

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT WORKPLACE: FIVE WOMEN WORKERS EXPERIENCES[#]

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In this article experiences of five victims of sexual harassment have been described. Different events in these cases demonstrate that sexual harassment has devastating psychological, physical, and emotional effects on targeted women workers and has a powerful potential to destroy trust, which is a fundamental element for a good working environment. It has been suggested that taking action can empower a victim to resolve the experience for herself, gain strength for her actions, and move forward with her life. But not a single action can be taken until and unless the victims speaks up about their experience, as the power of the harasser, the abuser, and the rapist depends above all on the silence of women.

Sexual harassment at workplace is any repeated and unwanted verbal, physical or gestural sexual advances, sexually explicit derogatory statements or sexually discriminatory remarks made by someone in the work place which are offensive to the worker involved, which cause worker to feel threatened, humiliated, harassed or which interfere with the worker's job performance, undermine job security or create threatening or intimidating work environment.

Sexual harassment is different from sexual flirtation which is based on mutual consent (Pattinson, 1991). Sexual harassment is a frequent display of power which is intended to intimidate or degrade another worker (Kanekar & Menon, 1992). It is a form of victimization about which increasing concern is being expressed in the workplaces (Ellis, Barak, & Pinto, 1991; Gutek & Cohan, 1987; Gutek, Cohen, & Konrad, 1990; Jenson & Gutek, 1982; Konrad & Gutek, 1986; Schneider, 1991; Sheffey & Tindale, 1992).

Although men may also be victimized, it is women who are mostly the targets of sexual harassment at a workplace. Further studies have shown that it affects all women regardless of their age, marital status, physical appearance, background, or professional status (Anila, 1994,

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1995, 1998; Anila, Ansari, & Tariq, 1991; Butt, 2001; Fitzgerald, 1992; Iqbal & Kamal, 2001; Kamal & Tariq, 1997). One reason may be that women tend to be concentrated in a narrow band of occupations that pay less while men predominate better paid, authoritative positions, and supervisory jobs.

The experiences of sexual harassment at workplace can result in a women leaving her job, she may be dismissed, or lose promotion prospects for failing to comply with the suggestions made to her. It creates a hostile and stressful working environment which can lead to mental and physical illness for the recipient and an uncomfortable atmosphere for other workers. Victims of sexual harassment suffer tension, anger, and anxiety; and it interferes with job performance and satisfaction (Anila, 1998; Coles, 1986; Jensen & Gutek, 1982; McGrath, Keita, Strickland, & Russo, 1990; Schneider, 1991).

The present research is based on the case studies of five victims of sexual harassment. In order to protect them and their privacy, all names have been changed. It is basically an exploratory study and the major concern is to know the causes of sexual harassment and its effects and outcomes on women who have been harassed. The study explored whether there are particular characteristics of the harasser, or there is something peculiar in the victim which makes him/her more vulnerable to harassment. The study also aimed at finding out what type of women suffer sexual harassment more frequently than others, for instance are they married or unmarried, are they pretty, are they mature women or are they young and innocent? Are they fashionable, and have high socioeconomic status or are they conservative, poor, timid, unconfident, and belong to low class families? Are they, the ones who freely mix up with their bosses and colleagues or are they the ones who are reserve with their fellow employees.

The present researchers also wanted to know what effects the victims experience after sexual harassment, what damage occurs in them, both physically as well as psychologically. What are the reactions of the family as well as the victims of sexual harassment. Do they report to some other person or authority and take some action or they just keep quiet and hide the traumatic experience from other people. It was also explored whether victims left their job or continued their work. Along with the specific characteristics it was also planned to explore the characteristics of harassers i.e., their ages, their status and position at workplace, whether they are mostly colleagues, bosses, or subordinates.

The study also explored the specific physical and social environment at workplace that facilitate the occurrence of the incidence of sexual harassment. The present researcher also planned to judge whether the women who work and sit at a place which is isolated from other members of the organization experience more sexual harassment as compared to those who sit and work with other members of the workplaces and in what kind of work sexual harassment is more prevented and experienced. The research was based on interviews carried out with the victims of sexual harassment.

METHOD

Sample

The sample consisted of five women victims, selected from an NGO on the basis of their harassment experiences. Their age ranged from 17 years to 32 years, at the time of the incident. Among them, one was divorced, one was married, and three were unmarried.

Instrument

The researcher interviewed each victim with the help of a guideline focusing on exploring each and every aspect of the victims experience of sexual harassment. In-depth interviews were conducted with each victim individually. Open-ended and close-ended questions were asked to obtain information on the issues related to the victim and harasser, as mentioned in the text.

Procedure

The victims were contacted individually. After developing rapport and assuring them about the confidentiality of their responses, detailed interviews were carried out and recorded through paper and pencil. All these victims of sexual harassment were under the treatment of a psychologist who works in an NGO and provides free counseling services.

CASE NO. (1) Amna belongs to a low-class family. She lives with her mother and two younger brothers. About three years ago her father died of double pneumonia due to lack of proper medical treatment. After her father's death their life became even worse because his pension was too small to support the family and they also had to pay the rent of the house. At that time, her brothers were studying in school while she had appeared for intermediate exams. In order to continue their living,

Amna decided to quit her education and applied for a telephone operator job in the office of a property dealer. She was 17, years old at that time and was very young, innocent, and had an attractive face but not one of very beautiful girls. The pay the property dealer offered was quite good and since she was very needy of money, she immediately joined the office.

Her boss Rashid, was around 40 years old ordinary looking man. It was a small office with few men workers and apart from Amna there was only one female worker who was a middle aged woman. After some days Rashid started asking Amna for staying over after office hours. The usual time of the office was till 5 pm but out of compulsion Amna started staying till 6:30 to 7 pm. During this time she started noticing that Rashid was trying to get close and frank to her. She was very timid and shy person and she never shared a single word with any of her male colleagues. She used to sit in a small cabin which was located on one side of a hall of the office. After 5 pm, her boss started coming to her cabin and talked to her about his personal life. He told her that he is still unmarried and lives with his friend. He used to sympathize with her about her father's death and her hard life. He also complimented on her attractiveness, and on her appearance and also talked about such other private matters.

As Amna was a very timid girl, she did not know what to do. She just kept quiet and told no body, not even her mother so as not to worry her. In the mean time, she was noticing that her boss's frankness was increasing every day. She was very worried and tense and was not in a position to share her sufferings with anyone.

One day she was just leaving the office at about 5:40 pm. Everyone else was gone, only the guard was sitting outside the office when suddenly Rashid came in her cabin and asked her to sit down and talk. He was very close to her physically. She got afraid and tried to run but he held her hand and compelled her to sit. Then he closed the door of the cabin and started demanding sexual favours. Amna started weeping and then suddenly Rashid snatched away her dupatta and raped her. After half an hour he left the office, leaving her fainted in the cabin. Some times later she woke up and saw that the whole office was in darkness even the guard was gone. Somehow, she reached home and told everything to her mother who could not do anything except cry.

After this incident, Amna suffered from high fever for seven days. She was in extreme stress and tension and was badly affected both physically and psychologically. She became very quiet and did not want to talk to anyone, not to her family members even. She was very

frightened and scared and would not leave the house. She started seeing reflection of her harasser in every other man and developed mistrust towards men in general and due to this mistrust she does not want to marry.

She did not go to police or shared it with anyone. They just kept quiet because of their reputation and told the researcher that complaining would be useless as no one will listen to them. Around two months later, Amna some what got better. Because of financial reasons, she was again compelled to get a job. This time, however, she started working in a house where her mother was already employed as a servant. The mistress of the house was working was very nice and when Amna's mother told her about her daughter's traumatic experience, the mistress of the house took Amna to a Psychologist.

CASE NO.(2) Beena is an educated, divorced women with a Masters degree in Public Administration (MPA). She is the only daughter of her parents and has one younger brother. She got married after her masters but due to non-adjustment with her husband got divorce after 18 months and started living with her parents. At the age of 32, she joined as a Personnel Relation Officer in a multinational company. Although she was not that young but was quite pretty - tall, fair, and very smart, and fashionable. Her parents are quite rich and liberal.

Her boss, Asif, offered her a good salary. She immediately mixed up with her colleagues and with her boss who had an impressive personality and was well-known among his social group. He was in late 40's and married with two children.

Asif and Beena started getting close to each other, by sharing tea and lunch time with each other. Asif also raised her salary. Beena liked to dress-up well and she was also told that it was part of her job to look reasonably attractive. During work, Asif often commented on her beauty, her clothes, and praised her stylish way of talking and dealing with the clients. He told her that he does not like his wife because she is too conservative and refuses to accompany him to social gatherings and that he had married her only of his because parents. Asif requested Beena to accompany him to social gatherings and parties. Beena simply ignored the demand although she felt discomfiture at his suggestion.

After few days, Asif again asked her to come with him to party. Beena, under his pressure, agreed to go with him. But in heart she did not like the way things were going Beena deliberately tried to distance from him. She did not like his attitude towards wife, nor she appreciated Asif's comments and remarks about her own appearance and as they

increased in frequency, she became extremely uncomfortable and tense about the whole situation.

One day Asif came to her room and caught hold of her hand, complaining that she was ignoring him these days. She immediately withdrew her hand and went out of her room without saying any thing. After some days he again insisted her to come to a party with him. He came very close to her physically and said she is looking very sexy today. But she said that she is not feeling well and wanted to go home early and went away. In the evening, he called her at home and again insisted to come to the party but she said she is suffering from fever and would not be able to come to the party. She was again very worried and tense and was not able to concentrate on anything and it was badly affecting her job and her work. Her parents also noted these changes and when they enquired she assured them that nothing was wrong. She thought that if her parents came to know about the whole situation, they would want her to leave the job and she did not want to be financially dependent on them. She did not go to the office for next two days and did not share any thing with any one. Eventually she thought of sharing her problem with her friend who advised her that she should directly talk to her boss and tell him that she is not that kind of a woman.

Next day she went to the office and when she was preparing herself to talk to him, Asif, suddenly came to her room. He was looking very happy and she immediately got worried and tense to see his attitude and behavior. He said that he had a news for her and told her that after two days they had an official meeting in Lahore and he wanted her to come with him for two day's visit and said that he had a hotel room reserved for both of them in Lahore. He said that they are going to spend two days together and in the end he told her that he wants to spend a night with her and she has to do that because it is his order as a boss. When she heard that she immediately reacted without thinking and slapped him, pushed him away and went out of the office. She went home and told her parents the whole thing. She told them that she will go to the police and will get the whole episode published in a news paper. Her parents said that she should not do such a thing because it will only ruin her reputation. But she was not ready to hear any thing, and wanted to go to the police at any cost. Her parents calmed her down and said they will think of some other way. Her father talked to the director of the organization and complained about Asif. The director listened to her father sympathetically and showed his concern and promised that he would take an effective step. So he called an explanation from Asif and gave him warning. Her father and she

insisted that Asif should be fired or expelled but they did not succeed in doing so because he worked at a high status job.

After this experience Beena left the job. She was very frustrated for not doing any thing about Asif. She was in extreme anger and remained in stress for two weeks. Then she went to professional psychologists and asked them what she should do because her parents were not letting her report to the police. She developed extreme mistrust and hatred for men first because of her husband and then because of her boss. The psychologists helped her and tried to bring her out of that condition and advised her to go to some other place for some days. She then went to England and nowadays is living with her aunt.

CASE NO. (3) Farah's family consisting of her parents and two younger sisters and one brother, resided in a servant quarter of a rich businessman, in whose house her mother worked as a servant. Farah has studied up to fifth grade and she is the only one in family who went to school. When Farah was 21 years old, her mother asked her to help her in the work at the businessman's house. Their employer was a married man with one daughter and two sons in their teens. Each member of the household had his/her own life. Father remained busy with his work, mother liked to go to parties and was not much interested what her children were doing. Their eldest son, Sajid, was one of those teenagers who came home late in the midnight and kept bad company. He was a habitual smoker and had many girl friends.

Farah was very pretty and attractive. Sajid started noticing her and looked for chances to talk to her but she just kept quiet and only answered in monosyllables. At times Sajid would try to touch her, especially when he would find her alone. Although Farah's mother did not like the boy and warned Farah to be careful, Farah did not dare tell her anything due to shyness.

One morning Farah was cleaning the house and her mother was washing dishes in the kitchen. No one was at home except Sajid, who was sleeping in his room. Farah went upstairs to clean boy's room. She did not know that Sajid was still in his room. When she opened the door she saw Sajid lying in his bed. She at once tried to get out of the room but Sajid dragged her inside the room and closed the door behind her. Farah tried to get away but he started tearing off her cloths. Farah started screaming with her full strength, she became hysterical and exerted her maximum effort to get away from him. When her mother heard some faint voices of screaming she became very worried and fearful. She went upstairs to look for her daughter and when she heard screams coming from Sajid's room, she became very frightened and

started pushing the door which was locked. She cried for help but no one listened. Farah in her effort to get away from him bit Sajid's hand and because of the pain he immediately let go of the girl and Farah ran to the door and opened it. When the boy saw her mother at his door he got panicked and went outside of the house.

Some how the mother managed to take her to the servant quarter. After half an hour, Sajid's mother arrived and when Farah's mother told her the whole story she refused to believe her and instead ordered them to leave the servant quarter immediately. When Farah's father came to know about the event he became very angry and depressed and wanted to go to the police but since they had no evidence and thought that it will ruin their own reputation, they left the servant quarter and went to their relatives house.

Farah was badly affected by the whole incident and has become very fearful and scared of men. Her relatives advised her mother to take her to a psychologist, from whom she is taking counseling these days.

CASE NO. (4) At the time of the incident Laila was 25 years old. She is a married woman with a son. She is very pretty and dresses-up quite well. Her husband is a mechanical engineer and they have good marital relations. She and her husband belonged to educated and upper-middle class families. She has done masters in business administration and some computer courses. When her son was 3 years old, she put him in kindergarten and decided to do a job which her husband happily allowed. After some days she heard about a vacancy of marketing manager in a private computer firm. She applied for the job and fortunately got it.

It was a small private firm and all the members of the staff used to work in a big hall. Overall the environment of the organization was friendly, intimate, and family like. After some days, another person, Tariq, also joined the firm as a computer engineer. Tariq was 26 years and unmarried. He was handsome and smart and other girls in the firm were impressed by his personality. He quickly mixed up with them as well as with other male colleagues.

Laila was a reserved kind of a girl and did not like to mix up much with anyone in the firm, which Tariq did not like. He started making passes at her, and sometimes came to her desk to talk to her (often when others were not around) but she responded him very reservedly. Laila started observing that he was trying to get closer to her and this made her tense and uncomfortable.

One day Tariq called on her desk and threatened her that she should change her attitude towards him and accept his offer of

becoming a friend as other girls of the firm, otherwise he would make her do that through some other way. She could not do anything because her colleagues were also there so she banged the phone, but this event made her very upset. She wanted to share it with someone but she could not do so because she was very scared and tense. Tariq also threatened her that if she made any complaint about him to any one then she will have to repent and this even worsened her condition. Her husband noticed that and asked the reason but she did not tell him anything. She wanted to tell him but because of the threat she was very much scared to do so. One day when she was coming home from office in her car alone, she noticed that Tariq was chasing her. Naturally she got very scared and did not know what to do. He was on a motor bike but after few minutes he disappeared. She was in extreme stress and did not want to go to the office next day but to avoid her husband's suspicion as well as her boss's and colleagues she went to the office. When she was coming back he again chased her and she got very frightened. Tariq disappeared after sometime and when she reached home she was visibly so much upset that her husband asked the reason but she said she is just not feeling well. Although her husband was very sympathetic and considerate she did not dare to tell him because she thought that he might blame her for what has happened. She did not go to the office next day. But all day long she received a series of calls threatening her that if she said even a word to anyone she will regret it.

She was not able to concentrate on her work, was very tense, and in extreme stress and was unable to sleep. Her boss was also complaining of her inefficiency and poor work performance. First she thought of scolding Tariq but she knew that it won't work. She did not go to the office for a week and sent an application. Her husband was constantly asking her about her condition and one day she told him about the whole episode. Her husband was also worried and asked her why she hadn't told him before. He was very angry and talked to his wife's boss. Her boss was very kind and concerned. He called explanation of Tariq and immediately fired him and wanted to call the police but Laila did not want to go to the police. She was very scared and in extreme stress. Her husband got himself transferred to Lahore and she resigned from that firm. Laila also consulted a psychologist to restore her normal condition.

CASE NO. (5) This incident happened in a biscuit factory. Zara was 22 years old and had an ordinary looking face and appearance. She was working in that factory to financially support her family. She was B.A and was unmarried. She had three brothers and three sisters. Her father

was a government servant. The working hours of the factory were from early morning till late evening.

Sohail, the supervisor of the factory was newly appointed and was a man in late 30's. He became frank with women subordinates and some of the women workers also became frank with him but other girls in the factory were not happy with him. Zara was in the group who did not like Sohail. He was very strict and rude with the male workers of the factory but when he talked to women workers his attitude suddenly changed and he tried to come as close to them as possible. Most of the workers were unhappy with him other than few women workers.

Sohail was a very handsome man and when he observed that some women workers were not impressed by him he started teasing them. He would give lots of work to them and would mostly criticize their work. He paid their salaries as late as possible but was very nice to those women who liked him. Due to this reason, some other girls of the factory also changed their attitude towards him because they did not want these kinds of troubles. Zara was really offended by this situation and became more against him. Her attitude was not hidden to other factory workers as well as from the supervisor. She openly criticized him in front of others. As a result, Sohail started troubling her even more. This caused stress in her and she was very disturbed and was unable to work properly but she could not afford to quit her job because of her financial problems. She was very much frustrated because she was compelled to do work with a man whom she hated. Some colleagues advised her to change her behaviour but she did not agree. She wanted to complain about the supervisor to higher authorities but some of her colleagues did not let her do so. Her supervisor started keeping her for overtime without any credit but she was compelled to obey him just to keep her job.

One day Zara was leaving for home with few colleagues when the supervisor called her in his office. She immediately became scared but her colleagues consoled her and suggested her to listen to Sohail but she asked one colleague to come with her. They together went inside but Sohail told her colleague to leave and she unwontedly left the room. When they were alone Sohail came close to Zara and held her tightly. He put his hand on her mouth strongly and said if she tried to scream he would kill her. He then started tearing off her clothes and raped her. The girl protested and screaming. When other girls heard her voices they got panicked and started also started screaming. Sohail got panicked ran out of the factory. Zara was very upset and extremely distressed. She went home somehow and told her mother the whole story. Next day she and her father and colleagues went to the police. They went on strike,

however, Zara left the job. She has developed hatred for men and does not intend to marry. She faced extreme psychological and physical problems due to this trauma. She lost her appetite due to which she lost her weight and physical strength. Her confidence was badly shattered. Other people's sympathies offended her. She went in psychological stress and stopped facing people and developed deep feeling of insecurity and fear. Then she went to psychologists to get their help. The organization made hectic efforts at higher level and got the supervisor transferred.

CONCLUSION

This article is based on the case studies of only five women victims, therefore, no general conclusion can be drawn from it. But still, these cases confirmed a number of contributory factors in sexual harassment as indicated by earlier studies quoted in the following paragraphs.

Keeping in view the above detailed cases of sexual harassment, it can be said that sexual harassment is mostly done by men who are superior in position and status than women i.e., who are their supervisors or bosses or any other person in more authority and command than the victim. This analysis shows that sexual harassment is mostly the expression of power and abuse of authority, command, high authority, and higher status which is in accordance with the studies done earlier (e.g., Kanekar & Menon, 1992; Carothers & Crull, 1984; DiTomaso, 1989). However, it does not mean that women are not harassed by their colleagues and subordinates. Second important thing to be inferred is that women of any age group can be the target of sexual harassment (see also Anila, 1998; Kamal & Tariq, 1997). Similarly, men of all age groups are prone to be harassers.

Another important aspect, evident from the cases studies, is that mostly sexual harassment occurs in an environment where the victim has an isolated place to sit or in other words from where she is easily approachable to the harassers.

A very significant observation from these cases can be that all the victims, irrespective of their physical look, socio-economic background, education, and personal characteristics and personality, experienced high levels of stress, psychological distress, tension, anger, frustration, and physical illness in different degrees because of harassment incidences. The victims who experienced rape and physical assault

experienced more stress and other psychological and physical problems as compared to those who experienced only threats, demands for sexual favours, and verbal sexual harassment.

One important thing to note is that all victims and their families avoided to report the event to police. Either the victim herself or their families did not want to go anywhere for complaint and most of them hid the incident because of their reputation. Only one out of five victims went to Police and formally reported the case.

In short, sexual harassment is a major problem of women working outside their homes. It causes stress, psychological problems as well as physical illnesses. After sexual harassment, women avoid to go to work place. All of the victims of our cases left their jobs after harassment experience. And even if they wanted to continue their work because of financial problems, their families did not allowed them to do so.

Sexual harassment is an issue which has to be addressed seriously and with great concern. Steps should be taken to avoid this problem for women, especially who want to work outside either for financial problems or for making use of their skills and abilities. Every organization, itself should provide effective measures to encounter this problem and awareness of rights of women and attitude change towards working women should be made because women are the equal half of any society, country, and nation.

Sexual harassment can be eradicated most effectively if there is joint employer/union action. Attitude change should be made to perceive a working women as an equal participant and member of an organization rather than a female. Written sexual harassment policies are very important at both government and non-government level to provide security to working women and to achieve equity for women at work places. These steps cannot be taken until and unless, the victims have the courage to disclose information about their experiences. As the power of the harasser, the abuser, the rapist depends above all on the silence of women.

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