

# Sexual Harassment

SAY NO !

## 6.1 SEXUAL HARASSMENT, NOT EVE-TEASING

"Vagala ranivi neeve sogasu  
kaadanu nene ..."

"Chupulatho gucchi gucchi  
champake nannu hai ..."

"I love you ante  
kotti potaav pillaa  
chaavu chaavu ..."

Generations of such film songs have eulogized men chasing reluctant women as a legitimate form of courtship. Reluctant heroines agree to the hero's love after he sings. In some films, the hero enters the heroine's classroom, follows her to her home, makes his friends speak to her and, in some cases, threatens suicide too.

But is such behavior actually romantic? Be assured: in real life women do not think so! They do not like being followed to the bus-stop. They do not want to hear comments about their dress or hair. They are irritated by cat-calls and whistling. They hate being touched or groped. Today, we hear or read about girls being pursued on Facebook and receiving phone calls, messages, or obscene pictures.

It must be clear by now that we are not discussing the usual joking and bantering between groups of young women and men in colleges. Or even friendly comments, warnings or declarations of interest in one another. Sometimes things work out and sometimes not. Most men and women understand what is involved and there is no pain or humiliation. Rejections of love are also pretty common in college

settings. Such rejected lovers—women and men—go on to find other, maybe better, partners and lead regular lives.

### It Is Not "Eve-teasing"

"Eve-teasing" is the term commonly used to describe such behavior. The term implies that it is merely light-hearted fun resorted to by boys. But this term misrepresents the experience of women. As Jayaprabha's poem (see, "Further Reading" at the end of this Unit) powerfully portrays, it is not "fun" for women. The women's movement has argued that a more apt description is "sexual harassment." And this is the term used in law as well.

It is not just young men who harass women; many older men are also guilty of this. Unfortunately, harassment also occurs in relationships of authority such as teacher and student, doctor and nurse or patient, between employees, and so on. The offending man can be a stranger on the bus, a neighbour, a relative, auto or taxi driver, hostel warden or a senior person in an organization. The list of possible harassers is a long one.

Another form of harassment is **stalking**. This involves men following and pursuing women despite their clear disinterest and distress. Some men think that if they find someone attractive, they should go on pursuing her even if she clearly is not interested and finds them a nuisance. Maybe like some king in olden times, they feel that whatever they want must be theirs.

At the heart of this problem is the idea that men have authority over women. When this happens, the woman as a



person disappears in their minds. She is simply a thing—an object that the man desires. It is this authority that that men exercise when they touch, grab, poke a woman (a woman who they may know or may not know) on the bus, train and street, at functions and offices. **Legally speaking, this is known as "sexual harassment."**

Women's experiences have shown that all this is not as harmless as it is usually described. In order to avoid such men, women are forced to change their everyday life. They take a different route to the bus-stop, make sure that a father or brother comes with them, avoid travel during night time, sometimes even leave a job. Such "adjustments" often compromise their opportunities for education or employment and women are forced to settle for less.

Often, women are anxious that if they talk about these incidents they would be blamed for it—"You must have encouraged it." They fear that a complaint to the parents may stop their education or result in an early marriage or being put under extreme surveillance. Severely distressed, and unable to cope with such behavior, some women have taken their own lives.

It is in the last two decades that the emotional, psychological and physical costs of such male behavior have been recognized as harassment and violence. **Women are increasingly being told to not feel ashamed to talk about this harassment and are being advised to share it with friends, relatives or in extreme cases in the police stations too. Men rather than women are being told to be ashamed of their conduct and change their behaviour.**

In this context, it is appalling to note that many Telugu films continue to perpetuate myths and untruths that patriarchal society produces about women, their desires and dislikes.

### Points to discuss:

1. Can you think of any incident, which happened to you or someone you know which involved anonymous phone calls or being followed, which disturbed you? How did the people around the harasser and the harassee—the man and the woman—behave? Talk about it with the person sitting next to you, or to the class.

2. Do you think it is necessary to educate boys about what is acceptable, or not acceptable, behaviour? Do you think we need to educate boys, or men, about more appropriate ways of social interaction? Why? Talk about this in class.

In the following section, let us examine how some recent films deal with the questions of harassment and consent.

### Harassment and Films

According to most Telugu films, Singaraju Ramadevi points out:

- When women say "no" they mean "yes" This line made famous by the song from the 1950s film, *Missamma*, was the title of a recent super hit film.

The Telugu film hero takes this very literally. Even when the woman says no loud and clear, he keeps pursuing her and harassing her in the name of love; he interprets her rejection and protest as coyness and often goes on to make authoritative statements about women's psychology. So, for example in the film, *Gabbar Singh*, the protagonist declares—"Listen man! One girl might fall for you in a week's time, another might take a month and some girls might even need a year . . . . But the fact is finally every girl will fall in love. That's natural law!" The hero of another film, *Loukyam* states—"Every girl is waiting to fall in love, they are



just waiting for the right man!" And he has no doubt that he is the right man. The above dialogues tell us that the hero does not want the woman's love as much as he wants to control and possess her. The number of sexual assaults and acid attacks in recent times attest to the fact that the woman's desire and her consent are given very little importance, both in film narratives and in real life.

- *Women actually enjoy obscene/sexually coloured comments*

In a so-called "decent family film" like *Seetamma Vakitlo Sirimalle Chettu*, one of the male leads says to a young woman—"Just think, when you turn sixty and look back on your life, don't you want some sweet memories of the comments made by fellows on the street. So, you should actually encourage men who pass comments about your appearance." This dialogue does two things—one, it equates the genuine appreciation that women may desire from people close to them with the unwanted heckling and obscene remarks that women are subjected to by strange men in public places. And second, it assumes that women actually welcome and enjoy such comments. It is time we give it its proper name: "harassment."

- *Women are just pretty dolls*

Most heroines in hero-centred films are just glamour dolls with no character, intelligence or individuality. As the heroine in *Seetamma Vakitlo Sirimalle Chettu* says, "All I want is sound sleep and a good husband!" In the same film, the hero upbraids a short-haired girl who expresses her liking for him, "It's a shame Indian women have stopped plaiting their hair. If I give you a flower, how will you wear it?" So, short haired women are not true Indian women and therefore do not deserve the hero's love! In *Loukyam*, the hero slaps the heroine

who is protesting angrily against something, and says—"Flowers, glass dolls and girls, they all look cute when they are fragile and sensitive!"

With very few exceptions, most films in the last decade have portrayed heroines as pretty and glamorous women with very little intelligence and with no other goal or aim in life but to win the attention of the hero. Most films don't seem to think that women do have individual goals and desires and that they are real persons with different tastes and aptitudes. There are scores of examples of songs, scenes and dialogues that can be provided to demonstrate this. In the next section, we discuss what we mean by the word, "consent."

The word "consent," that is a woman's (or a man's too) willingness to engage in a physical and/or emotional relationship with another person, is seldom discussed in accounts of romance or harassment. This is a very important idea that is built on the recognition that both adult women and men have the right to engage in a relationship if they so desire and also equally important is their right to reject a proposal for a romantic or sexual relationship. They have the right to say "No!"

### **Chai pe ek aur charcha**

The animated film, "Chai pe ek aur charcha" discusses this important issue through a possible scenario of invitation to tea that can happen in a college canteen, a work place or a place of leisure like a cinema hall, a public park or shopping mall. It stresses the fact that consent, unconditional willingness, is a key factor for not only drinking tea but also romance and sexual relationships. Watch the film in class and discuss it.



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

This special law is enacted to address the sexual harassment that women face in their workplaces. Working women have often faced stressful situations where the terms of their employment are determined by these factors. Several women have been forced to leave their jobs or seek transfers in order to escape from harassment by their employer or co-employees.

Some of the salient provisions of the law are listed below:

1. Sexual harassment includes any one or more of the following acts either by the employer or by the co-employees of the woman.  
Physical contact and advances; or  
A demand or request for sexual favours; or  
Making sexually coloured remarks; or  
Showing pornography; or  
Any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of sexual nature.
2. The woman employee who complains of sexual harassment need not be a permanent employee. She can be temporary, daily wage, ad-hoc, trainee, apprentice, contract worker, probationer and even a worker working on a voluntary basis. Domestic workers also came to be recognised as employees who can complain about sexual harassment.
3. Similarly the workplace is not limited to government offices and departments. It includes private sector organizations, establishments, ventures, societies, trusts and NGOs, hospitals and nursing homes.
4. Every employer now has the responsibility to constitute an Internal Complaints Committee. The Presiding Officer of this Committee will be a senior woman employee and will be assisted by two members drawn from amongst the employees and one member from an organization committed to the cause of women. Your college is legally required to have a committee of this kind to receive complaints and act on them. If this has not already been set up, you can ask for it to be set up.
5. An aggrieved woman can submit a written complaint of sexual harassment to the Internal Complaints Committee within a period of three months from the date of incident.  
Upon the report submitted by the Internal Committee, the employer should take action against the erring man as per the service rules applicable to the workplace. This can also include payment of compensation to the aggrieved woman.



## 6.2 COPING WITH EVERYDAY HARASSMENT

In situations of college or street harassment there are certain common sense suggestions that women receive. They are mostly about how to conduct themselves. For instance, people say, "Women should dress respectably. If they do so, nobody will comment or pass remarks." The advice assumes that women's dress is responsible for the harassment. Here are the results of an interesting survey conducted by a group called Blank Noise.

### **Clothes in which women were harassed:**

School uniform, capris, chudidhar/salwar-kurta, trousers, shorts, jeans, burqa, dupatta, saree, long sleeves, short sleeves, sleeveless tee-shirt, cute top, jacket, blazer, ghaghra, long skirt, short skirt, red lipstick, no lipstick, open hair, oiled hair, school socks, stockings, bare feet, kaftan, work uniform .

...

They asked women to respond to the question: "What were you wearing when you were sexually harassed?" Obviously, there was no connection between the dress worn by a woman and the fact of harassment. As a matter of fact, it turns out that contrary to what people generally think, it is not just stylishly dressed women who are harassed. You can read more about the survey at <http://blog.blanknoise.org/>.

Don't you think that girls should have the freedom to wear the clothes they are most comfortable in?

The second kind of simplistic advice women receive is about safety.

People say:

- Avoid going out alone.
- Reach home before it gets dark.
- Avoid late night work or outings with friends.

Some families and many institutions such as hostels apply a night curfew for women. Therefore very few women are visible after nightfall on the streets. But women need to work late, they have to shop in the evening, or they may need to meet someone.

*The following is an account by an 18-year-old girl studying in a college in New Delhi.*

In the name of safety, women students in our University are controlled to a terrifying extent. We have no flexibility of movement. We are treated like children and our views are not respected or considered.

The girls' hostel is like a zenana. A brick screen shuts us off from all sides—hiding our verandas and open spaces from public view. We have two entrances, both guarded all day.

We have a warden to whom we have to apply for prior permission to stay out at night or for leave. This requires endless letters of permission from our parents and/or our local guardian. Male students do not require such permission.

We protested these rules and asked for an "open campus": that when we ask for permission, we should not be interrogated even



after we have a permission letter from parents; that we should not be locked into our Blocks after 10, that women students deserve certain autonomy and certain freedoms.

I accept that there are rules and that we need to follow while living in a hostel . . . . But what I am angry about is that male students face NONE of these rules!

I am told that this is for my good. I am not sure. On the contrary, I wonder if this is another way of controlling me . . . .

The student's account in the box raises an interesting question: should we focus on controlling the lives of women, in the name of safety? Or, is it that like everyone else women also need to be alert about their safety? Women, and men, need to judge situations and, sometimes, take calculated risks.

Is it not better to make all public spaces more accessible and safe for women (as well as men)?

The third kind of advice given to women is **to keep silent** about being harassed. They are told not to speak about it at all, not even to their close friends. Till recently, it was not possible for this issue to be raised or discussed in public forums, including classrooms.

However, across generations women have devised varied methods to deal with harassment on the street, colleges and work places. As we have stated earlier, not all women report to the police. Some deal with it personally and some collectively. Some women write about it. Read an imaginary letter written by a student to her male teacher in the following box.

Sir,

You groped at my breasts when I was 12 years old.

I wish I had you thrown out of the house then and there. I will teach my sons and daughters to NOT keep quiet when men like you touch them, ever.

I am not ashamed. I refuse to share your shame and make it mine. You might think you are powerful but you are weak and a coward.

You were a teacher and a mentor, I looked up to you. I trusted you. But guess what? You just ruined everything. I can no longer trust anyone. I feel like every person out there is somehow trying to use me. And I constantly blame myself for what happened.

But . . . sir, wait a minute. I have thought about this again and again. I don't want to hate you, or pepper-spray you, or learn to defend myself with martial arts, I don't want to hang you or jail you. I refuse to harbour negative feelings.

I want to trust my teachers.

### Complaints Committee

It is now mandatory to set up a Complaints Committee in every college and university, and also in all work places. Students and women teachers facing harassment can report it to such a Committee. Many educational institutions have set up such committees. **Does your college have a Complaints Committee against sexual harassment?**



**Points to discuss:**

1. Girls: Share with your close friend or your sister about how you coped with an incident of harassment that you faced. Maybe you can even share it in your class.
2. Boys: Have you ever been harassed yourselves?

**Take Back the Night campaigns**

Women have challenged the night curfew and restrictions on their mobility in many countries by marching in the night. They pointed out that they have a right to be out on the road. Further, it should be safe for them to do so. These campaigns have been called "Take back the night." Such collective action has been quite empowering for women. After the December 2012 gang rape incident in Delhi, nearly 4000 people—men, women and transgender—marched on Tank Bund in Hyderabad with the slogan "Free the night: It belongs to both men and women." It was a truly spectacular and inspiring event.

**Extract from Midnight March Pamphlet, Hyderabad**

- Why is it dangerous for women to walk at night?
- Why does a woman need to be protected by a man?
- Why can't men and women co-exist in the night streets as well?
- Why can't men be trusted to not abuse women?
- Why can't we make all spaces safe instead of keeping women indoors?

The demands made by the people who were in the march included: cheap and accessible public transport and street lighting that reduce the possibility of harassment and violence against women, as well as functioning emergency helplines which would be of great help.

**Points to discuss:**

1. Think of any incident where, in a film or with someone around you, a woman is harassed. Recall the clothes she was wearing. Do you think that her appearance had any relevance to the annoyance she was facing? How? Would it have been any different if she had been wearing something similar to what women around you, for instance those in your family, wear?
2. You, or someone close to you, may have had to go out late in the evening—for a film, or even a visit to a doctor. Describe the experience of that trip (whether you were alone, with family members or friends, etc.). Do you think it would be different if (a) it was a young boy alone (b) it was a young girl alone. How? Why?



## UNIT 6

### Nirbhaya Laws 2013 Everyday Sexual Harassment

*frequent interaction*  
A new set of laws termed the Nirbhaya laws deal with those who are following women around, pestering them, peeping, touching and so on. New offences such as forced disrobing, stalking, voyeurism and acid attacks have been introduced in the Indian Penal Code recently. Public stripping and parading of women being a common way of "punishing" transgressions by women, especially in rural areas, is now a separate offence. Likewise are acid attacks, a distinct kind of violence, in which acid is used to take revenge against women who have rejected offers of love or marriage.

*approach stealthily*  
1. Stalking: Any man who

- i) Follows a woman and contacts, or attempts to contact, her for a personal interaction repeatedly despite a clear indication of disinterest by the woman;
- ii) Monitors the internet, email and other communication of the woman
- iii) Watches or spies on a woman in any manner, that results in a fear of violence or serious alarm, distress in the mind of such woman, or interferes with the mental peace of the woman, commits the offence of stalking.

2. If a man makes sexually coloured remarks, he can be punished with up to a year's imprisonment.

3. Voyeurism makes punishable watching, photographing or disseminating images of women in undress or when engaging in private acts.

4. If a man tries to make physical contact involving unwelcome and explicit sexual overtures or *start & begging*

b) demands or even requests for sexual favours or, c) shows pornography against the will of a woman. Such behavior can be punished with an imprisonment upto three years or with fine or with both.

*take g one's clothes*  
It is a crime if a man tries to disrobe or compels a woman to be naked in any public space. Such an act can be punished with a minimum imprisonment of three years and a maximum of seven years.



### 6.3 FURTHER READING: "CHUPULU"

There is a clear line demarcating the kinds of behaviors that are acceptable and those that are not. Take, for instance, staring at women and girls, that may be seen as harmless and innocuous. But is it really so? In the following poem, well-known Telugu poet Jayaprabha talks about staring. The poem gives us a clear sense of the anger a woman feels at these unwelcome looks.

#### Chupulu (Stares)

Needle sharp stares  
from two eyes  
land on these lumps of flesh  
and roam freely about.

Liar stares  
that do not dare  
look into my eyes, but  
crawl  
like larvae on my body.

Eyes rich and poor,  
young and old  
stare  
at women  
alike.

Signaling  
the hunger of a drooling dog,  
the ugly grab of a wolf.  
They haunt my dreams.

In the dense jungle  
I cannot tell  
light from darkness.  
There is no escape  
from these stares

On the road,  
in the bus, in the classroom,  
they chase my step  
snapping at me, here and there.  
These poison fangs  
knife me.

I feel scared.  
I wish I could fly  
or vanish into the void.

But the earth is mine too.  
I've taught my eyes  
To stare back,  
equally sharp.  
Stares for stares.

That is how I wage my war now.

These cowardly stares  
that cannot look me in the eye  
flee to the underworld.

How I long for the day when  
not only eyes, but  
the whole body  
of a woman  
bristles.

Translated by BVL Narayana Row