

Research Paper

Victims of Sexual Harassment

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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment continues to be a widespread yet largely unreported form of gender-based violence that poses ongoing threats to the safety, dignity and mental health of women across public, educational and work environments. Although India has introduced significant legal changes, including the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023 and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, the continued prevalence of sexual harassment indicates persistent challenges in prevention, reporting, institutional accountability, and effective reinforcement. This review examines the different aspects of sexual harassment, including gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion, and explores their effects on people's mental, social, and legal well-being. The paper uses the crime data, legal provisions and important court landmark judgments to show how serious the problem is in India. It also looks at both immediate and long-term mental experiences by survivors, such as emotional distress, cognitive difficulties, behavioural changes, problems in relationships, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), social isolation and reduced quality of life. Real examples from different situations, such as public transport, workplace and other institutional settings, are used to show how sexual harassment can look in different contexts and how factors like unequal power, poor management and social attitudes can contribute to ongoing victimization. The review highlights the need for a comprehensive and survivor-focused approach that includes strong legal action, mental health support that takes trauma into account, education on gender issues, making sure that institutions are accountable and raising public awareness.

Keywords: *Sexual harassment, Gender-based violence, Psychological impact, Women's safety, Workplace harassment, Sexual coercion, Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), POSH Act, Trauma*

Sexual harassment is overlooked mainly in India, especially in the era of the MeToo movement, which saw survivors share their testimonies and cause the failure of numerous significant individuals worldwide, in politics, business, the entertainment industry, and beyond. India was no exception to this trend, with women from all walks of

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life revealing their situations with sexual harassment. Sexual harassment (a form of discrimination) is composed of three main kinds of behaviour: (1) Gender harassment (verbal and nonverbal gestures that convey antagonism, objectification, exclusion, or second-class status for members of one gender), (2) unwanted sexual attention (verbal or physical unwelcome sexual attempts, which can include assault), and (3) sexual coercion (when favourable professional or educational treatment is conditioned on sexual activity). Harassing behaviour can be either direct (targeted at a specific person) or indirect (pervasive) (a general level of sexual harassment in an environment). Although India has introduced significant legal changes, including the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023 and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, the continued prevalence of sexual harassment indicates persistent challenges in prevention, reporting, institutional accountability, and effective reinforcement.

This paper examines the forms sexual harassment takes in India, the legal provisions that address it, and the psychological consequences for survivors, drawing on national crime data, statutory law, and case illustrations from public transport, workplace, and institutional settings.

Objectives

To review the conceptual forms of sexual harassment (gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion); to examine the magnitude of the problem in India through NCRB data and the legal provisions under the IPC/BNS; to outline the psychological consequences of sexual harassment for survivors; and to illustrate these patterns through documented case examples.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper adopts a narrative review methodology. It synthesizes secondary data from National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports, statutory provisions under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, and documented case law and case illustrations, rather than primary data collection. As such, the "Participants" and "Psychological Variables" fields of the standard empirical template do not apply.

RESULTS

Legal and Statistical Context

The magnitude of sexual harassment in India represents a significant public safety and gender equity concern, as reflected in national-level crime reporting and institutional data. Reports published by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) consistently highlight that sexual offences against women remain a persistent issue across states, cities, and institutional settings. The data indicate that harassment is not confined to isolated contexts but occurs across public, private, and digital environments, reflecting its widespread and systemic nature within Indian society.

Table 1. Distribution of Crimes Against Women in India (NCRB, 2022)

Crime Category	Number of Cases	% of Total
Cruelty by husband or relatives	140,019	31.4
Kidnapping and abduction of women	85,310	19.2
Assault on women with intent to outrage modesty	83,344	18.7
Rape	31,516	7.1
Insult to the modesty of women	8,972	2.0

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Crime Category	Number of Cases	% of Total
Dowry deaths	6,450	1.4
Abetment of suicide of women	4,963	1.1
Other crimes against women	84,682	19.0
Total	445,256	100.0

Source: National Crime Records Bureau. (2023).

NCRB statistics reveal considerable variation in reported incidents of sexual harassment and related offences across states and cities, with states of higher population density and urbanization tending to report greater numbers, a pattern that may reflect differences in reporting practices and access to legal and institutional support rather than incidence alone. Shelter home data indicate the continued demand for safe accommodation for women facing violence and harassment, underscoring their ongoing vulnerability in domestic, workplace, and public environments. Workplace harassment remains a significant concern despite legal protections under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, with underreporting driven by fear of retaliation, stigma, and power imbalances, and often overlapping with broader patterns of gender-based discrimination. Harassment in public transport is another major area of concern, where overcrowding, lack of surveillance, and limited enforcement contribute to increased vulnerability for women commuters, reinforcing the need for safer transport infrastructure and gender-sensitive policing.

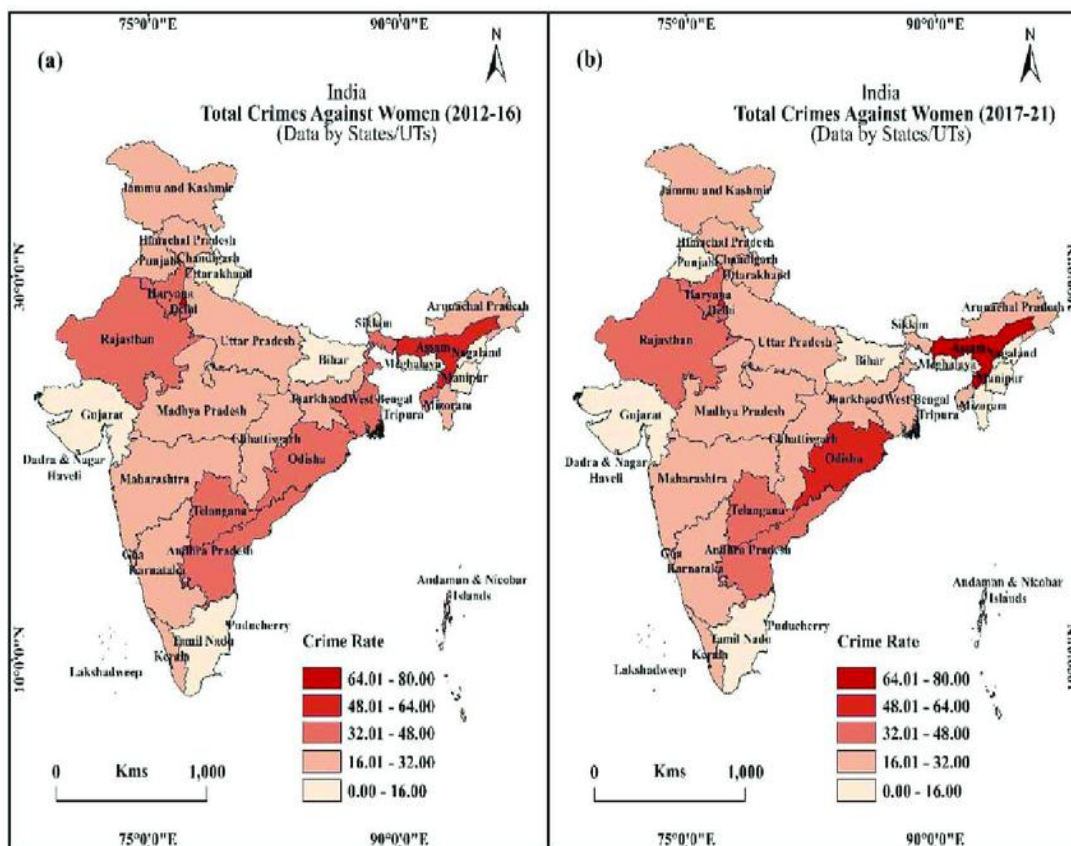


Figure 1. Total crime against women rate state-wise in the years 2012-16 (a) and 2017-21 (b) **Source:** Reproduced from Society Register: Islam, J. A., & Saikia, M. (2025). *Exploring Crime Against Women in India: Socio-economic and Spatial Dimensions*. Society Register, 9(2), 51–72. <https://doi.org/10.14746/sr.2025.9.2.03>

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The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, penalises perpetrators of sexual harassment under the following sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, BNS (2023):

Table 2. Statutory Provisions Against Sexual Harassment (IPC/BNS)

IPC Section	BNS Section	Offence	Punishment
294	296	Obscene acts or songs in public places	Imprisonment up to 3 months, fine, or both
354	74	Assault or criminal force to outrage a woman's modesty	Imprisonment 1–5 years, plus fine
354A	75	Sexual harassment (unwelcome physical contact/overtures, demand for sexual favours, showing pornography, sexually provocative remarks)	Imprisonment up to 3 years, fine, or both
354B	76	Assault or criminal force to disrobe a woman	Imprisonment 3–7 years, plus fine
354C	77	Voyeurism	1–3 years (first conviction); 3–7 years (repeat), plus fine
354D	78	Stalking	Up to 3 years (first offence); up to 5 years (repeat), plus fine
509	79	Word, gesture, or act intended to insult a woman's modesty	Imprisonment up to 3 years, fine, or both

Source: Indian Penal Code, 1860; Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013; Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023.

Forms of Sexual Harassment

Gender Harassment

Gender harassment is the most prevalent form of sexual harassment, involving behaviours that convey the message that women are not welcome or do not deserve respect. Where gender harassment is present, women are more likely to also experience unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion, as these forms of misconduct rarely occur in isolation from one another. This category spans derogatory remarks about women, which normalize disrespect and stereotyping and reduce women to narrowly defined roles; eve-teasing in public and semi-public spaces, including comments, gestures, staring, and physical intimidation, which restricts women's mobility and sense of safety; sexually coloured comments, jokes, or innuendo that objectify and demean; humiliating jokes, taunts, whistling, and staring that assert dominance and reinforce gender hierarchies; and the broader treatment of women as sexual objects in public spaces through behaviours, comments, or glances that reduce them to their physical appearance. Across these forms, gender harassment normalizes the objectification and control of women's bodies, places the burden of avoidance on victims rather than accountability on perpetrators, and sustains unequal power relations that impede gender equity.

Unwanted Sexual Attention

Unwanted sexual attention refers to unsolicited behaviours that target individuals based on their gender or sexuality, including inappropriate comments, gestures, touching, or persistent advances, and is known to create hostile environments that negatively affect victims' psychological well-being, performance, and social participation (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007). In the Indian context, societal norms and power imbalances often normalize these behaviours and make reporting difficult (Srinivasan & John, 2012). This category includes unwanted touching, ranging from minor to intrusive non-consensual physical contact intended to intimidate or assert power; unsolicited or coercive requests for a lift/ride from strangers, which contribute to vulnerability and restricted mobility (Farrington & Painter, 2004; Koskela, 1997; Bedi, 2014); staring and leering, a form of nonverbal harassment that communicates objectification without direct contact (Johnson et al., 2018); intrusive physical proximity in public transport, where crowding is exploited for deliberate touching or lingering contact (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2020); and pursuing despite refusal, involving persistent contact after clear rejection that can escalate into stalking or coercive conduct. Across these forms, the consequences extend beyond immediate discomfort to long-term emotional distress, hyper-vigilance, decreased self-efficacy, and withdrawal from public, social, or professional engagement, underscoring the need for both policy interventions and cultural shifts.

Sexual Coercion

Sexual coercion refers to the use of pressure, manipulation, or threats to obtain sexual activity without freely given consent, operating through psychological means such as guilt, intimidation, or persistent persuasion rather than overt force. It undermines individual autonomy and consent, and its subtle nature often makes it difficult to recognize and report. This category includes demanding sexual favours in exchange for benefits or to avoid negative consequences (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Johnson et al., 2018); threats or pressure, whether implicit or explicit, that compromise an individual's ability to give free and informed consent (Basile, 2002; Koss & Oros, 1982); the use of authority or power imbalance, where individuals in positions of influence exploit hierarchical relationships to discourage refusal or reporting (Johnson et al., 2018; Fitzgerald et al., 1997); quid-pro-quo behaviour, which conditions employment, academic, or other benefits on accepting unwelcome sexual advances (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Johnson et al., 2018); and forcing compliance through fear or dependency, which exploits emotional, financial, or professional reliance to override resistance (Basile, 2002; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Victims of sexual coercion commonly experience anxiety, depression, diminished self-esteem, and feelings of helplessness, making affirmative consent and effective prevention strategies essential.

Direct vs Indirect Sexual Harassment

Direct and indirect sexual harassment represent two distinct but overlapping forms of unwanted sexual attention. Direct harassment involves explicit actions such as verbal propositions or physical advances, while indirect harassment includes subtler, often pervasive behaviours that are equally harmful over time (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Johnson et al., 2018). This includes the distinction between physical acts and verbal/gestural acts, spanning unwanted touching to suggestive comments and nonverbal cues; online harassment through messages, emails, and persistent digital monitoring or stalking, which creates a sense of constant surveillance (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007; Karami et al., 2021); rumour spreading of a sexualized nature, which damages reputation and social standing even without direct confrontation; obscene songs or sexually suggestive comments in public spaces, including catcalling and explicit remarks, which are often culturally normalized

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despite their harm (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2020); voyeurism, involving observing or recording individuals without consent for sexual gratification (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007); and cyber monitoring, the non-consensual tracking of an individual's online activity to exert control or maintain unwanted contact (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007; Karami et al., 2021). Whether direct or indirect, both forms negatively affect psychological well-being and participation in professional and social life.

Sexual harassment also includes behaviours intended to intimidate, humiliate or violate a woman's dignity, such as: asking any female stranger if she needs a drive/lift; touching any woman from a passing vehicle or in any public transport; looking for females on the street to harass; pursuing, following or stalking any woman, whether physically or through other means; and spreading rumors, false statements, or derogatory comments about any woman that harm her reputation and dignity.

Psychological Impact

There are many other common reactions to sexual assault. Not all survivors of sexual abuse are the same, nor will any act of sexual violence impact two persons in the same manner. There is no incorrect or right way to feel or behave. Many diverse emotions, behaviours, and bodily responses come and vanish as the body and mind digest the destruction caused by sexual abuse. Understanding survivor responses enables advocates and clinicians to better contextualize trauma and facilitate recovery.

Emotional Reactions

Survivors commonly experience a range of emotional reactions, including shame, in which they may feel "dirty," "tainted," or somehow responsible despite responsibility lying entirely with the perpetrator; guilt, involving self-blame even when no actual fault exists, such as questioning whether they "resisted enough"; fear, a persistent stress response marked by ongoing anxiety, hypervigilance, and avoidance behaviours even in safe environments; anger, directed toward the perpetrator, failing systems, or oneself, which can also serve as a protective emotion that helps survivors reclaim agency; and depression, manifesting as persistent sadness, loss of interest, emotional numbness, fatigue, and changes in sleep and appetite. These emotional responses are not signs of weakness but reflect the mind's response to traumatic violation, and early recognition and supportive intervention are essential for recovery.

Cognitive Reactions

Cognitive reactions reflect how sexual abuse affects a survivor's thinking patterns, memory processing, and interpretation of events, functioning as the mind's attempt to cope with overwhelming trauma. These include denial, the refusal or inability to accept the reality or severity of the abuse as a protective defense mechanism; minimisation, downplaying the significance of the abuse by comparing it to "worse" experiences; amnesia, partial or complete difficulty recalling aspects of the event due to dissociation; intrusive thoughts, unwanted and distressing memories or images that repeatedly enter consciousness; and nightmares, distressing dreams related to the trauma that disrupt sleep and contribute to chronic fatigue. While these responses can delay help-seeking and emotional processing when prolonged, they represent common protective mechanisms rather than intentional avoidance.

Behavioural & Interpersonal Effects

Sexual abuse also produces behavioural and interpersonal changes as survivors adapt to violated safety, autonomy, and trust. These include boundary issues, difficulty establishing, maintaining, or recognizing personal limits in relationships; trust issues, difficulty trusting others even in safe or supportive environments, leading to emotional guardedness; isolation, withdrawal from social interactions and support systems due to shame or fear of judgment, which can increase vulnerability to depression; avoidance, deliberately steering clear of people, places, or situations that trigger memories of the abuse; and aggression or withdrawal, where survivors may exhibit either increased irritability or emotional numbing depending on individual coping styles. These are adaptive coping mechanisms that, while sometimes protective in the short term, can interfere with daily functioning and recovery over time.

Somatic & Physiological Effects

Trauma is also experienced through the body, involving disruptions in physical sensation, biological regulation, and health-related functioning. These effects include dissociation, a disconnection between thoughts, emotions, sensations, or identity that can leave survivors feeling detached from reality; anesthesia (emotional numbing or physical blunting), a reduced ability to feel physical or emotional responses; eating disorders, including restrictive eating or bingeing as a coping response to regain a sense of control over the body; anxiety, marked by persistent worry, hypervigilance, and physical tension linked to heightened stress-response activation; and psychosomatic complaints, physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach pain, or fatigue that arise from unresolved emotional distress. Addressing both the emotional and physical dimensions of these responses is essential for holistic recovery.

Long-Term Psychological Consequences

Sexual abuse can also result in long-term clinical mental health conditions that significantly affect emotional stability, behaviour, and overall functioning, varying in severity depending on individual resilience, support systems, and access to intervention. These include PTSD, characterized by intrusive memories, avoidance, hyperarousal, and negative changes in mood and cognition that can persist long after the traumatic event; substance abuse, developing as a coping mechanism to numb emotional pain or intrusive memories, often reflecting attempts at self-medication; self-harm, deliberate acts of injury without suicidal intent used as a maladaptive coping strategy for overwhelming emotional pain; and suicidal ideation, thoughts or considerations of ending one's life closely associated with severe depression, PTSD, and hopelessness, requiring immediate support and crisis intervention.

Case Illustrations

A 19-year-old college student was harassed with inappropriate comments and an attempted unwanted physical contact by a male passenger in a packed Kolkata Metro compartment; no other passenger intervened. She reported the incident to the Railway Protection Force, and the accused was arrested and booked under Section 354A IPC (Section 75 BNS). The case illustrates the fear, anxiety, and powerlessness survivors associate with public transport harassment (Ghosh, 2014).

Mary, an employee at a private company, was assigned night shifts despite raising safety concerns, which HR did not address. Her senior manager assigned her tasks that created opportunities for private interaction and later made unwelcome advances while driving her home from a company event. Though she resisted and he apologized, she did not report the

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incident immediately for fear of mockery or professional repercussions, illustrating the organizational and psychological barriers that deter workplace reporting.

In the landmark 1997 case, Bhanwari Devi, a social worker with the Rajasthan Government's Women Development Programme, was gang-raped after attempting to prevent a child marriage. Prosecuted at the time under IPC Sections 354, 376, and 509 (now BNS Sections 74, 63, and 79), the case led to the Supreme Court's Vishaka Guidelines, the basis of the POSH Act, 2013. Bhanwari Devi experienced severe psychological trauma, fear, humiliation, and loss of dignity, yet pursued a prolonged legal battle that established mandatory workplace protections nationally.

In *Apparel Export Promotion Council v. A.K. Chopra* (1999), a female AEPC employee faced unwelcome sexual advances from a senior colleague; though there was no physical contact, an internal investigation led to his dismissal. The Supreme Court upheld the dismissal, ruling that physical contact is not necessary to establish sexual harassment (then IPC 354A, now BNS Section 75). The victim experienced fear, embarrassment, and loss of self-confidence; the ruling expanded the legal understanding of workplace harassment.

DISCUSSION

The combined statistical and legal evidence suggests that sexual harassment in India is not limited to isolated situations but remains a widespread problem across public, private, and digital settings. At the same time, differences in reported cases among states and cities may reflect variations in reporting practices, awareness, and access to institutional resources, rather than differences in actual incidence alone. This distinction is important when interpreting the statistics presented in Table 1. A state or city with a higher recorded number of cases is not necessarily a more dangerous place for women. Higher figures may also indicate greater awareness of rights, more accessible complaint mechanisms, or more functional police and judicial systems that allow experiences of harassment to become officially recorded. In contrast, lower reporting numbers in some regions may conceal, rather than demonstrate, lower actual incidence. This possibility is consistent with the broader observation that shelter-home data and workplace complaint statistics are likely to capture only a portion of the harassment women actually experience. The continued underreporting of harassment in workplaces and public transport, despite the legal safeguards introduced through the POSH Act, 2013, and the IPC/BNS provisions outlined in Table 2, suggests that fear of retaliation, social stigma, and unequal power relationships may remain greater barriers to seeking justice than the absence of legal provisions themselves. In other words, the law on paper appears considerably stronger than the law in practice. The range of statutory provisions summarized in Table 2, from Section 296 of the BNS concerning obscene acts in public to Section 78 concerning stalking, demonstrates that Indian criminal law recognizes and criminalizes many of the forms of harassment discussed in this paper. However, the continued persistence of sexual harassment indicates that legal recognition alone has not ensured consistent enforcement, institutional responsiveness, or accessible redress for survivors.

The classification of gender harassment, unsolicited sexual attention, and sexual coercion also shows that these behaviours rarely occur completely independently of one another. When gender-based harassment becomes normalized, unwanted attention and coercive behaviour may become easier to introduce and accept, further strengthening unequal power dynamics. In such situations, the responsibility for avoiding harassment can gradually shift onto victims rather than remaining with those responsible for the behaviour. This layered

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nature of harassment has important implications for prevention. Interventions that focus only on the most visible or severe forms, such as physical assault or explicit quid-pro-quo coercion, may fail to address the everyday climate of gender harassment that allows such behaviour to develop. If that underlying environment remains unchanged, new instances of unwanted attention and coercion can continue to emerge from the same normalized attitudes. The distinction between direct and indirect harassment reinforces this concern. Indirect forms, including rumour-spreading, cyber monitoring, and hostile environments created through jokes, comments, or repeated remarks, can be particularly difficult to address through specific statutory provisions. Nevertheless, their psychological and social effects may be substantial, affecting a woman's sense of safety, dignity, and belonging in workplaces, educational institutions, and public spaces. The psychological outcomes identified in this review further demonstrate the complexity of these experiences. Emotional, cognitive, behavioural, somatic, and long-term effects, including PTSD, self-harm, and suicidal ideation, should not be viewed as completely separate reactions but as points along a broader spectrum of trauma responses. These responses can vary according to the intensity, duration, frequency, and context of the harassment. The presence of both immediate reactions, such as shame, fear, and denial, and longer-term clinical outcomes, such as PTSD and substance abuse, within the experiences of survivors suggests that psychological harm should not be understood simply as a reaction to a single event. Instead, it can develop as a continuing trajectory, particularly when survivors do not receive timely support, institutional acknowledgment, or meaningful legal recourse.

Overall, the findings indicate that strengthening enforcement, improving institutional accountability, and expanding survivor support may be more effective in reducing the prevalence and impact of sexual harassment in India than relying primarily on further legal reform. The existing statutory framework already addresses many of the forms of conduct examined in this review. The greater challenge appears to lie in ensuring that these protections function consistently in everyday settings. Effective prevention therefore requires more than the existence of laws: it requires institutions that respond promptly, complaint mechanisms that survivors can trust, trained personnel who understand the psychological and legal dimensions of harassment, and social environments in which bystanders and authorities do not treat such behaviour as normal or unavoidable. Ultimately, the gap between legal protection and lived experience must be addressed if the formal recognition of sexual harassment is to translate into genuine safety, dignity, and justice for survivors.

CONCLUSIONS

Sexual harassment is a systemic problem that remains widely underreported, with women facing various social, institutional, and psychological barriers to coming forward. The legal framework, including the recent reforms under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) 2023, provides a comprehensive set of provisions to address different forms of sexual harassment; however, effective implementation and enforcement remain crucial challenges. The psychological impact of sexual harassment is deep and long-lasting, affecting victims' mental health, interpersonal relationships, and overall well-being, with responses ranging from shame, guilt, and fear to depression, PTSD, and self-harm. Addressing sexual harassment requires a multi-pronged approach focused on victim-centric reporting mechanisms, comprehensive sensitization programs for key stakeholders, and sustained efforts to transform the societal attitudes and power dynamics that enable such behaviours. Taken together, the statistical, legal, and case-based evidence reviewed here indicates that sexual harassment in India persists less from a gap in law than from gaps in enforcement,

institutional accountability, and survivor support, the areas where intervention is most urgently needed.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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