

Pre-1997 the person facing sexual harassment at workplace had to lodge a complaint under Section 354 of the Indian Penal Code 1860 that deals with the 'criminal assault of women to outrage women's modesty', and Section 509 that punishes an individual/individuals for using a 'word, gesture or act intended to insult the modesty of a woman.'<sup>[1]</sup>

During the 1990s, Rajasthan state government employee Bhanwari Devi who tried to prevent child marriage as part of her duties as a worker of the Women Development Programme was raped by the landlords of the community. The feudal patriarchs who were enraged by her (in their words: "a lowly woman from a poor and potter community") 'guts' decided to teach her a lesson and raped her repeatedly.<sup>[2]</sup> The rape survivor did not get justice from Rajasthan High Court and the rapists were allowed to go free. This enraged a women's rights group called Vishaka that filed a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court of India.<sup>[1]</sup>

This case brought to the attention of the Supreme Court of India, "the absence of domestic law occupying the field, to formulate effective measures to check the evil of sexual harassment of working women at all work places."

In 1997, the Supreme Court passed a landmark judgment in the same Vishaka case laying down guidelines to be followed by establishments in dealing with complaints about sexual harassment. **Vishaka Guidelines** were stipulated by the Supreme Court of India, in Vishakha and others v State of Rajasthan case in 1997, regarding sexual harassment at workplace. The court stated that these guidelines were to be implemented until legislation is passed to deal with the issue.<sup>[3]</sup>

The court decided that the consideration of "International Conventions and norms are significant for the purpose of interpretation of the guarantee of gender equality, right to work with human dignity in Articles 14, 15 19(1)(g) and 21 of the Constitution and the safeguards against sexual harassment implicit therein."

**Vishaka Guidelines**  
**against**  
**Sexual Harassment at Workplace**

**Guidelines and norms laid down by the Hon'ble Supreme Court in Vishaka and Others Vs. State of Rajasthan and Others(JT 1997 (7) SC 384)**

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**HAVING REGARD** to the definition of 'human rights' in Section 2 (d) of the Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993,

**TAKING NOTE** of the fact that the present civil and penal laws in India do not adequately provide for specific protection of women from sexual harassment in work places and that enactment of such legislation will take considerable time,

It is necessary and expedient for employers in work places as well as other responsible persons or institutions to observe certain guidelines to ensure the prevention of sexual harassment of women.

**Duty of the Employer or other responsible persons in work places and other institutions**

It shall be the duty of the employer or other responsible persons in work places or other institutions to prevent or deter the commission of acts of sexual harassment and to provide the procedures for the resolution, settlement or prosecution of acts, of sexual harassment by taking all steps required.

**Definition**

For this purpose, sexual harassment includes such unwelcome sexually determined behaviour (whether directly or by implication) as:

- a) Physical contact and advances;
- b) A demand or request for sexual favours;
- c) Sexually coloured remarks;
- d) Showing pornography;
- e) Any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of sexual nature

Where any of these acts is committed in circumstances where-under the victim of such conduct has a reasonable apprehension that in relation to the victim's employment or work whether she is drawing salary, or honorarium or voluntary, whether in government, public or private enterprise such conduct can be humiliating and may constitute a health and safety problem. It is discriminatory for instance when the woman has reasonable grounds to believe that her objection would disadvantage her in connection with her employment or work including recruiting or promotion or when it creates a hostile work environment. Adverse consequences might be visited if the victim does not consent to the conduct in question or raises any objection thereto.

### **Preventive Steps**

All employers or persons in charge of work place whether in public or private sector should take appropriate steps to prevent sexual harassment. Without prejudice to the generality of this obligation they should take the following steps:

- A. Express prohibition of sexual harassment as defined above at the work place should be notified, published and circulated in appropriate ways.**
- B. The Rules/Regulations of Government and Public Sector bodies relating to conduct and discipline should include rules/regulations prohibiting sexual harassment and provide for appropriate penalties in such rules against the offender.**
- C. As regards private employers, steps should be taken to include the aforesaid prohibitions in the standing orders under the Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946.**
- D. Appropriate work conditions should be provided in respect of work, leisure, health and hygiene to further ensure that there is no hostile environment towards women at work places and no employee woman should have reasonable grounds to believe that she is disadvantaged in connection with her employment.**

### **Criminal Proceedings**

Where such conduct amounts to a specific offence under the Indian Penal Code or under any other law, the employer shall initiate appropriate action in accordance with law by making a complaint with the appropriate authority.

In particular, it should ensure that victims or witnesses are not victimized or discriminated against while dealing with complaints of sexual harassment. The victims of sexual harassment should have the option to seek transfer of the perpetrator or their own transfer.

### **Disciplinary Action**

Where such conduct amounts to misconduct in employment as defined by the relevant service rules, appropriate disciplinary action should be initiated by the employer in accordance with those rules.

### **Complaint Mechanism**

Whether or not such conduct constitutes an offence under law or a breach of the service rules, an appropriate complaint mechanism should be created in the employer's organisation for redress of the complaint made by the victim. Such complaint mechanism should ensure time bound treatment of complaints.

### **Complaints Committee**

The complaint mechanism, referred to above, should be adequate to provide, where necessary, a Complaints Committee, a special counsellor or other support service, including the maintenance of confidentiality.

The Complaints Committee should be headed by a woman and not less than half of its member should be women. Further, to prevent the possibility of any undue pressure or influence from senior levels, such Complaints Committee should involve a third party, either NGO or other body who is familiar with the issue of sexual harassment.

The Complaints Committee must make an annual report to the Government department concerned of the complaints and action taken by them.

The employers and person in charge will also report on the compliance with the aforesaid guidelines including on the reports of the Complaints Committee to the Government department.

### **Worker's Initiative**

Employees should be allowed to raise issues of sexual harassment at a workers' meeting and in other appropriate forum and it should be affirmatively discussed in Employer-Employee Meetings.

### **Awareness**

Awareness of the rights of female employees in this regard should be created in particular by prominently notifying the guidelines (and appropriate legislation when enacted on the subject) in a suitable manner.

### **Third Party Harassment**

Where sexual harassment occurs as a result of an act or omission by any third party or outsider, the employer and person in charge will take all steps necessary and reasonable to assist the affected person in terms of support and preventive action.

**The Central/State Governments are requested to consider adopting suitable measures including legislation to ensure that the guidelines laid down by this order are also observed by the employers in Private Sector.**

**These guidelines will not prejudice any rights available under the Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993.**

## What is sexual harassment

Sexual harassment includes such unwelcome sexually determined behavior (whether directly or by implication) as:

a) physical contact and advances; b) a demand or request for sexual favors; c) sexually colored remarks; d) showing pornography; e) any other unwelcome physical verbal or non-verbal conduct of sexual nature.

Where any of these acts is committed in circumstances where the victim has a reasonable apprehension that in relation to the victim's employment or work whether she is drawing salary, or honorarium or voluntary, whether in government, public or private enterprise such conduct can be humiliating and may constitute a health and safety problem.

It is discriminatory for instance when the woman has reasonable grounds to believe that her objection would disadvantage her in connection with her employment or work including recruiting or promotion or when it creates a hostile work environment.

Adverse consequences might be visited if the victim does not consent to the conduct in question or raises any objection thereto.

Thus, sexual harassment need not involve physical contact. Any act that creates a hostile work environment - be it by virtue of cracking lewd jokes, verbal abuse, circulating lewd rumours etc. counts as sexual harassment.<sup>[4]</sup>

The creation of a hostile work environment through unwelcome physical verbal or non-verbal conduct of sexual nature may consist not of a single act but of a pattern of behavior comprising many such acts.

Thus, it is important that the victim report such behavior as soon as possible and not wait for it to become worse. In some cases, the psychological stigma of reporting the conduct of a co-worker might require a great deal of courage on the part of the victim and they may report such acts after a long period of time. The guidelines suggest that the complaint mechanism should ensure time bound treatment of complaints, but **they do not suggest that a report can only be made within a short period of time since the incident occurred.** What is Harassment?

Often, the police refuse to lodge FIRs for sexual harassment cases, especially where the harassment occurred sometime ago.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Employer's obligations

**Internal Complaints Committee and Local Complaints Committee:** The Sexual Harassment Act requires an employer to set up an 'Internal Complaints Committee' ("ICC") at each office or branch, of an organization employing at least 10 employees. The government is in turn required to set up a 'Local Complaints Committees' ("LCC") at the district level to investigate complaints regarding sexual harassment from

establishments where the ICC has not been constituted on account of the establishment having less than 10 employees or if the complaint is against the employer.

The Sexual Harassment Act, 2013 also sets out the constitution of the committees, process to be followed for making a complaint and inquiring into the complaint in a time bound manner.

**Interim Reliefs :** The Sexual Harassment Act empowers the ICC and the LCC to recommend to the employer, at the request of the aggrieved employee, interim measures such as (i) transfer of the aggrieved woman or the respondent to any other workplace; or (ii) granting leave to the aggrieved woman up to a period of 3 months in addition to her regular statutory/ contractual leave entitlement.

In addition to ensuring compliance with the other provisions stipulated, the Sexual Harassment Act casts certain obligations upon the employer to, inter-alia,

- provide a safe working environment
- display conspicuously at the workplace, the penal consequences of indulging in acts that may constitute sexual harassment and the composition of the Internal Complaints Committee
- organise workshops and awareness programmes at regular intervals for sensitizing employees on the issues and implications of workplace sexual harassment and organizing orientation programmes for members of the Internal Complaints Committee
- treat sexual harassment as a misconduct under the service rules and initiate action for misconduct.
- The employer is also required to monitor the timely submission of reports by the ICC.

If an employer fails to constitute an Internal Complaints Committee or does not comply with any provisions contained therein, the Sexual Harassment Act prescribes a monetary penalty of up to INR 50,000 (approx. US\$1,000). A repetition of the same offence could result in the punishment being doubled and / or de-registration of the entity or revocation of any statutory business licenses.<sup>[6]</sup>

## **Complaints mechanism**

All women who draw a regular salary, receive an honorarium, or work in a voluntary capacity in the government, private sector or un-organised sector come under the purview of these guidelines.

- All workplaces should have an appropriate complaints mechanism with a complaints committee, special counsellor or other support services.
- A woman must head the complaints committee and no less than half its members should be women.
- The committee should include an NGO/individual familiar with the issue of sexual harassment.
- The complaints procedure must be time-bound.
- Confidentiality must be maintained.

- Complainants/witnesses should not experience victimization/discrimination during the process.

## **Preventive steps**

- Sexual harassment should be affirmatively discussed at workers' meetings, employer-employee meetings, etc.
- Guidelines should be prominently displayed to create awareness about the rights of female employees.
- The employer should assist persons affected in cases of sexual harassment by outsiders.
- Central and state governments must adopt measures, including legislation, to ensure that private employers also observe the guidelines.
- Names and contact numbers of members of the complaints committee must be prominently displayed.

## **From Guidelines to Act**

The Sexual harassment at workplace Bill was passed by the Lok Sabha on the 2nd of September, 2012. It is now The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013. It defines sexual harassment as laid down by the Supreme Court in Vishakha and others v State of Rajasthan (1997) case.<sup>[7]</sup>

## **Recommendations**

National Commission for Women has asked the government to ensure constitution of Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) in accordance with Supreme Court guidelines in its departments, institutions and autonomous bodies to address such cases. It has also recommended conducting gender sensitisation workshops for top level management officials.

NCW recommended publicizing committee using posters, etc. and explicitly mention the contact details of the members. The commission also highlighted the need for orientation programs for employees to sensitize them on sexual harassment. Another recommendation was to enhance communication strategies to combat violation against women.<sup>[8]</sup>

The rules for the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 have come into force on 9th Dec, 13'. <http://www.lawyerscollective.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Sexual-Harassment-at-Workplace-Rules.pdf>

## **See also**

- The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013