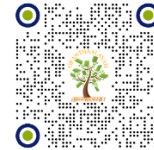


Original Article

## WOMEN AND WORKPLACE HARASSMENT AND ITS ASSOCIATION WITH ANXIETY DEPRESSION

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### ABSTRACT

The widespread problem of workplace harassment has a substantial impact on women's mental and professional health. The many facets of workplace harassment are examined in this review, along with its manifestations, frequency, and close correlation with anxiety and depression in female employees. The study emphasizes the emotional toll of harassment and the pressing need for preventive organizational policies, efficient redressal procedures, and supportive work environments by combining empirical findings from organizational, psychological, and sociological viewpoints.

**Keywords:** Psychological Trauma, Anxiety, Depression, Workplace Harassment, Women Employees, Organizational Behavior, And Mental Health

### INTRODUCTION

Women's workforce participation has grown dramatically in recent decades, which is a critical step toward economic empowerment and gender equality. But along with these advancements come enduring obstacles that jeopardize women's psychological health, safety, and dignity in the workplace. Among these difficulties, workplace harassment has become a significant issue that affects women from a variety of industries, age groups, and socioeconomic backgrounds. A hostile or intimidating work environment can result from a variety of forms of harassment in the workplace, including verbal, physical, sexual, and psychological abuse [Verkuil et al. \(2015\)](#).

Any unwanted behavior or practice that causes physical, psychological, or emotional harm is considered harassment by the International Labour Organization [International Labour Organization. \(2018\)](#). Within the workplace context, it represents a pattern of misconduct that violates ethical norms, organizational values, and human rights. India's Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 makes sexual harassment a crime, but the true scope of the problem is still hidden by underreporting and social stigma [Verkuil et al. \(2015\)](#).

In addition to undermining a woman's sense of security, workplace harassment has serious psychological repercussions, especially when it comes to anxiety and depression. Victims frequently suffer from long-term stress, emotional exhaustion, low self-esteem, and social and professional disengagement. When these factors combine, they can cause serious mental health issues, decreased productivity, and absenteeism. A cycle of fear and silence is also maintained when women who report harassment are

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victimized or subjected to retaliatory actions, which worsen emotional trauma and deter others from seeking justice [Rosander et al. \(2023\)](#), [Sarkar \(2024\)](#).

Globally, numerous studies have documented the strong association between workplace harassment and psychological disorders, particularly anxiety and depression. However, the extent and intensity of this association vary depending on cultural norms, organizational policies, and available support systems. In the Indian context, where traditional gender expectations and hierarchical power structures remain influential, workplace harassment poses unique socio-psychological challenges [Pareek \(2022\)](#).

This review paper's primary goal is to comprehend and examine the intricate connection between workplace harassment and the psychological effects it has on women, with a special emphasis on anxiety and depression. It looks at the different types of harassment women encounter in the workplace and how these unpleasant experiences impact their mental health, job satisfaction, and emotional well-being. The paper also seeks to review previous empirical studies and theoretical perspectives that highlight the correlation between harassment and psychological distress. It also aims to pinpoint the individual, organizational, and social elements that affect how severe victims' anxiety and depression symptoms are. The ultimate goal of the study is to recommend practical preventive and corrective measures, like awareness campaigns, mental health treatments, and organizational policy changes, to make workplaces for women safer, more welcoming, and psychologically supportive [International Labour Organization. \(2018\)](#), [Sarkar \(2024\)](#).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for comprehending workplace harassment and its psychological effects is based on a number of interconnected theories from the fields of occupational health, social psychology, and organizational behavior. It clarifies how gender relations, power dynamics, and workplace dynamics all play a role in harassment and how these incidents can cause psychological distress, such as anxiety and depression [Fitzgerald \(2018\)](#), [Einarsen et al. \(2020\)](#).

Unwelcome behavior, discrimination, intimidation, or abuse that produces an offensive or hostile work environment are all parts of the complex phenomenon known as workplace harassment. It can take the form of sexual advances, exclusion, psychological manipulation, or verbal abuse and can happen between coworkers, superiors, or subordinates. According to the [International Labour Organization. \(2018\)](#), workplace harassment encompasses a variety of inappropriate actions or behaviors that result in harm to one's physical, mental, or emotional well-being. Similar to this, India's POSH Act (2013) emphasizes women's right to a safe and respectable workplace while offering a legal framework to prevent sexual harassment [Government of India \(2013\)](#).

Harassment at work triggers psychological reactions linked to helplessness, fear, and self-blame, which frequently result in long-term stress, anxiety disorders, and depressive symptoms. Rumination, self-confidence, and cognitive functioning can all be negatively impacted by prolonged exposure to a hostile environment. This eventually leads to the emergence of occupational trauma, which has an impact on one's personal and professional health [Nielsen et al. \(2015\)](#).

There are several ways that workplace harassment can appear, and each one has negative psychological and emotional effects on women. One of the most prevalent and upsetting forms of harassment is sexual harassment, which includes unwanted sexual advances, offensive remarks, gestures, or physical contact that make the workplace hostile and uncomfortable. Such conduct frequently diminishes women's dignity and causes fear, anxiety, and a decline in self-esteem. In order to degrade or intimidate the victim, verbal and psychological harassment can take the form of insults, threats, rumors, or purposeful humiliation. These behaviors frequently result in emotional exhaustion and have an impact on a woman's mental health and productivity at work [Rospenda et al. \(2023\)](#). Bullying at work is when someone in a position of authority repeatedly mistreats or denigrates subordinates by intimidating, excluding, or manipulating them. It creates a poisonous atmosphere that can lead to long-term stress and depression. When women are subjected to unfair treatment or disparaging comments because of their gender, caste, religion, or marital status, it is discriminatory harassment and a violation of their right to equality and inclusion. Last but not least, cyber harassment is a new type of abuse made possible by digital communication platforms, in which people are harassed online, stalked, or have their privacy violated via social media, emails, or messages. When combined, these types of harassment not only harm the victim's mental well-being but also sabotage productivity and harmony within the company [Nielsen et al. \(2015\)](#).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1) Fitzgerald et al. (1997) Integrated model of sexual harassment

Fitzgerald and colleagues tested a comprehensive model linking antecedents (e.g., organizational climate, power differentials) to consequences of sexual harassment in organizations. Their work established sexual harassment as a workplace stressor that reliably predicts declines in general mental health, including depressive symptoms and anxiety-related outcomes, and laid the conceptual groundwork used by later empirical studies.

## **2) Houle, Staff, & Mortimer (2011) Longitudinal evidence of depressive affect**

Using longitudinal survey data from the Youth Development Study, Houle and coauthors found that experiences of sexual harassment during early occupational careers were associated with increased depressive affect over time. The study strengthens causal inference by showing harassment precedes later depressive symptoms.

## **3) Verkuil et al. (2015) Meta-analysis: workplace bullying and mental health**

This systematic review and meta-analysis synthesized cross-sectional and longitudinal studies linking workplace bullying (a form of nonsexual harassment) to adverse mental health outcomes. Results showed consistent, moderate-to-large associations with anxiety, depression, and psychological distress across occupations and study designs. The meta-analysis highlights bullying as a robust predictor of poor mental health.

## **4) Rospenda et al. (2023) Chronic harassment and long-term psychological distress**

Analyzing diverse occupational samples, Rospenda and colleagues found that chronic exposure to workplace harassment (including generalized harassment and sexual harassment) is associated with persistent psychological distress and greater risk of depressive symptoms and maladaptive coping (e.g., alcohol misuse). The authors call for stronger policy enforcement and mental-health supports.

## **5) Lipinska-Grobelyny (2023) Gender differences in mobbing and mental health**

This study examined how gender moderates the relationship between workplace mobbing/bullying and mental-health indicators. Findings indicate that gender significantly alters the strength and nature of the harassment → anxiety/depression link, with women often showing higher levels of anxiety and somatic complaints following sustained harassment.

## **6) Fitzgerald (2018) Review chapter summarizing decades of evidence**

In an authoritative chapter, Fitzgerald summarized ~20 years of research documenting that sexual and gender-based harassment reduce women's psychological well-being (including anxiety and depressive disorders). The review synthesizes theoretical and empirical work and emphasizes organizational and legal interventions.

## **7) Mensah et al. (2022) harassment, illegitimate tasks, and depression**

This empirical paper explored how gender harassment and assignment of illegitimate tasks are linked to poor mental health outcomes. It reports clear associations with burnout and depressive symptoms, suggesting that gender-based micro-hostilities at work function as chronic stressors that erode mental well-being.

## **8) Sarkar (2024) Mental health & well-being at work (review)**

A recent review highlighting contemporary evidence that exposure to workplace harassment (sexual and nonsexual) increases incidence of anxiety and depressive symptoms, especially among younger female workers; it underscores the importance of workplace mental-health programs and early detection.

## **9) Rosander et al. (2023) Bullying exposure and mental-health problems (systematic review)**

This review examined gendered patterns in bullying research and reported that while much bullying research focuses on mixed samples, gendered analyses often reveal stronger mental-health impacts for women (including anxiety and depression). It also points to methodological gaps (e.g., reliance on self-report, sparse longitudinal work in some sectors).

## **10) Chaudhuri (2007) / Indian context studies (Pareek 2022)**

Qualitative and survey studies from India document the prevalence and forms of sexual and verbal harassment experienced by women at work (healthcare, education, public sector). These studies report clear psychological consequences — anxiety, fear, lowered self-esteem, and depressive symptoms — and emphasize legal/implementation gaps (e.g., in the 2013 POSH Act application) and cultural barriers to reporting. Use such region-specific work to situate your review in the Chhattisgarh/Indian context.

## **OBSERVATION**

According to the reviewed literature, harassment of women in the workplace is a pervasive and ongoing problem in many industries and nations. Numerous empirical and theoretical studies have noted that harassment can take many different forms, including verbal, sexual, psychological, discriminatory, and cyber-based. The majority of research continuously shows a strong correlation between workplace harassment and poor mental health outcomes, particularly depression and anxiety. The reviewed literature also emphasizes how gender power disparities, organizational hierarchies, and a dearth of efficient redressal mechanisms frequently make women's psychological distress worse. Women who encounter harassment frequently express feelings of shame, powerlessness, low self-esteem, and disengagement from work-related activities. Chronic harassment exposure also raises the risk of long-term issues like emotional exhaustion, absenteeism, post-traumatic stress disorder, and poor job performance.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The following is a summary of the conclusions drawn from the reviewed literature:

- 1) High Prevalence of Harassment:** According to studies like [Chaudhuri \(2007\)](#) and [Fitzgerald et al. \(1997\)](#), 40–60% of working women encounter harassment at some point in their careers.
- 2) Psychological Repercussions:** According to almost all research [Verkuil et al. \(2015\)](#), [Rospenda et al. \(2023\)](#), exposure to harassment is significantly associated with symptoms of anxiety and depression. Sleep issues, mood swings, difficulty focusing, and a decline in motivation are all displayed by victims.
- 3) Long-term Mental Health Effects:** Research shows that harassment has a lasting psychological impact, with depressive symptoms continuing long after the incidents have ended [Houle et al. \(2011\)](#), [Rospenda et al. \(2023\)](#).
- 4) Women are more susceptible to psychological harm than men** because of social stigma, fear of reprisals, and underreporting, according to research by [Lipińska-Grobelny, A. \(2023\)](#) and [Rosander et al. \(2023\)](#).
- 5) Organizational Gaps:** Numerous studies highlight the poor enforcement of anti-harassment legislation, the deficiency of internal complaint committees, and the lack of adequate mental health support systems in the workplace, particularly in developing nations such as India.
- 6) Indian Context:** Research like [Chaudhuri \(2007\)](#) and [Pareek \(2022\)](#) shows that cultural silence, victim-blaming, and ignorance make victims' anxiety and depression worse.

All of the reviewed research points to workplace harassment as a major psychosocial stressor that causes anxiety and depression in working women. These findings are corroborated by the Stress Theory and Cognitive Appraisal Model, which postulate that repeated exposure to harmful stimuli (harassment) modifies cognitive and emotional processing, leading to psychological dysfunction and chronic stress. A woman's sense of security, community, and professional identity are all disrupted by harassment. Anxiety is frequently the first reaction to the ongoing fear of humiliation or retaliation, and depression develops as a long-term effect. This leads to a cycle of psychological trauma. These results are also significantly shaped by gender bias and organizational culture. The psychological toll on victims is often increased by workplaces that condone sexist behavior or ignore complaints.

The fact that harassment is intersectional is also important; in Indian contexts, caste, religion, and marital status all intensify the experience of discrimination. Even with the POSH Act (2013), there are still gaps in reporting, implementation, and awareness. The line between work and personal life is further blurred by cyber harassment, an emerging form of abuse that extends workplace harassment into virtual spaces. The dearth of easily available psychological support and counseling in organizations is a recurrent theme in the literature. Reducing harassment and lessening its negative effects on women's psychological health requires integrating leadership accountability, confidential grievance procedures, and mental health awareness programs.

## CONCLUSION

According to the review, one of the main factors influencing working women's anxiety and depression is workplace harassment. Research consistently demonstrates that harassment, whether it be psychological, verbal, or sexual, causes significant emotional distress, undermines self-esteem, and reduces productivity at work. Chronic mental health conditions like depression, burnout, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder are exacerbated by prolonged exposure. Organizations must bolster internal complaint committees, enforce zero-tolerance policies, and encourage gender-sensitive work environments in order to address this. Equally important are mental health interventions, such as stress-reduction plans, awareness seminars, and employee counseling services. To better understand the institutional and cultural aspects of workplace harassment and its effects on mental health, future research in India should concentrate on longitudinal and intervention-based studies, especially in areas like Chhattisgarh.

In addition to being required by law, ensuring women's safety, dignity, and psychological health at work is also morally and socially necessary for inclusive and sustainable development.

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