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Sexual Harassment in the Information Technology Sector: A Study of Bengaluru, India

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Abstract

Information Technology sector is thriving in India. It is placing India on the global plane. Bengaluru is a city of southern part of India. It is also termed as the “silicon valley” of India. The study has been conducted in the Information Technology sector in Bengaluru, India; which was earlier called Bangalore. Out of the 100 respondents who were studied, 50 were women. Most of them who were sexually harassed were younger and unmarried ones. The general studies conducted at different times and by different authorities have found the existence of sexual harassment in the Information Technology sector. In this paper, we are focusing on the study of presence of sexual harassment in workplace in the Information Technology sector. Harassment aggravates discrimination within the workplace. The paper has gone into several theoretical frameworks, through which sexual harassment of women in the Information Technology sector has been studied.

Keywords

information technology, sexual harassment, Bengaluru, “Silicon Valley”, India

1. Introduction

According to Oxford Dictionary, Information Technology (IT) is the application of computers and telecommunications equipment to store, retrieve, transmit and use data, regarding business or other enterprise. Information Technology is associated with industries like computer hardware, software, electronics, semi conductors, internet, telecom equipment, e-commerce and industries (Anthony Ralston, 2000).

Information Technology (IT) industry in India has played a key role in putting India on the global map. The industry has played a significant role in transforming Indian image as a global player in providing world class technology solutions and business services. It has built up valuable brand equity over the years. It is one of the largest employers of women (Singh, 2006). The industry has helped India

transform from a rural and agriculture-based economy to a knowledge-based economy, according to Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry. The rapid growth of this global industry since the 1990s has created a new kind of workforce, introduced new cultures of work into India, and set into motion, diverse social transformations that are as yet vaguely understood. While the Information Technology professionals are well travelled, comfortable in international work settings, and masters of the latest technologies, many are nonetheless still embedded in ‘traditional’ social and cultural milieu, and also articulate their adherence to ‘traditional values’. This has resulted in a new blending of modernity and tradition. The rise of the IT industry has also fed into ongoing processes of globalization, stimulating significant transformations in the urban middle classes and in the cultural milieu of cities such as Bengaluru. However, IT education is out of reach of many women, due to cost and selectivity of admissions in engineering colleges and universities. Most Indian women, who avail training through training centres or polytechnics, do not equip job seekers with competitive skills to guarantee a well-paid job. Women’s participation in the IT sector is higher, compared to other sectors in the country. In the IT sector, the computers have a woman-friendly image. It fits into the gendered socio-cultural framework. A career in software has the highest social approval. The IT sector provides women with high salary, greater international mobility, gender-neutral policy, flexible work routine, parental leave, transportation, etc. (N. Gupta, 2020). The number of women employees engaged in the IT sector is 34 per cent. Most of them are less than 30 years (Ring, 2018). Fewer women are employed in the networking, compared to software occupations. This is due to the physical aspects of the work are too difficult for women. Long erratic hours and travelling which comes hand in hand with network maintenance responsibilities have been shunned by many women (Mishra, 2006).

The Information Technology industry is a flag bearer of the Indian economy globally. Indian women are playing a vital role in its growth. But, sexual harassment of women in the IT sector is an aberration, which is somewhat distorting the work environment. Sexual harassment has been a curse within India’s workplaces. Aarti Dhar reported in *The Hindu* on 15th November, 2010, a study titled “Workplace Sexual Harassment Survey”, carried out by the Centre for Transforming India, a non-profit organization, has brought out some startling revelations about the status of implementation of policies to prevent such harassment. It stated that out of 600 female employees working in IT and BPO industries, 88% of women were subject to sexual harassment in their workplace, with supervisors being the perpetrator in 72% of the cases. Another major finding was that more than 82 per cent of the incidents, which could be classified as sexual incidents, occurred outside the boundaries of the office. Of all the respondents, 77 per cent stated that the details of sexual harassment policies were not part of their hiring process, while only 7 per cent stated that they could recollect some discussion about the topic, either during their hiring process or later. In a joint Reuters/Ipsos global poll of over 12,000 people in 24 countries, India was found to have the highest rate of reports of workers being sexually harassed, by colleagues or supervisors. 25 percent also reported, being assaulted at their place of work. These figures represent real suffering for the millions of women across the country that are harassed –

close to 50 per cent of women had been subjected to abusive language, physical contact or been sought sexual favours from. In some cases such abuse becomes too much – there has been at least one case of a female employee of a major electronics company committing suicide, after being sexually harassed by a superior. Research indicates that many such severe cases go unreported. Up to 90% of victims of harassment do not report inappropriate or abusive behavior for fear of being victimized. Varuna Verma in ‘Coffee, Tea or Me’ reported that sexual harassment in the Information Technology sector is not uncommon, in *The Telegraph* on 26th May, 2013.

The study of Information Technology professionals in Bengaluru has shown that sexual harassment of the women in the workplace does take place. In one of the cases, a Bengaluru-based woman professional, who worked as a team leader in a multinational informational technology IT Company, was being sexually harassed by her male boss, who was head of Company’s India office. Initially, she made excuses and tried to wriggle out of the situation. Then he started sending personal messages and gifts. She complained to the Human Resource Department. But, her complaint was not taken seriously, as she was not harassed physically. In the end, she had to quit her job. This was only one incident related in the survey.

Most of the IT companies have Sexual Harassment Policies. But, there are several instances when they have tried to hush up any complaint, which have surfaced. This has discouraged women from lodging complaints. A particular victim did not want to lodge complaint, as she had seen the problems that her colleague had faced, after she complained against sexual harassment. Her friend was called up for countless Committee meetings and asked to narrate the incident, which was very offensive for her. The harasser got away with a warning only.

One of the reasons for relatively high level of sexual harassment in the Information Technology sector, is that most companies work in project mode. During the tenure of the project, the project head has absolute power. The project head is in complete charge of the team members. So, such high level of authority can prove to be corrupting. According to another IT professional, the nature of the job demands working together, where teammates work closely, travel together and work late into the evenings. Youth-centric, informal work-culture may be a favorable opportunity for the perpetrator, to come close to the harasser. The team leader should not take advantage of the situation. Some fail to understand the line between personal and professional lives and cross it, resulting in sexual harassment in the workplace.

Another reason provided by the experts, is that the glass ceiling has not been broken in the IT sector. There is very slim presence of women at the top to steer the IT sector, towards an unbiased gender-friendly playing field. This is unlike the other sectors, like some banking companies, financial companies, where some women have presided over the Company boardrooms.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter has pointed out a very important factor in the workplace. As long as the proportion of women remains less than 30 percent, it is not representation, but “tokenism”, in the workplace. To transform this and ensure representation of women, what is required is a conscious commitment to such a goal. The European Commission has also taken this argument of Kanter to the private sector, like the Information Technology sector. The European Commission wants Companies to

increase the representation of women on the Board of Directors to 30 percent by 2015, and 40 percent by 2020. The European Commission is not satisfied with voluntary commitments from Companies, for such a measure. The European Commission desires that there should be legislation to ensure the same. The United States is witnessing a campaign to increase the number of women on the Boards to 20 percent by 2020. Indian Companies are still stuck with less than 3 percent women Directors and even fewer Chief Executive Officers.

Indeed, in the Information Technology sector, there are 84000 women employees. But, there is only 3 percent women Chief Executive Officers in the Information Technology sector, according to an article “Lessons in Diversity”, in *The Economic Times* on 8th March, 2012.

In India, women are keen to join the Information Technology sector. The sizeable part of the Indian women are taking IT industry, as a preferred career option according to a recent finding, released by the Kelly Services, India. The number of women in the IT sector is growing up fast, but there is not a matching mobility rate for women to the senior positions. The study identifies the key factors for this and the steps that Companies need to adopt to achieve this.

Bengaluru is called the “Silicon Valley of India” (Anita Gurumurthy, Amrita Vasudevan, 2018). In 2020 survey on 1003 employees, founders and investors; 44 per cent of the female tech founders were harassed. 41 per cent of women founders who were harassed were harassed sexually. 65 per cent of the women founders stated that they were propositioned for sex. 59 per cent of the women faced unwanted physical contact. 56 per cent stated that sexual slurs were directed at them. 32 per cent of the women were groped and 24 per cent of women were sent graphic photographs. 40 per cent of the women founders remarked that they were harassed by an investor. 48 per cent of the women working in tech experienced harassment. 76 per cent of these women were harassed by another employee. 42 per cent was harassed by the supervisor. Women are not reporting harassment to senior leadership as done before. 45 per cent of women reported sexual harassment, compared to 55 per cent in 2017 (The State of Women in Tech and Startups: Top Findings for 2020 2022).

Job site *Indeed* conducted a survey of employees of various IT companies. 87 per cent of the IT women remarked that they are likely to leave their job, if they faced gender harassment (Sarkar, 2019).

In Hyderabad, another city in India, there are 6,00,000 employees in the IT/ITES sector. They are working in 1500 companies. National Women’s Commission representing Telengana stated that it is an open secret that sexual harassment in workplace is prevalent in organized and unorganized sectors. In the IT cluster, several women face harassment. The IT companies are supposed to submit a report every year to the Local Complaints Committee. Not even 5 per cent of the companies send. They also do not send their representatives for the training sessions. Many women are not aware of the Vishakha Guidelines. The women employees are discouraged to report to the internal complaint committee (R. Gupta, 2021).

Although several studies have shown that men can be targets of sexual harassment, nevertheless, women remain the most frequent targets of sexual harassment behaviors such as unwanted touching

and invasion of personal space (Heather McLaughlin, Christopher Uggen, Amy Blackstone, 2012). Anuradha Verma in an article in “Are you being sexually harassed?”, in *The Times of India* on 8th August, 2011, revealed that many experts have commented that reported cases of sexual harassment in workplace, represents a tip of the iceberg, as thousands of cases go unreported. A proposition need not always be outright and can be as insidious as a hug or a remark. A psychiatrist, Anjali Chhabria added that many times women feel an initial shock. They ask themselves if it really happened or if they imagined it. They wonder if they gave out those signals and they do not know how to react. The victim is confused whether to slap him, gently push him away or is it big enough to report formally or will complaining create more problems for her. There is no easy way out (Tom Dannenbaum, Keya Jayaram 2005).

Several studies confirm that the concept of power is central to the study of sexual harassment in workplace. According to an article, “Arresting Sexual Harassment at the Workplace”, in *The Financial Express*, on October 12, 2003; in India, while companies are generally reluctant to admit that such harassment occurs, women on the condition of anonymity admit that sexual harassment is quite rampant. As a part of the training process, all officers and board members have been given a course on the prevention of sexual harassment. Additional changes in the code of conduct and employee manual have been done in order to include prevention of sexual harassment clauses. A majority of the Companies believe that everything is right in their Companies, and there is no need for a policy on sexual harassment at workplace. According to a survey conducted by Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) *Making Companies Women Friendly*, found that the sexual harassment is done by three categories of people—employees, vendors and customers. Indira Jaisingh, a renowned senior advocate has commented that, it is very rare when proper action is taken against the culprit and the victim is compensated.

Giant multinational companies in the Information Technology sector, enforce every employee to sign the Code of Conduct that has clauses on sexual harassment, too. They state that they have grievance cells at every office, where employees can register their complaints. Anonymous letters or allegations are not encouraged. The complainant has to reveal his/her identity before any action is taken and the grievances are handled in total confidence.

2. Method

The present study uses both primary and secondary source materials. Published and unpublished materials lying at the field level offices have been collected, correlated and analyzed. The Study has examined the current conceptual background and thinking on the issue of sexual harassment. After thorough literature survey and consulting books, journals, and newspaper articles relevant to this topic, the study has formulated the theoretical aspect of the problem.

Primary data has been collected in Bengaluru, a city in southern part of India. Finalization of research design, review of secondary data and finalization of the questionnaire in the initial phase of the

research work. Empirical study on the basis of random sampling method has been undertaken through field survey undertaken from January 2007 to December 2012. In this period, interviews of IT professionals at all levels in Bengaluru, have been taken through structured questionnaires and these structured interviews have been supplemented by informal interactions with the respondents. Simultaneous library work was done and newspapers were followed. Simultaneously, time was utilized for data processing and data analysis and the final phase has been utilized for scrutiny, editing and finalization of the thesis and preparation of the report. Microsoft Excel has been used. The data processing consists of office editing, data entry and computer programming. In the ultimate analysis, this study depends on both quantified data and qualitative observation for arriving at the conclusions.

2.1 Sample Size

The sample size was 100. Out of which 50 per cent were men. Questionnaires were utilized. Interviews were also taken. Snowballing technique helped a lot as this is a sensitive issue.

In Bengaluru also, all respondents who have been harassed are women. (Table 1) Gender wise, Malaysian women workers are also sexually harassed regardless of their educational background (Mohd Nazari Ismail, Lee Kum Chee and Chan Foong Bee 2007).

Table 1. Gender and Sexual Harassment in Information Technology Sector in Bengaluru

City	Male	Female
Bengaluru	0(0%)	16 (100%)

Table 2. Age Group and Sexual Harassment in Information Technology Sector in Bengaluru

City	21-30years	31-40years	41-50years	51-60years
Bengaluru	9 (56.25%)	6(37.5%)	1 (6.25%)	0(0%)

Regarding age as a factor behind sexual harassment of women in Bengaluru, more than 56 per cent are in the age group of 21-30 years and more than 37 per cent are in the age group of 31-40 years.

Table 3. Marital Status and Sexual Harassment in Information Technology Sector in Bengaluru

City	Married	Unmarried
Bengaluru	5(31.25%)	11(68.75%)

Out of the 16 women harassed in the IT sector in Bengaluru, more than 68 per cent are unmarried (Table 3). The universe of the study was 100.

3. Theoretical Framework

Catherine MacKinnon explained sexual harassment as the unwanted imposition of sexual requirements in a relationship of unequal power. MacKinnon remarked that a woman struggling to establish credibility in a workplace setting “can be swept off balance by a reminder that she can be raped, fondled, or subjected to repeated sexual demands.” Her resulting anxiety, fear or vulnerability prevents a woman from “feeling, or being viewed as, the equals of their male counterparts in the workplace” (Zalucki, 1989)

a. Natural or Biological Theory- This theory assumes that men and women are naturally attracted to each other. So, in the workplace also, they relate to each other in sexually- oriented behaviours. This view supports that sexual harassment is harmless behavior and it is not a problem at all. This theoretical approach trivializes sexual harassment. It is a natural behaviour of individuals with strong sex drives. This perspective has been debunked academically. However, even today, this is a popular belief among many in several sections of the society.

b. Psycho Analytical Approach- Freudian and non-freudian theories have discussed that certain men use violence against women such as sexual harassment in workplace. This can be caused due to intra-psychic conflict, personality disorders, denial mechanisms, traumatic childhood etc. This theory supports that the cause of any type of violence lies in the perpetrator’s minds.

c. Organizational Theory- Individuals with formal organizational power, such as managers, may use their position to harass subordinates, according to Benson and Thomson, MacKinnon and others. This theory suggests that sexual harassment in the workplace results from the opportunity presented by power and authority relationships, derived from hierarchical structure of organizations. It defines the problem as an abuse of power, based on-

- i. Differential power positions within the organization,
- ii. Numerical ratios of males to females within the organization,
- iii. Norms and social climate of organizational life,
- iv. The unavailability of effective formal and informal grievance and resolution procedures.

Wilson and Thompson argue that it is primarily about men exercising power over women. Harassment is linked to women’s disadvantaged status at work and subordinate position in society. They believe that sexual harassment is too complex to be explained using simple theories of power and use Lukes’ three dimensional models to offer an analysis:

- The one-dimensional view - The organizational hierarchy creates the power, which is used within the organization. In these structures men are typically in positions of power and women are not.
- The two dimensional view - Power is exercised over others by controlling the agenda and deciding which issues are important and which will be marginalized. The organization will ultimately dictate what is seen as normal behaviour and as sexual harassment is bound up within the culture of an organization, it becomes normalized.

- The three-dimensional view – This view supports that power may operate to shape and modify desires and beliefs in a manner contrary to people’s interests. This goes into the “hidden faces of power or deep structures” within an organization whereby sexual harassment may not even be apparent and the processes for dealing with it are nonexistent, because it is not seen as an issue (Carrie Hunt, Marilyn Davidson, Sandra Fielden, Helge Hoel, 2007) .

Socio-Cultural Theory- The socio-cultural perspective focuses on unequal distribution of power and status between men and women. Sexual Harassment is seen as a manifestation of the patriarchal system, in which men are the dominant group in the society. Women will be more victimized in a workplace where, men are in the majority. Using Data from Merit System Protection Board Study, Tangri et al supported stronger empirical support for organizational and socio-cultural models, which both view sexual harassment arising from power and status inequality. This model proposes that sexual harassment is a product of culturally legitimated power and status differences between men and women (Farley and MacKinnon support this perspective. Sexual harassment does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it reinforces society’s norms, values and mores of patriarchy (Lenhart, 2004).

Sex Role Theory- According to Collier and Williams, in the society, men are often stereotyped as being receptive to and welcoming sexual advances of women. On the other hand, women stereotypically are not as receptive to and welcoming of the sexual advances of men. For this reason, male-to-female sexual harassment is viewed more negatively than female-to male sexual harassment as the perceived degree of unwelcomeness of the behaviour is greater in the former situation than the latter.

Sex Role Spill-over Theory-As propounded by Gutek, this theory denotes the carryover of gender-based expectations into the workplace. According to this theory, women employed in male-dominated or female-dominated work, often find their sex role is a salient aspect of their position. For example, a woman’s gender singles her out in the male-dominated workplace, where she is perceived as a female, rather than a worker. In the female-dominated workplace, sex-role and work-role may overlap. This model also recognizes the socio-cultural power structures based on gender, where men have more power than women.

Sexual harassment is a multi-dimensional problem. Only one perspective cannot provide the full analysis of the situation. For the present study, the combination of organizational power theory, socio-cultural theory, and sex-role spill-over theory will be utilized to understand the malaise of sexual harassment in workplace. Patriarchy and oppression have been the underlying basis for most of the models. Patriarchy can make oppression look normal, as part of everyday reality. Patriarchy supports hegemonic masculinity. This has destructive consequences for both men and women. It is destructive for men as it defines men as aggressive, dominant, violent etc. Patriarchal socialization creates a society, which easily is comfortable with aggression against women.

4. Research Questions

2.1 Women in the corporate world have reached a position in their workplace through their merit and hard work. While moving up the ladder and becoming successful, they face several hurdles, which may include sexual harassment. Sexual harassment may be the result of different groups of people coming together in the workplace (namely, people of different class, religious, and rural-urban backgrounds), where some feelings of superiority and ego may be at play.

2.2 With the passage of time, women are becoming more aware of their rights and status. Laws are there, but the implementation machinery may not be perfect.

2.3 The roles of the family and peer group are sometimes supportive in helping women to fight against the outside world.

2.4 The State is taking some preliminary steps to create a harassment-free environment for the workplace.

5. Findings

The finding of the study is that there is existence of sexual harassment in the Information Technology in the IT sector in Bengaluru, India. 16 per cent of the women have been harassed. Most of them are in the age group of 21-30 years. There are no women victims in the age group of 51-60 years. Unmarried women have been sexually harassed than married women employees in the IT sector. After the MeToo Hashtag Movement, voicing of complaints has risen. This supports the view that 40 per cent of the women tech employees or founders have faced sexual harassment in a survey undertaken 1000 tech, founders and employees. The perpetrators were boss or investors. Large companies are taking serious steps to weed out the perpetrator. For example, in Google, an exit package of \$90 million was provided to the creator of Android, for accusation of sexual misconduct (Connley, 2020).

Sexual Harassment of Laws has come into effect. But, still, there are many loopholes. The employees still have lack of trust how their company will deal with the issue. Stigmatization may affect their career in the long run. Women Who Tech founder Allysin Kapin has stated that in the past, the companies of the tech sector has shown poor statistics in handling the sexual harassment cases and making the perpetrator accountable. After the "Me Too" Movement, harassment has gone up in the mass scale. There are pockets of harassment, which have gone higher up. The toxic culture of harassment needs to be cleaned up, so that there is no fear of retaliation and increase in the accountability of the harasser (Connley 2020).

6. Discussion

2.5 The International Labour Organization has condemned sexual harassment as a form of gender discrimination, and as a violation of basic human rights. Workplace sexual harassment has been emerging as a critical challenge for female employees working across industries. Sexual Harassment at

the workplace is a form of systemized violence against women. Sexual harassment is a serious problem for women workers (M. Ramanathan, P.S. Sarma, R. Sukanya, S.P.Viswan, 2004).

2.6 Sexual harassment is not consensual sexual behaviour between two people, who are attracted to each other. It also has nothing to do with mutual attraction or friendship (Research Report Sexual Harassment At The Workplace In Viet Nam: An Overview Of The Legal Framework 2013).

2.7 Sexual harassment permeates all strata, ranging from the unorganized sector to the corporate (Geetha 2012).

2.8 Sexual Harassment has been considered a hindrance by the United Nations Development Programme and the Department of Personnel and Training, Government of India, as revealed by a host of workshops on gender sensitization with a National Workshop held in New Delhi, with the cadre controlling authorities of various civil services as participants (Nayak, 1998).

In Bengaluru, in one incident on January 2019, Bellandur police arrested a software engineer who sexually harassed his colleague by inviting her to his flat and lacing the fruit juice with sedatives, so that he can take advantage sexually (Kalkod 2020). The city reported third number of cases (158) after Delhi(431) and Mumbai(377), according to National Crime Record Bureau(Kalkod 2020).

Women subjected to sexual harassment are showing more confidence in the police than the earlier years. They also have the same commitment to see through the end of the case. The police develop a strong case against the accused and turns to a deterrent for other sexual offenders. They are showing more consistency in pursuing cases(Kalkod 2020). Though the software giants have Prevention of Sexual Harassment Committee, many cases continue to remain underground (Rising number of sexual harassment cases in India's IT industry, many stories go untold 2015).

7. Conclusion

Sexual harassment goes unreported in many cases. Judgement by the broader community, missing out on future proportions or forced to quit the company can be some of the after effects of the reporting sexual harassment in the IT sector (Agarwal, 2018). Moreover, there is always a fear that a reputation of difficult to work with may come up, if a woman reports against sexual harassment. Fear of retaliation can also prevent them in reporting the cases. One of the offender remarked that there if there is reporting by only person, the position may be compromised. Till there is gender gap in the information technology, there will be high chances of occurrence of sexual harassment of women (Sara O Brien, Laurie Segall 2017). But, still the awareness of women has increased. There are more and more women who have reported cases of sexual harassment in the Information Technology sector in India.

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