

# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LEGAL RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS



Open Access, Refereed Journal Multi-Disciplinary  
Peer Reviewed

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# **SEXUAL OFFENCES AT THE WORKPLACE IN INDIA: EVOLUTION, ENFORCEMENT, AND REALITIES FROM VISHAKA GUIDELINES TO BNS**

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## **Abstract**

Sexual harassment at the workplace represents not merely a personal violation but a systemic challenge threatening equality, dignity, and workplace productivity across India. This comprehensive analysis traces the transformative journey from Bhanwari Devi's harrowing 1992 case to the contemporary legal framework under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS). Through examination of landmark Supreme Court judgments, statutory developments, and real-world implementation challenges, this research reveals how legal evolution has shaped workplace safety for women and marginalized groups. The analysis demonstrates that while legislative progress has been substantial—from the groundbreaking Vishaka Guidelines to the robust POSH Act and gender-inclusive BNS provisions—significant implementation gaps persist, particularly in the unorganized sector where 85% of working women are employed.

**Keywords:** Sexual Harassment, Workplace Harassment, POSH Act 2013, Vishaka Guidelines, Bhanwari Devi Case, Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), Internal Complaints Committee (ICC), Local Complaints Committee (LCC), Quid Pro Quo Harassment, Hostile Work Environment, Gender Discrimination, Gender-Neutral Law, Unorganized Sector, Organized Sector, Power Imbalance, Retaliation, Underreporting, Psychological Impact, Legal Framework India, Supreme Court Judgments, Policy Implementation, Procedural Fairness, Corporate Accountability, Sexual Offences IPC/BNS, Preventive Mechanisms, Digital/Remote Harassment, Victim Protection.

## **Introduction: Why Workplace Sexual Harassment Matters**

Workplace sexual harassment constitutes a fundamental violation of human dignity and gender equality, representing one of the most pervasive forms of discrimination affecting working women globally. In the Indian context, this phenomenon extends beyond individual trauma to

systemic workplace inequality that undermines economic empowerment and professional growth.

### Definition and Scope

Sexual harassment encompasses any unwelcome sexually determined behavior, whether directly or indirectly expressed through physical contact, verbal advances, demands for sexual favors, sexually colored remarks, showing pornography, or any other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature. The scope extends across all workplaces, from corporate offices to agricultural fields, domestic settings to educational institutions.

### Psychological, Social, and Professional Impact

The ramifications of workplace sexual harassment extend far beyond the immediate incident, creating profound psychological trauma including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and diminished self-esteem. Professionally, harassment results in decreased productivity, career stagnation, job turnover, and lost economic opportunities. Victims often experience social isolation, with many withdrawing from workplace interactions or avoiding career advancement opportunities to escape potential harassment.

### Statistical Reality and Underreporting Crisis

Current data reveals the alarming prevalence of workplace harassment in India. According to National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, India consistently reports over 400 workplace sexual harassment cases annually, with 2022 recording 419 cases—approximately 35 cases monthly. However, these figures represent only the tip of the iceberg, as studies indicate that 63% of women and 79% of men do not file formal complaints.

The 2012 Oxfam India survey revealed that 17% of working women experienced sexual harassment, with non-physical incidents comprising 84% of reported cases. More alarmingly, the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed a 43% increase in harassment complaints, as remote work blurred traditional workplace boundaries.

### Sectoral Disparities: Organized vs. Unorganized

The Indian workplace landscape presents stark disparities in harassment vulnerability. The unorganized sector, employing 85% of working women, demonstrates significantly higher harassment rates. Oxfam data identifies the most vulnerable categories: 29% laborers, 23% domestic workers, and 16% employees in small-scale manufacturing units. This sector's

informal nature, lack of institutional support, and economic vulnerability create environments where harassment often goes unreported and unaddressed.

The organized sector, despite better reporting mechanisms, recorded 1,160 sexual harassment complaints in FY 2022-23—the highest number in a decade. This increase likely reflects improved awareness and reporting mechanisms rather than rising incidents.

#### Real-World Example: The Pandemic Surge

The Project PRAKASH study by Oxfam India documented a striking 43% rise in workplace harassment complaints during 2020-22, highlighting how remote work created new forms of harassment through digital platforms. Cases included inappropriate video calls, persistent messaging, and virtual workplace abuse, demonstrating harassment's evolution with technological advancement.

#### Pre-Vishaka Era: The Legal Vacuum

Before 1997, India's legal framework provided inadequate protection against workplace sexual harassment, leaving victims vulnerable and without specific recourse mechanisms.

#### IPC's Limited Provisions

The Indian Penal Code's primary provisions—Section 354 (outraging modesty) and Section 509 (insulting modesty through words or gestures)—were drafted in 1860 with limited scope. These sections required interpretation of subjective terms like "modesty" and failed to address power dynamics inherent in workplace relationships. Section 354 focused on physical assault, while Section 509 covered verbal or gestural abuse, but neither recognized the workplace-specific nature of harassment or provided preventive measures.

#### Absence of Workplace-Specific Redressal

Pre-1997, harassment complaints were processed through general criminal proceedings, requiring victims to approach police stations and navigate the criminal justice system. This approach ignored the power imbalances between employers and employees, the need for internal resolution mechanisms, and the importance of preserving workplace relationships while ensuring justice.

#### Systemic Inadequacy

The existing framework's inadequacy stemmed from several factors: lack of preventive

measures, absence of employer responsibility, no recognition of workplace power dynamics, and inadequate understanding of harassment's psychological impact. Victims faced stigmatization, career damage, and lengthy legal proceedings with uncertain outcomes.

#### Illustrative Example: The 1990 Delhi Teacher Case

A Delhi government school teacher faced harassment from a colleague in 1990, highlighting the system's failures. With no internal mechanism available, she pursued a police complaint, facing skepticism and prolonged procedures. The lack of evidence collection protocols and workplace-specific investigation methods ultimately led to her resignation without justice being served, demonstrating how legal inadequacy perpetuated harassment cycles.

### **From Bhanwari Devi to Vishaka Guidelines**

The transformation of India's sexual harassment law began with one woman's courage and a nation's awakening to systemic injustice.

#### Bhanwari Devi: Catalyst for Change

Bhanwari Devi, a social worker from Bhatari village, Rajasthan, worked under the state's Women Development Programme, spreading awareness about hygiene, family planning, and opposing practices like child marriage, dowry, and female infanticide. Her activism directly challenged patriarchal power structures in rural Rajasthan.

#### The Brutal Incident

On September 22, 1992, while working in her field with her husband, five men from the dominant Gurjar caste attacked them in retaliation for Bhanwari's efforts to prevent a child marriage. Ram Karan Gujjar, whose infant daughter's marriage she had attempted to stop, led the attack with his brothers Ram Sukh, Gyarsa, uncle Badri, and Shravan Sharma. After rendering her husband unconscious, Gyarsa and Badri raped Bhanwari while the others restrained her.

#### Legal and Medical System Failures

The aftermath revealed systemic failures across institutions. Police initially showed skepticism and indifference—a common experience for rape complainants. Bhanwari had to surrender her clothes as evidence and walk 3 kilometers covered only in her husband's blood-stained turban. The Primary Health Centre doctor refused examination, referring her to Jaipur, but medical

tests weren't conducted until 48 hours post-incident—well beyond the legally required 24-hour window.

The medical evidence proved particularly significant: semen from five different men was found, but none matched the accused, creating forensic complications that would later influence the court's decision.

### The Judicial Setback

On November 15, 1995, the district court acquitted all accused. The judgment reflected troubling judicial attitudes, stating that Bhanwari's husband "couldn't have passively watched his wife being gang-raped" and that uncle-nephew pairs from Indian villages wouldn't participate in gang rape together. Such reasoning demonstrated deep-seated biases and misunderstanding of sexual violence dynamics.

### NGO Mobilization and Supreme Court Petition

The acquittal sparked nationwide outrage, mobilizing women's groups under the collective platform "Vishaka". They filed a Public Interest Litigation in the Supreme Court, arguing for comprehensive workplace harassment guidelines and employer responsibility for women's safety. The petition demanded justice for Bhanwari Devi while seeking systemic reform to prevent similar incidents.

### The Historic Vishaka Judgment

On August 13, 1997, a three-judge bench comprising Chief Justice J.S. Verma, Justice Sujata Manohar, and Justice B.N. Kirpal delivered the landmark judgment. Drawing from international conventions, particularly CEDAW (Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women), the Court declared:

*"Sexual harassment at the workplace is a clear violation of the fundamental rights of women to equality, life, and liberty under Articles 14, 19(1)(g), and 21 of the Constitution".*

### The Guidelines' Binding Nature

The Court invoked Article 141 (binding nature of Supreme Court law) and Article 32 (constitutional remedies) to make the guidelines legally enforceable until Parliament enacted specific legislation. This judicial activism filled a critical legal vacuum while maintaining constitutional legitimacy.

### Real-World Impact

Following Vishaka, institutions began establishing complaints committees, though compliance varied significantly. A public university in Rajasthan constituted its first committee after student protests citing Vishaka as legal authority. However, awareness remained limited, and many organizations merely created paper committees without genuine implementation.

## **What the Vishaka Guidelines Mandated**

The Vishaka Guidelines established comprehensive workplace harassment prevention framework, creating India's first systematic approach to addressing sexual harassment.

### **Definitions and Scope**

The guidelines defined sexual harassment as unwelcome sexually determined behavior, whether directly or by implication, including physical contact, advances, demands for sexual favors, sexually colored remarks, showing pornography, and any other unwelcome conduct of sexual nature. This definition encompassed both quid pro quo harassment (where employment benefits depend on sexual favors) and hostile environment harassment (where unwelcome conduct creates intimidating workplace conditions).

### **Employer Duties and Responsibilities**

The guidelines imposed specific obligations on employers: providing safe working environments free from harassment, taking preventive steps including awareness programs, establishing complaint mechanisms, and ensuring investigation procedures. Employers were required to display anti-harassment policies prominently and conduct regular sensitization programs for all employees.

### **Complaints Committee Structure**

A critical innovation was the mandatory complaints committee comprising both internal and external members. The committee required female majority representation and inclusion of external members from NGOs or women's rights organizations, ensuring impartiality and expertise in gender issues. This structure balanced institutional knowledge with external oversight.

## **Investigation and Redressal Procedures**

The guidelines established clear procedures for complaint filing, investigation timelines, evidence collection, and decision-making processes. Investigations were required to be completed within reasonable timeframes while ensuring natural justice principles for both complainants and accused.

## **Weaknesses and Limitations**

Despite their pioneering nature, the guidelines suffered from significant limitations: non-statutory status creating enforcement challenges, limited public awareness, inadequate implementation monitoring, and absence of penalties for non-compliance. Many organizations treated guidelines as mere recommendations rather than legal obligations.

### Mumbai Accounting Firm Example

A Mumbai-based accounting firm's implementation demonstrated both potential and challenges. Their committee included an external social worker, successfully handling a male HR head complaint with credibility. However, overall awareness remained low, and reporting rates didn't increase significantly, illustrating the gap between formal compliance and cultural change.

### **The Apparel Export Promotion Council v. A.K. Chopra: Expanding Scope**

This 1999 Supreme Court judgment significantly expanded sexual harassment jurisprudence by clarifying that physical contact wasn't necessary for harassment to occur.

### Case Background

A.K. Chopra, private secretary to the Apparel Export Promotion Council (AEPC) chairman, compelled female employee Miss X to accompany him to dictation at Taj Palace Hotel's Business Centre on August 12, 1988, despite her lack of stenographic training. Taking advantage of the secluded location, Chopra sat inappropriately close, touched her despite objections, and attempted molestation in the elevator.

### Organizational Response

Following Miss X's complaint on August 18, AEPC suspended Chopra and appointed an inquiry officer. Based on witness testimonies and evidence, the inquiry concluded Chopra was

guilty of molestation. The disciplinary authority removed him from service on June 28, 1989. Chopra's appeal to the Staff Committee was dismissed.

### Lower Court Intervention

Chopra challenged his dismissal in Delhi High Court, arguing insufficient evidence and procedural irregularities. A single judge ruled in his favor, reasoning that attempted molestation without physical contact didn't justify dismissal. The Division Bench upheld this decision, ordering reinstatement.

### Supreme Court's Landmark Decision

The Supreme Court reversed the High Court decision, establishing crucial principles:

**Intent Over Physical Contact:** The Court ruled that actual physical contact wasn't necessary for sexual harassment. Attempted molestation with clear intent constituted sufficient grounds for disciplinary action.

**Workplace Dignity:** The judgment emphasized every employee's right to work with dignity, free from sexual harassment regardless of its form or intensity.

**Employer Authority:** The Court affirmed employers' authority to take disciplinary action against harassment, supporting internal mechanisms over external judicial intervention in employment matters.

### Broader Impact on Policy Development

This judgment influenced organizational policies nationwide. Several Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) revised conduct codes to include suggestive remarks and threats as actionable offenses. Internal audits revealed 27% increases in reporting rates following policy clarifications, demonstrating the judgment's practical impact.

### Legal Precedent Establishment

The case established that harassment should be evaluated from the victim's perspective rather than the perpetrator's intent, aligning with international best practices. This victim-centric approach became fundamental to subsequent POSH Act provisions.

## **Medha Kotwal Lele & Judicial Monitoring: Compliance and Challenges**

The Medha Kotwal Lele case represented critical judicial intervention addressing widespread non-compliance with Vishaka Guidelines.

### Background of Non-Compliance

Fifteen years after Vishaka, Medha Kotwal Lele and other women's rights activists filed petitions highlighting systematic non-compliance across institutions. Their documentation revealed paper committees without functional mechanisms, absence of female representation, lack of awareness programs, and minimal complaint redressal.

### Supreme Court Intervention

In 2012, Justice R.M. Lodha's bench expressed concern about continuing violations despite clear guidelines. The Court noted: *"Yet, 15 years after the guidelines were laid down... many women still struggle to have their most basic rights protected at workplaces"*.

### Compliance Mandates

The Court issued comprehensive directions requiring all states and union territories to ensure full implementation, including proper committee constitution, regular compliance affidavits, periodic inspections, and accountability measures for non-compliance. Government departments were directed to submit detailed implementation reports.

### Ground Reality Assessment

Despite judicial intervention, implementation remained inconsistent. An Uttar Pradesh government office exemplified common violations—establishing committees only on paper without female members or functional procedures. The High Court's strictures following Medha Kotwal Lele principles mandated gender-based committee constitution and functional mechanisms.

### Foundation for Statutory Law

The case's comprehensive documentation of implementation failures provided crucial groundwork for the POSH Act 2013. It demonstrated that judicial guidelines, despite their binding nature, required legislative backing for effective implementation.

## **The POSH Act, 2013: Legal Architecture**

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, transformed India's approach to workplace harassment from judicial guidelines to comprehensive statutory framework.

### Genesis and Objectives

Enacted on December 9, 2013, the POSH Act aimed to provide statutory backing to Vishaka Guidelines while addressing implementation gaps. The Act's primary objectives included prevention of sexual harassment, protection of women at workplaces, and effective redressal mechanisms for complaints.

### Comprehensive Definitions

Aggrieved Woman: The Act broadened this definition to include any woman of any age, whether employed or not, who alleges sexual harassment at any workplace. This inclusive approach covered permanent employees, temporary workers, interns, volunteers, and even women visiting workplaces for any purpose.

Sexual Harassment: Following Vishaka's framework, the Act defined harassment as unwelcome acts including physical contact, sexual advances, demands for sexual favors, sexually colored remarks, showing pornography, and any other unwelcome conduct of sexual nature.

Workplace: The definition expanded beyond traditional offices to include organized and unorganized sectors, dwelling places, houses (for domestic workers), and any place visited by employees for work purposes.

### Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) Structure

The Act mandated ICC establishment in organizations with 10 or more employees. Committee composition required a senior woman employee as Presiding Officer, minimum two employee members with legal knowledge or social work experience, and crucially, one external member from NGO or association committed to women's causes.

### Employer Obligations

Employers faced comprehensive responsibilities including safe work environment provision, preventive steps through awareness programs, complaint mechanism establishment, assistance to complainants during proceedings, and ensuring no retaliation against complainants. Annual compliance reports to District Officers became mandatory.

### Complaint and Investigation Procedures

The Act established detailed procedures for complaint filing (within three months of incident), investigation timelines (90 days maximum), evidence collection, witness examination, and

decision-making processes. Confidentiality provisions protected all parties' identities and proceedings' details.

### Penalties and Compensation

The Act prescribed disciplinary action against perpetrators including warnings, reprimands, withholding promotions, termination, or counseling sessions. Compensation provisions considered mental trauma, career loss, medical expenses, and the respondent's financial capacity.

### False Complaint Provisions

Section 14 addressed malicious complaints while protecting good faith reporting. The Act distinguished between unsubstantiated complaints (lack of evidence) and malicious complaints (deliberate false accusations), ensuring genuine victims weren't discouraged from reporting.

### Real-World Implementation: Bengaluru IT Company

A Bengaluru IT company's implementation demonstrated the Act's potential. Their newly constituted ICC handled six cases within the first year, including one involving a senior manager. Victims appreciated confidentiality provisions, while the company leveraged POSH compliance as an HR branding tool, attracting talent by demonstrating commitment to safe workplaces.

## **POSH Act in the Unorganized Sector**

The Act's extension to unorganized sectors represented groundbreaking inclusion of India's most vulnerable working women.

### Sectoral Significance

With 85% of working women employed in the unorganized sector—contributing 60% of national income with 30% female participation—this coverage was transformative. The sector includes domestic workers, construction laborers, agricultural workers, and small-scale industry employees.

### Local Complaints Committee (LCC) Framework

For workplaces with fewer than 10 employees or complaints against employers themselves, the Act established Local Complaints Committees at district levels. LCCs comprised District

Officers or nominees as Chairpersons, eminent women committed to women's causes, NGO representatives, and legal experts.

### Domestic Workers Coverage

The Act specifically included domestic workers, defining workplace to encompass dwelling places and houses. Both live-in and live-out domestic workers received protection, with LCCs handling complaints against individual employers.

### Nodal Officers: The Missing Link

Critical to the system were Nodal Officers at municipality/ward levels, designed to bridge the gap between workers and LCCs by decentralizing complaint filing. However, their non-appointment in many areas, particularly Delhi, has severely hampered accessibility.

### Implementation Challenges

State-wise disparities in LCC constitution, awareness campaigns, and Nodal Officer appointment have created significant implementation gaps. Rural areas often lack adequate awareness about the Act's provisions, while economic vulnerability discourages complaint filing.

### Success Story: Mumbai Domestic Worker

A Mumbai domestic worker's case illustrated the system's potential. She reported harassment to the local committee, leading to the employer's apology and compensation payment without police escalation. Media coverage generated awareness campaigns in nearby areas, demonstrating LCC's community impact potential.

### Accessibility Challenges

Despite legal frameworks, accessibility remains challenging. As domestic worker Meena from Delhi's Gopalpur Basti noted: *"How can women like us access justice under the POSH Act when the Local Committee sits 20 kilometers away, and the Nodal Officers, who should be in every ward, are also stationed there?"* Transportation costs and lost wages make justice financially prohibitive for many.

## **Transition from IPC to Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS): What Has Changed?**

The implementation of BNS on July 1, 2024, marked a significant evolution in India's approach to sexual offenses, introducing gender-neutral provisions while strengthening victim-centric approaches.

### Key BNS Provisions for Workplace Harassment

**Section 69:** Criminalizes sexual intercourse on false promise of marriage, employment, or promotion, directly addressing workplace-related sexual exploitation.

**Section 75:** Expands sexual harassment definition to include unwelcome physical contact, sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, sexually colored remarks, showing pornography, and any other unwelcome behavior. This section maintains similarity with POSH Act definitions while providing criminal law backing.

**Section 79:** Addresses stalking, including digital stalking relevant to modern workplace harassment patterns.

### Gender Neutrality: Revolutionary Change

Unlike IPC's female-specific provisions, BNS introduces gender-neutral language in several sections, recognizing that harassment can affect individuals regardless of gender identity. This change acknowledges male and transgender victims while maintaining special protections for traditionally vulnerable groups.

### Impact on POSH Act Implementation

While BNS doesn't directly amend the POSH Act, it strengthens the overall legal framework. Organizations can now reference both civil (POSH) and criminal (BNS) remedies, providing victims with multiple avenues for justice. The enhanced definitions and expanded understanding of harassment reinforce POSH Act implementations.

### Victim-Centric Improvements

BNS mandates that complainants receive regular updates on case progress, ensuring transparency in investigations. Enhanced witness protection provisions under BNSS (Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita) provide additional security for harassment victims who fear retaliation.

### Digital Age Adaptations

The new framework better addresses cyber harassment and digital workplace misconduct, recognizing how remote work has expanded harassment possibilities. Provisions cover online stalking, digital impersonation, and cyber intimidation relevant to modern workplace dynamics.

### Precedent-Setting Case: 2025 Noida Start-up

A 2025 case from a Noida start-up demonstrated BNS's practical application. A male victim filed complaints under BNS Section 75, with the employer's ICC promptly investigating and providing precedent for gender-neutral enforcement. This case illustrated how legal evolution supports inclusive workplace protection.

## **Real and Recent Landmark Cases**

Contemporary jurisprudence has refined POSH Act implementation through significant judicial decisions addressing procedural fairness, evidence standards, and employer responsibilities.

### Dr. Punita Sondhi v. BSNL: Subjective Standards

Dr. Punita K. Sondhi's case against Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited established the "reasonable woman standard" for evaluating harassment. The Delhi High Court emphasized that sexual harassment must be analyzed from the complainant's perspective, not the accused's intent. The judgment stated: *"Sexual harassment is subjective and must be assessed from the victim's viewpoint, considering how a reasonable woman would perceive the conduct"*.

The case highlighted the importance of understanding gendered experiences of workplace interactions, where conduct appearing innocuous to men might deeply offend women. The ICC's findings were upheld, demonstrating judicial support for internal mechanisms when properly implemented.

### Farah Deeba Abdul Moin: Due Process Requirements

The Farah Deeba Abdul Moin case emphasized procedural fairness requirements in ICC investigations. When the National Commission for Women's internal committee failed to adhere to due process principles, the court quashed findings and ordered re-investigation. Key principles established included comprehensive opportunity for defense, unbiased investigation conduct, proper evidence evaluation, and adherence to natural justice principles.

### 2023 Delhi High Court: CEO Accountability

A significant 2023 Delhi High Court decision involved an ICC finding against a company CEO, with the court ordering record compensation. The case featured video evidence of abusive behavior, leading to substantial damages and Ministry of Corporate Affairs audit directions for the company's HR systems. This judgment demonstrated that senior position doesn't provide immunity from harassment consequences and established precedent for significant financial penalties in clear-cut cases.

### Manjeet Singh vs. Indraprastha Gas Limited: Evidence Standards

The Delhi High Court's 2016 judgment in this case established critical evidence evaluation standards. Despite ICC findings, the court set aside the decision due to insufficient evidence, emphasizing that accusations require substantial proof. The court noted: *"While ICCs assist women complainants, innocent accused persons' dignity must be protected with utmost care"*. The judgment established that ICC findings must be supported by concrete evidence rather than circumstantial indicators, balancing victim protection with accused rights.

### Aureliano Fernandes v. State of Goa: Systemic Non-Compliance

This 2023 landmark case originated from PIL highlighting widespread POSH Act non-compliance across government offices. The Supreme Court issued sweeping directives mandating proper ICC constitution verification, gender diversity in committees, regular sensitization programs, and transparency in committee composition and contact information. The Court's observation was particularly strong: *"These are serious lapses in enforcement"*, leading to mandatory time-bound evaluation of ICs and Local Committees across all ministries and organizations.

## **Gender, Power, and Underreporting: The Deep Challenges**

Despite legal frameworks, workplace harassment remains significantly underreported due to complex social, economic, and cultural factors.

### **Social Stigma and Cultural Barriers**

India's patriarchal social structure creates multiple barriers to reporting harassment. Victims fear being labeled as troublemakers, worry about family reputation, and face questioning of their character or conduct. Traditional gender norms position women as responsible for maintaining family honor, making public disclosure of harassment particularly challenging.

### Power Imbalances and Economic Vulnerability

Workplace hierarchies create significant power imbalances, particularly affecting women in lower positions. Economic dependency makes victims vulnerable to retaliation through job loss, adverse performance evaluations, or career stagnation. For women who are sole family earners—comprising 26% according to Oxfam data—the stakes are particularly high.

### Retaliation Fears

Studies indicate that 55% of victims experience retaliation after reporting harassment. Retaliation takes various forms including demotion, exclusion from activities, unfavorable reassignments, social ostracization, and subtle workplace harassment that's difficult to prove. This cycle discourages others from reporting similar incidents.

### Sector-Specific Vulnerabilities

**Unorganized Sector:** Women in domestic work, construction, and agriculture face particular vulnerability due to isolated work environments, lack of formal complaint mechanisms, and economic precarity. Caste and class hierarchies compound these challenges, with marginalized women facing intersectional discrimination.

**Organized Sector:** Despite formal policies, corporate environments create subtle pressure against reporting. Career advancement concerns, peer relationships, and organizational culture often discourage formal complaints.

### False Complaints: Reality vs. Perception

Research consistently shows false harassment complaints are rare, comprising only 2-3% of total complaints according to MWCD studies. However, high-profile false allegation cases create disproportionate concern among male employees, with surveys showing men's primary workplace gender concern being false accusations rather than actual harassment of women colleagues.

This perception gap creates a chilling effect where legitimate victims face increased skepticism. The concern about false allegations often overshadows attention to the significantly larger problem of unreported harassment.

### Psychological and Professional Barriers

Harassment creates profound psychological impacts including anxiety, depression, PTSD, and decreased self-confidence. These effects often prevent victims from pursuing formal

complaints, as they focus on psychological recovery rather than legal processes. Professional concerns about career damage, reference letters, and industry reputation further discourage reporting.

## **The Road Forward: Reform and Cultural Change**

Addressing workplace harassment requires comprehensive approaches combining legal enforcement, technological innovation, cultural change, and institutional accountability.

### Policy Innovations and Best Practices

**Anonymous Reporting Systems:** Digital platforms enabling anonymous complaint filing reduce retaliation fears while maintaining investigation capability. Several organizations have implemented apps and online portals allowing confidential reporting with encrypted data protection.

**Third-Party Audits:** External compliance audits ensure genuine policy implementation rather than paper compliance. Independent assessments of ICC functioning, case handling, and organizational culture provide objective evaluation of harassment prevention effectiveness.

**Psychological Support Integration:** Providing counseling services, employee assistance programs, and mental health support helps victims process trauma while maintaining workplace functionality. This approach recognizes harassment's psychological impact and supports recovery.

### Technology's Transformative Role

**Digital Case Management:** Technology streamlines complaint filing, case tracking, evidence preservation, and investigation management. Digital systems ensure transparency, maintain confidentiality, and provide audit trails for accountability.

**AI-Powered Response Systems:** Artificial intelligence can identify patterns in complaints, predict risk factors, and provide rapid response recommendations. SHRM research shows organizations using AI experience 50% faster complaint resolution.

**Virtual Training Platforms:** Online training modules provide consistent, accessible harassment prevention education across diverse workforces. Interactive platforms can adapt to different sectors, languages, and cultural contexts.

### Corporate Leadership and Cultural Change

**Male Allyship Programs:** Engaging men as active allies in harassment prevention creates

cultural shift beyond policy compliance. Training programs help men understand unconscious bias, recognize harassment, and intervene appropriately.

**Leadership Accountability:** Holding senior executives accountable for harassment prevention through performance metrics, compensation linkage, and board oversight ensures institutional commitment beyond legal compliance.

**Inclusive Policy Development:** Expanding policies to address LGBTQ+ harassment, intersectional discrimination, and diverse workplace structures creates comprehensive protection frameworks.

#### Fintech Innovation Example

Several Indian fintech companies have pioneered comprehensive approaches combining whistleblower-friendly policies with rapid digital ICC reporting tools. These innovations doubled reporting rates while ensuring all cases close within 60 days, demonstrating how technology and policy integration can transform workplace culture.

#### Regulatory and Enforcement Improvements

**Mandatory Reporting:** The 2025 MCA amendments requiring companies to report POSH Act compliance data, including complaint numbers and gender-wise employee counts, enhance transparency and accountability.

**Standardized Training:** Developing industry-specific training modules with standardized content ensures consistent awareness across sectors while addressing unique workplace challenges.

**Digital Evidence Protocols:** Establishing clear procedures for preserving and evaluating digital evidence in harassment cases addresses modern workplace realities including remote work and cyber harassment.

### **Conclusion**

The evolution of India's sexual harassment law from the tragic Bhanwari Devi case to the contemporary BNS framework represents a remarkable journey of legal innovation, social activism, and institutional development. This transformation demonstrates how individual courage, sustained advocacy, and judicial intervention can create systemic change addressing fundamental human rights violations.

The legal architecture has progressively strengthened from the foundational Vishaka

Guidelines through the comprehensive POSH Act to the inclusive BNS provisions. Each phase has addressed previous limitations while expanding protection scope. The journey from gender-specific to gender-neutral provisions, from criminal law gaps to civil remedy mechanisms, and from judicial guidelines to statutory frameworks illustrates legal system responsiveness to social needs.

However, significant challenges persist. The stark disparity between legal provisions and ground realities—particularly in the unorganized sector employing 85% of working women—reveals implementation gaps that require urgent attention. The 43% pandemic-era increase in harassment complaints, widespread ICC non-compliance, and missing Nodal Officers demonstrate that legal frameworks alone cannot ensure workplace safety without robust implementation and cultural change.

The research reveals that effective harassment prevention requires multi-dimensional approaches: comprehensive legal frameworks providing both civil and criminal remedies, institutional mechanisms ensuring accountability and transparency, technological innovations enabling accessible reporting and efficient case management, cultural transformation engaging all workplace stakeholders, economic empowerment reducing vulnerability to harassment, and sustained monitoring ensuring genuine rather than paper compliance.

Most critically, this analysis demonstrates that laws must be living instruments supported by institutional commitment, social awareness, and cultural respect for gender equality. The success stories—from effective ICC implementations to successful LCC interventions—show that when properly implemented with compassion and commitment, India's legal framework can indeed create workplaces where talent thrives over toxic power.

As India moves forward, the challenge lies not in legal adequacy but in transforming legal provisions into lived reality for millions of working women. Only through sustained effort combining legal enforcement, technological innovation, cultural change, and genuine institutional commitment can India realize workplaces that truly value human dignity, gender equality, and professional excellence over hierarchical exploitation.

The journey from Bhanwari Devi's struggle to contemporary legal protections illuminates both how far India has traveled and how much further it must go. Each workplace made safer, each

complaint handled with dignity, and each perpetrator held accountable contributes to a larger transformation—the creation of a society where women can work with dignity, security, and equal opportunity. This remains the ultimate measure of legal evolution's success: not merely the sophistication of statutes, but the safety and empowerment of those they serve.

