response. By understanding the various forms of harassment, its impact, and the underlying causes, we can develop more effective strategies to confront and address this problem. Legal reforms, cultural change, and support for victims are essential components of this effort. As we continue to unmask the reality of harassment and work towards a safer and more respectful world, it is crucial to remain vigilant, advocate for change, and support those affected by harassment. Together, we can create an environment where women are free from harassment and able to live with dignity and respect. Ram Ahuja said, in his book *Social Problems in India*, "Violence against women is one of the most pervasive human rights violations. It devastates lives, fractures communities, and stalls development. To combat the rising phenomenon of violence against women and girls, those committing the crimes must be prosecuted. The survivors have little hope of seeing their perpetrators pay for their crimes, and so the violence perpetuate. States must ensure, that the economic and social rights of the victims are protected. But laws alone are not enough; for perpetrators to be brought to justice, women and girls must be empowered to report violence before it costs them their lives."¹¹ According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), violence against women stifles a country's development.

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¹¹ Ahuja, R. (2021). *Social Problems in India* (4th ed.). Jaipur: Rawat Publication. P-307

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