

Women's Safety at Workplace in Indian Academia: An Unavoidable Marker for True Sustainability

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Abstract: The growing lack of safety at workplaces has emerged as a critical concern in the academic ecosystem in India. While universities and research institutions are traditionally regarded as spaces of knowledge creation and intellectual freedom, the lived realities of women often reflect structural vulnerabilities and unsafe conditions. Women's safety in Indian academic institutions which are generally brushed under the carpet through victim silencing, affects not only individual well-being but also institutional sustainability, equity and credibility. Despite the enactment of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (PoSH Act) and the Vishakha Guidelines (1997), systemic challenges persist in reporting, redressal, and cultural acceptance of gender equity. This paper synthesizes current literature, policy frameworks, and case studies to analyse the socio-cultural, institutional, and intersectional factors contributing to sexual harassment in Indian higher education. Using gendered organizational theory, intersectionality, and sustainability frameworks, it examines the implications of unsafe academic environments for talent retention, diversity, and institutional credibility. Policy recommendations focus on strengthening Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs), fostering cultural change, and aligning academic practices with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). The study argues that women's safety is not merely a compliance issue but an essential marker of sustainable academic growth. Secondary method have been used for data collection for the purpose of the paper.

Keywords: Women's safety, sexual harassment, Indian academia, institutional response, victim silencing, PoSH Act, SDG goals.

1. Introduction

With over 1,000 universities, 40,000 colleges, and approximately 38 million students, the Indian higher education is one of the largest in the world, comprising of both private and public educational organizations (AISHE, 2022). With the growth in the academic framework of the Country, there has been a steady increase in women's participation in academia, approaching gender parity at postgraduate and doctoral levels. Although, these developments reflect as a positive shift, enrolment and greater representation of women in teaching or other academic positions alone do not ensure equitable or safe academic environments. Evidence suggests that persistent cases of sexual harassment, institutional apathy towards the victim, organized victim silencing and cultural and social stigma and

victim blaming and shaming continue to hinder women's full potential and participation in Indian academia (Bhandari & Lefebvre, 2020; Sahu, 2024).

What is Sexual Harassment?

Any unwanted sexual act or behavior, whether verbal, nonverbal, or violent, that disrupts someone's job or fosters an uncomfortable, threatening, or hostile work environment is considered sexual harassment in the workplace. Unwelcome approaches, solicitations for sexual favors, sexually suggestive remarks or materials, and other sexually suggestive behavior are important components. This conduct may manifest as hostile work environments or quid pro quo harassment, in which employment is conditioned on sexual favors (Sexual Harassment, n.d.).

Sexual harassment can include a range of actions:

- *Physical behavior:* Inappropriate and unsolicited physical contact, such as a pat, squeeze, grabbing or obstruction of someone's path with the intention of sexual misconduct.
- *Verbal conduct:* It includes improper discussions about someone's physique, looks, or personal life, as well as sexual remarks, jokes, and insults.
- *Nonverbal behavior:* It includes sending unwanted messages, making inappropriate gestures, and displaying sexually graphic or suggestive content.

Types of Sexual Harassment:

- *Quid Pro Quo, or "This for That,":* It is the practice of offering job perks (such as promotions or job retention) in return for sexual favours or linking the refusal of such benefits to sexual activity.
- *Hostile Work Environment:* This refers to serious or ongoing sexual conduct that interferes with an employee's capacity to perform their job by making the workplace frightening, insulting, or intolerable.

The harasser can be a co-worker, a supervisor, or even someone who is not an employee but a client or customer (Thengadi et al., 2013).

Thus, sexual harassment in Indian universities affects both personal safety and institutional integrity and manifests in various forms ranging from verbal and non-verbal sexual advances to coercive behaviours, intimidation, unwelcomed and inappropriate physical contact and gestures and even

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physical assault. Reports from the National Commission for Women (NCW, 2019) indicate that many women face harassment ranging from inappropriate remarks to coercive sexual advances and intimidation, yet the majority of cases remain unreported due to fear of retaliation, loss of job and reputation, stigma, and hierarchical power structures and the culture of victim silencing, shaming and blaming. Hierarchical structures within academia aggravate these challenges, particularly when perpetrators hold senior administrative or faculty positions. Although the PoSH Act (2013) mandates Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) in all institutions, compliance and implementation across organizations vary widely and private universities at times fail to adhere to these mandates established by the University Grants Commission or comply to the POSH Act, as such jeopardising the basic right to operate in safe work environments to their employees (Bhatnagar & Rajadhyaksha, 2021).

Sexual harassment cases are not limited to India itself. In fact, research has documented that gender-based violence is prevalent in universities and colleges across the globe, highlighting the complex connection of organizational culture, power hierarchies, and systemic inequalities (Fitzgerald, Drasgow, & Magley, 1999). However, these challenges are amplified in India because of ingrained patriarchal norms, rigid gender roles, and the social expectation of female modesty and compliance (Nair, 2018). The combined effect of institutional inaction and societal pressures creates an environment where survivors are often silenced, perpetuating cycles of harassment and stunting women's academic growth in a way that remaining silent becomes a more feasible option for the victim.

Recent cases of sexual harassment at premiere institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), and the University of Hyderabad have brought national attention to these challenges, revealing many loopholes in the implementation of protective and legal frameworks and the need for systemic and cultural reform (Sahu, 2024; Menon, 2019). Social movements, including #MeToo India, have encouraged more survivors to come forward and speak up, increasing visibility and public discourse around the issue. Yet, despite growing awareness, institutional mechanisms continue to fall short in addressing harassment, ensuring justice, and providing support for victims (Gangoli, 2023).

The implications of sexual harassment goes beyond individual trauma of the survivors as unsafe academic spaces hinder talent retention, reduce research productivity, and negatively impact institutional reputation, thereby obstructing the sustainable growth of higher education in India. Therefore, aligning the cause of women's safety with the principles of sustainability, particularly social sustainability as outlined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is crucial for creating inclusive, equitable, and resilient academic institutions in the long run (United Nations, 2015).

This paper examines how sexual harassment and unsafe academic spaces inhibit sustainable growth particularly for women working in the academic field in India. It investigates institutional, cultural, and legal frameworks; highlights

intersectional vulnerabilities; and proposes strategies for creating safe, equitable, and inclusive academic environments.

The paper tries to find answer to the following central question:

How does sexual harassment in Indian academia affect women's participation and institutional sustainability and in turn hamper the fulfilment of SDG Goals of Gender Equality (SDG 5) and Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (SDG 16) and what are the systemic reforms needed to address this challenge?

A. Impact of Sexual Harassment in Indian Academia on Women's Participation, Institutional Sustainability, and SDG Fulfilment

Sexual harassment in Indian academia poses a serious threat to gender equity, institutional integrity, and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Despite progressive legal frameworks such as the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (PoSH Act), incidents of harassment remain underreported and often mishandled within higher educational institutions (Mehta, 2021; Sahu, 2024).

B. Impact on Women's Participation and Institutional Sustainability

Sexual harassment in academia drives many women to withdraw from educational and research careers due to trauma, retaliation, or lack of institutional support, leading to reduced female representation in academic leadership and a weakened talent pipeline (Lakshminarayanan & Košir, 2024; Bhattacharya, 2020). Institutions that ignore or mishandle such cases face reputational damage, eroded trust, and declining morale among students and staff (Chauhan & Sharma, 2025). This culture of silence and unaccountability not only perpetuates unsafe environments but also undermines institutional performance, credibility, and long-term sustainability (Mehta, 2021).

C. Psychological Implications on Victims of Sexual Harassment

Workplace sexual harassment results in significant psychological consequences for victims, including anxiety, depression, PTSD, low self-esteem, and burnout. It impairs focus and can lead to career setbacks and increased substance abuse as victims struggle with anger, shame, and helplessness. The trauma of such harassment overwhelms coping mechanisms, resulting in long-term effects on mental health and overall well-being, manifesting physically through symptoms like sleep disturbances and fatigue. Victims may experience impaired functioning, engage in self-destructive behaviors, or withdraw from their workplaces, leading to lasting effects on their careers and professional advancement (Houle et al., 2011).

D. Link to SDG 5 and SDG 16

The persistence of sexual harassment in academic institutions hinders progress toward SDG 5, which seeks to eliminate violence and discrimination against women and

ensure their full participation in education, research, and leadership (United Nations, 2015). When institutions fail to provide a safe environment, they effectively deny women equal access to educational and professional opportunities, violating targets 5.1 (end discrimination) and 5.5 (ensure women's participation in decision-making).

Similarly, these failures impede SDG 16, which emphasizes building "effective, accountable and inclusive institutions" and ensuring "access to justice for all" (United Nations, 2015). Weak implementation of the PoSH Act, procedural delays, and compromised Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) reveal institutional fragility and lack of accountability (Lakshminarayanan & Košir, 2024). When grievance mechanisms are ineffective or biased, they delegitimize the very institutions meant to uphold justice, contradicting targets 16.3 (promote rule of law) and 16.6 (develop effective institutions).

Thus, sexual harassment in academia not only restricts women's empowerment but also erodes institutional legitimacy, creating a feedback loop where gender inequity and institutional weakness reinforce each other. Without gender-sensitive governance, neither SDG 5 nor SDG 16 can be meaningfully achieved within the academic ecosystem.

2. Literature Review

A. Global and Indian Context of Women in Academia

Globally, women have made significant strides in higher education participation. However, inequities persist in leadership roles, career progression, and experiences of harassment (Morley, 2013). In India, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of women has reached 27.9% (AISHE, 2022), yet representation declines sharply in faculty leadership and administrative positions (Bhandari & Lefebvre, 2020).

Research indicates that sexual harassment is often a manifestation of systemic power imbalances rather than isolated incidents (MacKinnon, 1979; Fitzgerald, Drasgow, & Magley, 1999). Feminist organizational theory suggests that hierarchical structures in academia amplify women's vulnerability, particularly for doctoral students, postdoctoral researchers, and junior faculty (Acker, 1990).

B. Institutional Mechanisms and Legal Frameworks

The Vishakha Guidelines (1997) established preventive measures against workplace harassment in India, leading to the PoSH Act (2013), which formalized Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) and local complaint mechanisms (LCCs) (Supreme Court of India, 1997) within all workplaces and organizations. Despite these provisions, empirical studies reveal widespread challenges:

Lack of trained and independent ICC members: The inefficiency or complete absence of Internal Complaints Committee and trained members in most organizations who fail to provide a clear and transparent platform for the victims to address their complaints pose to be one of the greatest hindrances for providing a transparent framework for justice. The presence of administrative members in these committees

most of the times, hinder transparent probe ensuring only the best interest of the organization and excusing the organization from accountability (Mehta, 2021).

Procedural delays and breaches of confidentiality: Most often than not, organizations fail to take timely action or delay the process of investigation while extracting all the information that the victim shares on good faith. Even in institutions where ICCs are operational, procedural inefficiencies and breaches of confidentiality remain rampant. Delayed responses to complaints, protracted inquiries, and insensitive handling of testimony deter complainants from pursuing justice. In some cases, confidential details of a victim's complaint have been leaked within institutional circles, subjecting them to social ostracism and further victimization. Lakshminarayanan and Košir (2024) note that such procedural lapses not only compromise justice but also erode trust in the system, leading to "institutional fatigue" among victims who often withdraw their complaints midway. This failure to maintain confidentiality and procedural fairness contravenes the spirit of the PoSH Act and the Vishakha Guidelines' emphasis on dignity and non-retaliation.

Institutional prioritization of reputation over justice: As Sahu (2024) observes that many Indian academic institutions prioritize their reputation over addressing allegations transparently. Universities often engage in "reputational management" by downplaying or silencing complaints to avoid public scrutiny, accreditation risks, or backlash. This institutional defensiveness perpetuates a culture of impunity, where perpetrators especially senior academicians continue to occupy positions of power. The hierarchical nature of academia aggravates this dynamic, leaving victims vulnerable and isolated.

These shortcomings collectively contribute to the systemic underreporting of sexual harassment cases in Indian academia. The social stigma attached to victims, combined with institutional apathy, sustains unsafe and exclusionary academic environments. Although social movements such as #MeToo India (Gangoli, 2023) have brought unprecedented visibility to the issue and emboldened survivors to speak out, they have not fully dismantled entrenched patriarchal and bureaucratic structures within universities. The gap between legal mandates and institutional will remains a critical challenge for achieving gender justice and safe academic spaces in India.

C. Socio-Cultural and Intersectional Dimensions

Patriarchal norms and gendered expectations in Indian society reinforce academic harassment and silence survivors (Nair, 2018; Chatterjee, 2019). Intersectional factors, including caste, class, religion, and regional background, compound risks for marginalized women (Crenshaw, 1989). Studies reveal that women from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and minority communities face disproportionate harassment and limited access to redressal mechanisms (Bhatnagar & Rajadhyaksha, 2021).

D. Sustainability and Academic Integrity

Sustainability in higher education encompasses not only

financial and environmental aspects but also social equity and inclusivity (Elkington, 1997). Unsafe academic environments drive a “leaky pipeline,” where talented women withdraw from careers, eroding diversity, innovation, and institutional credibility (Bhandari & Lefebvre, 2020). Women’s safety is therefore an essential marker of sustainable academic development aligned with SDG 5 and SDG 16 (United Nations, 2015).

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

A. Gendered Organizational Theory

Acker (1990) conceptualizes organizations as gendered structures where norms, policies, and practices reinforce male dominance. In Indian academia, recruitment, mentorship, evaluation, and promotion processes often reflect such hierarchies, exposing women to harassment and career obstacles.

B. Intersectionality

Crenshaw’s (1989) framework emphasizes that multiple social identities intersect to shape experiences of oppression. Marginalized women in academia face compounded vulnerabilities, highlighting the need for nuanced policies that address more than gender alone.

C. Sustainability Framework

Elkington’s (1997) triple bottom line integrates economic, environmental, and social dimensions. Social sustainability in academia necessitates safe and inclusive spaces; failure to ensure women’s safety undermines institutional resilience and intellectual capital.

D. Methodology

This study adopts a multi-source and qualitative approach through:

- Content analysis of media reports, institutional policies, and legal documents concerning sexual harassment in Indian academia.
- Review of secondary data from NGOs, academic publications, and government reports.
- Case study analysis of notable incidents from IIT Bombay, JNU, University of Hyderabad, and other institutions.
- Analysis guided by theoretical frameworks of gendered organizations, intersectionality, and sustainability.

No primary interviews were conducted due to ethical and logistical constraints, but public survivor narratives were used to contextualize findings.

4. Case Studies in Indian Academia

A. IIT Bombay (2019)

A female student alleged harassment by a senior professor, highlighting initial institutional indifference. Widespread media coverage and public protests prompted the ICC to conduct a formal investigation. The case exposed gaps in

committee independence and procedural transparency (Sequeira, 2019).

Reported Sexual Harassment Cases in Selected Indian HEIs (2019–2023)
(Data from Rajya Sabha answer AU503, Ministry of Education)

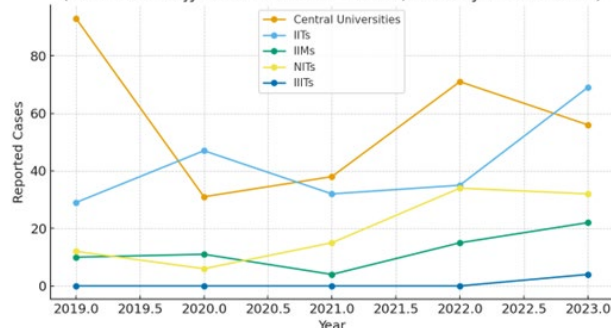


Fig. 1. Reported sexual-harassment cases in selected Indian higher-education institutions (2019–2023).

Data sourced from Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No. 503, Ministry of Education (2024)

B. Jawaharlal Nehru University (2018)

Multiple harassment complaints by female students against senior faculty revealed systemic apathy within the JNU campus. Victims reported they received threats of academic retaliation and social ostracization, reflecting hierarchical power dynamics and institutional prioritization of reputation over justice (Shankar, 2019).

C. University of Hyderabad (2019)

The suicide of a PhD student following alleged harassment garnered Nationwide attention. Investigations revealed administrative failures in handling complaints and providing counselling support, emphasizing the human cost of institutional negligence (Menon, 2019).

D. Indian Institutes of Technology (Multiple Cases, 2020–2022)

Several IIT campuses reported harassment cases leading to public protests and resignations. Investigations revealed recurring issues: ICCs without trained members, procedural delays, and insufficient victim support (Warkad, 2025).

The above case studies are the once that have been reported and recorded. However, there are numerous higher educational organizations especially operating in the private sector where such incidents go without reporting or resolution because of institutional apathy and lack of reporting mechanisms or proper ICCs. Often victims lack awareness on the subject and fall prey to institutional and societal pressure to initiate legal action or more often than not silenced by administration and department seniors. As a result the perpetrators start developing an attitude of nonchalance and become repeat offenders further endangering the right to safety of both female staff and students alike.

5. Findings and Discussion

A. Rising Incidence and Reporting Trends

Data from the National Crime Records Bureau (2022) indicate an upward trend in harassment complaints, possibly

reflecting both increased incidents and growing awareness. Social movements such as #MeToo India have encouraged more survivors to report, but institutional inertia continues to hinder effective redressal.

B. Barriers to Reporting

Victims face multiple obstacles:

- *Fear of retaliation:* Victims fear retaliation from the harasser or the organization resulting in academic or professional setbacks, loss of scholarships, or contract / job termination
- *Institutional silence:* ICCs often lack independence and at times private higher educational organizations lack a proper Internal Complaints Committee. At times the committee might be formed just for namesake and may comprise of people holding administrative positions such as Registrars, Deans etc. within the organization who may prioritize institutional reputation over the safety and dignity of the victim and side with the harasser to protect the reputation of the organization.
- *Victim Silencing:* The organizations who lack proper mechanisms to handle cases of sexual harassment use techniques like victim silencing where the victim is directly or indirectly convinced or threatened not to speak up or take legal measures (Barnes, 2023).
- *Social stigma:* Victims may experience victim-blaming, further harassment and bullying, and exclusion at workplaces and lack of family support who take these incidents as a degradation of reputation (Chatterjee, 2019; Nair, 2018).

Hierarchical structures amplify these challenges, particularly when perpetrators occupy senior positions.

C. Institutional Challenges

Key weaknesses in ICCs include:

- Lack of trained personnel
- Procedural delays and confidentiality breaches
- Inadequate psychological and legal support for survivors (Mehta, 2021; Specs, 2024).

D. Intersectional Vulnerabilities

Women from marginalized groups face compounded risks due to caste, class, and minority status. Cultural taboos, fear of retaliation, and lack of access to legal resources exacerbate these vulnerabilities (Crenshaw, 1989).

E. Implications for Sustainability

Unsafe academic environments contribute to the “leaky pipeline,” diminishing female representation in leadership, research innovation, and decision-making. Conversely, inclusive and safe institutions enhance talent retention, productivity, and global competitiveness. More often than not female administrative members are strategically placed to nullify allegations against the victims (Bhandari & Lefebvre, 2020).

6. Policy Recommendations

To address systemic challenges, the following interventions are proposed:

- 1) *Strengthen ICCs*
 - Ensure independence and trained personnel
 - Include external experts from NGOs or legal fields
 - Maintain confidentiality and provide survivor support
- 2) *Mandatory Gender Sensitization Programs*
 - Regular workshops for students, faculty, and staff
 - Integrate gender equity into curriculum and faculty development
- 3) *Transparent Reporting and Accountability*
 - Publish annual reports on complaints and resolutions
 - Link institutional funding and rankings to PoSH compliance
- 4) *Victim-Centric Support Systems*
 - Counseling, legal aid, safe reporting channels
 - Ensure protection against retaliation
- 5) *Cultural Change Initiatives*
 - Promote gender equality through awareness campaigns
 - Foster mentorship networks for women scholars
- 6) *Integration with SDGs*
 - Align institutional policies with SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, Strong Institutions)
 - Treat women’s safety as a benchmark of academic sustainability and performance evaluation of members of the top management.

7. Limitations

The primary limitation of the study is that it relies heavily on secondary data, including media reports, institutional documents, and published research. No direct interviews with survivors or institutional representatives could be conducted owing to the sensitive nature of the topic of the study, limiting thorough insights into personal experiences and internal processes. However, to mitigate this limitation a thorough review of the available literature on the topic has been conducted that clearly emphasizes the gravity of the situation of rising cases of sexual harassment with Indian Academia and the necessity to enforce stricter laws and sensitize the workforce about the dos and don’ts in an academic space or workplace.

8. Conclusion

Sexual harassment in Indian academia remains a pressing challenge, reflecting entrenched patriarchy, institutional inertia, and cultural stigmatization. While legal frameworks such as the Vishakha Guidelines and PoSH Act provide mechanisms for redressal, implementation gaps and hierarchical power dynamics continue to impede justice. Formulation of policies alone will not suffice until and unless through gender sensitization campaigns are carried out within academic institutions and transparent mechanisms provided to handle such cases.

This study demonstrates that women's safety is not merely a legal obligation but a critical component of institutional sustainability. Unsafe environments lead to talent loss, reduced innovation, and weakened institutional credibility, and decreased participation of women in an active manner, while safe and inclusive environments enhance participation, productivity, and global competitiveness.

Systemic reforms must address legal enforcement, institutional accountability, cultural norms, and survivor-centric support. Aligning higher education institutions with SDGs further underscores that women's safety is an unavoidable marker of sustainable academic growth. Creating equitable and secure academic spaces is essential for India's higher education system to achieve excellence, diversity, and resilience. Woman's safety in a work environment is not simply a benchmark for an efficient organization but also a reflection of true culture of an organization and marker of a civilized society at large.

As rightly stated by education activist and the youngest Nobel laureate, Malala Yousafzai in her speech on youth education at the United Nations,

"We cannot all succeed when half of us are held back." (*UN Speech on Youth Education - July 12, 2013*, 2018)

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