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Workplace Harassment among Employees: An Explorative Study

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Abstract

Introduction: Workplace harassment is the belittling or threatening behavior directed at an individual worker or a group of workers. Matters of workplace harassment recently gained interest among practitioners and researchers as it is becoming one of the most sensitive areas of effective workplace management. **Materials and Methods:** Nonexperimental cross-sectional exploratory survey approach with quantitative design was adopted. Samples constituted both male and female employees 20–60 years working for minimum 6 h in an institution selected by random sampling technique. Data were collected using demographic tool and workplace harassment experience tool developed by the investigator. The Institutional Ethics Committee approval and the individual subject consent were also obtained. **Results:** Data obtained from 210 employees indicated that majority (20%) were between the age group of 30–35 years. Majority, 63.3%, of the employees had occasional harassment, 8.1% had mild harassment, 0.5% had severe harassment, and 28.1% reported no harassment at the workplace. Area-wise analysis indicated that highest possible area among participants was psychological (15.5 ± 7.26) and the lowest harassment was in the area of physical harassment (3.74 ± 1.75). **Conclusion:** Workplace harassment is a serious concern which requires immediate attention for better outcome. Although majority of the participants experience at least some form of harassment, they hesitate to objectively indicate the same due to fear of consequences of losing the job and facing further ramifications. The issue requires to be addressed with appropriate policies at the workplace. The study will help to plan the strategies to be implemented for building a healthy workplace environment.

Keywords: Employees, harassment, workplace

INTRODUCTION

Harassment is a form of employment discrimination that violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Harassment is an unwelcome conduct that is based on race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy), national origin, age (40 or older), disability, or genetic information.^[1] Harassment is a costly proposition for employers. It can result in low morale, absenteeism, reduced productivity, employee turnover, and damages and litigation costs.^[2] The 2014 Workplace Bullying Institute, Zogby national survey, shows that 27% have experienced workplace bullying in the past, and 7% of employees currently suffer workplace bullying.^[3]

A study conducted in Bangladesh on workplace harassment is becoming the most panic issue in the workplace, and human resource management revealed that among the participants,

52.11% experienced of harassment every month. Nearly 48.12% were harassed by the co-workers. The participants also reported that the workers have defective ethics and the management in Bangladesh practices traditional type response about the issue of panic.^[4]

The Society for Human Resource Management study that interviewed 1016 human resource professionals, 22% reported incidents of pushing or shoving, 13% reported fist fights, and 1% reported rape or sexual assault. Much of the physical violence on workers is preceded by physiological aggression, hinting that emotional harassment may be the cause for workplace.^[5] Another cross-sectional study conducted in coastal South India on harassment among women at workplace

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also indicated that out of 160 working women interviewed, about 28.8% of them were harassed; majority (47.8%) of the respondents were harassed within 1 year of joining their employment.^[6] An article reported by the National Commission for Women indicated that between 2013 and 2014, there was 35% increase in complaints from 249 to 336, according to a December 2014 reply filed by in the Lok Sabha.^[7]

The recent research has ignored potential effects of workplace harassment which has demonstrable impact on health. Workplace harassment is a widely prevalent problem in India; probably, there is a lack of existing literature on workplace harassment. The present study aims to explore the experiences of workplace harassment among employees of the institution. The findings of this study will throw light on measures to improve the workplace environment and to curb the existing prevalent workplace harassment issues if any. Further, the study will help to plan the strategies to be implemented for building a healthy workplace environment.

METHODOLOGY

A nonexperimental cross-sectional exploratory survey approach with quantitative design was used. Participants constituted 210 employees, of age group between 20 and 60 years, working for minimum 6 h in selected institution. Random sampling technique was used to select the samples. The employees willing to participate in the study only were included for data collection. The ethical clearance was obtained by the Institutional Review Board of the university. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants and individual written informed consent was obtained before collecting the data from the participants. Data were collected from a selected institution in Mangaluru. Data for the study were collected using the tool sociodemographic pro forma and workplace harassment rating scale and the personal experience questionnaire developed by the investigators. The workplace harassment rating scale consisted total of 40 items distributed in terms of physical, personal, psychological, verbal, work-related, and sexual harassment. The maximum score was 200, which was arbitrarily categorized and interpreted as score <40 = no harassment, 41–80 = occasional harassment, 81–120 = mild harassment, 121–160 = moderate harassment, and score above 161 indicated severe harassment. Tools were validated and checked for reliability (Cronbach's alpha $r = 0.98$). The English version of the tool was translated to Kannada version and checked for the language validity. After pretesting of the tools, it was revealed that the tools were in simple language and were able to elicit the data required. The time taken to complete the tool was 15 min.

RESULTS

The data presented in Table 1 indicate that maximum of the participants belonged to the age group of 26–40 years.

Table 1 also indicates that majority were females (72.4%) and 51% belonged to nuclear family. The data also indicated that maximum, i.e., 65.2% of them were married.

Data presented in Table 2 show percentages in the type of employment such as permanent (41.9%) and temporary (39.5%). All the participants were working in private sector. Maximum of them had more than 3–6 years of experience; however, 8.1% of the participants had ≤ 1 year of experience.

Figure 1 indicates that 43% of the participants were with professional qualification, 34% were graduate and postgraduate, and 10% were with intermediate Pre university course and less than that education.

Figure 2 indicates that maximum, i.e., 55.2% were professional employees and 18.6% were in clerical work.

Table 1: Sample characteristics in terms of age in years, gender, and type of family ($n=210$)

Sample characteristics	Frequency (%)
Age (years)	
21-25	37 (17.6)
26-30	41 (19.5)
31-35	42 (20.0)
36-40	40 (19.0)
41-45	21 (10.0)
46 and above	29 (13.8)
Gender	
Male	58 (27.6)
Female	152 (72.4)
Type of family	
Nuclear	107 (51.0)
joint	90 (42.9)
Extended	8 (3.8)
Single parent	5 (2.4)
Marital status	
Married	137 (65.2)
Unmarried	66 (31.4)
Widow/widower	5 (2.4)
Divorced/separated	2 (1.0)

Table 2: Sample characteristics in terms of type of employment, sector of workplace, and total years of experience ($n=210$)

Sample characteristics	Frequency (%)
Type of employment	
Permanent	88 (41.9)
Temporary	83 (39.5)
Probationary	23 (11.0)
Contract basis	16 (7.6)
Sector of workplace	
Private	210 (100)
Government	-
Total work experience (years)	
<1	17 (8.1)
1-3	62 (29.5)
3-6	29 (43.3)
>6	82 (39.0)

Figure 3 indicates that 39.5% of the participants had monthly family income ranging between Rs. 5773 and 9633.

Data presented in Table 3 show that maximum (63.3%) experienced occasional workplace harassment whereas 0.5% reported mild harassment. A small percentage (28.1%) of them reported that they had not experienced any such. None of the participants reported severe or moderate workplace harassment.

The data presented in Table 4 indicate that the highest possible area among participants was psychological (15.5 ± 7.26)

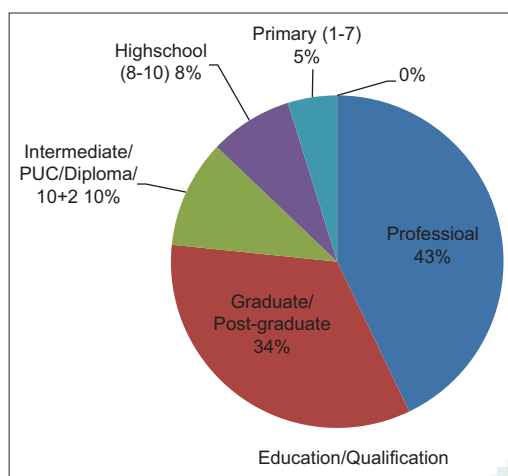


Figure 1: Pie diagram showing education of participants in percentages

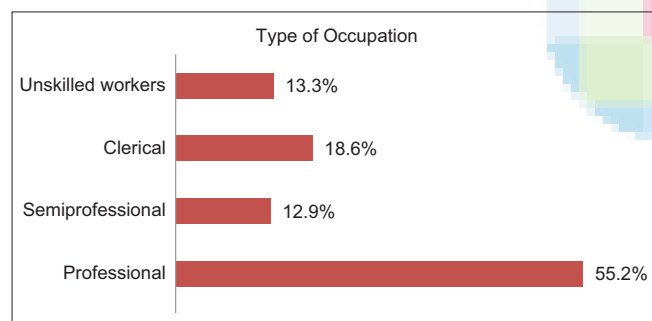


Figure 2: Bar diagram showing occupation of participants in terms of percentages

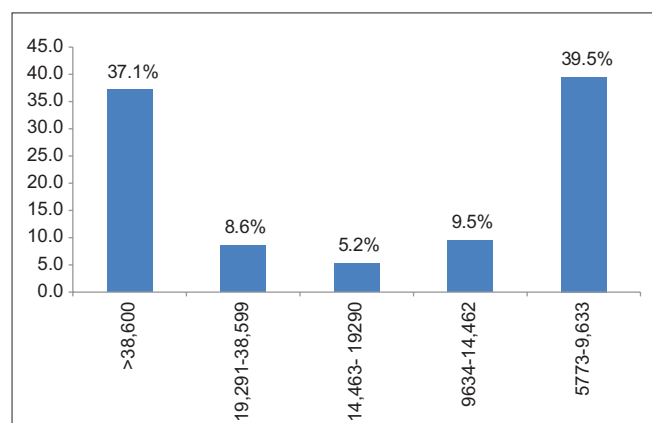


Figure 3: Bar diagram showing monthly family income in rupees

and the lowest harassment was in the area of physical harassment (3.74 ± 1.75).

DISCUSSION

The study findings indicate that the participants experienced at least some form of harassment and majority of them experienced occasionally (63%). Among the participants, majority belonged to the age group between 26 and 30 years and majority of them were females. It could be because of work pressure among females due to various roles and responsibilities at home and work setting. The study findings are similar to the findings reported by Unnikrishnan *et al.*^[6] where 28% of women experienced some form of harassment out of which 37% were ≤ 25 years of age. The present study findings do coincide with the findings of the Bangladesh^[4] study which revealed that among the participants, 52.11% experienced of harassment every month.

Based on the marital status, it was indicated that both married and the unmarried females reported occasional harassment. The findings indicated that professionals experienced harassment comparatively higher than the other category as well as those with more than 6 years of experience. Study findings also revealed that 28.1% of the participants reported no harassment. It was observed that “no harassment” did not literally mean the absence of harassment, whereas the participants were afraid to reveal the harassment with the fear of facing consequences and further repercussions.

The findings also indicated that the area-wise harassment score indicated that highest mean score (15.5 ± 7.26) was in the

Table 3: Distribution of participants in terms of experience of workplace harassment (n=20)

Harassment experience	Score range	Frequency (%)
Severe	161-200	1 (0.5)
Moderate	121-160	-
Mild	81-120	17 (8.1)
Occasional	41-80	133 (63.3)
No harassment	1-40	59 (28.1)

Table 4: Area-wise score

Areas	Number of items	Maximum score	Range	Mean±SD
Physical harassment	3	15	2-15	3.74±1.75
Personal harassment	7	35	6-28	10.40±3.93
Psychological harassment	11	55	11-54	15.5±7.26
Verbal harassment	3	15	3-15	4.24±2.08
Work-related harassment	8	40	8-39	11.16±5.02
Sexual harassment	8	40	7-40	9.00±3.53
Total	40	200		

SD: Standard deviation

area of psychological harassment followed by work-related (11.16 ± 5.02) and personal harassment (10.40 ± 3.93). These findings are contradictory to the findings revealed by Unnikrishnan *et al.*^[6] that majority (67.3%) of harassment was verbal in manner whereas 22.7% were physical. In the present study, the least of the mean score was in the physical harassment area (3.74 ± 1.75).

Further, the association between the sociodemographic variables and the level of harassment indicated that there was a significant association between harassment and the level of education, indicating that the harassment was more among those with lower educational qualification ($\chi^2(4) = 0.005$). It could be that the employees perceived their experience as harassment based on their sensitivity which reflected the personal consequences.

CONCLUSION

Based on the study findings, it is concluded that workplace harassment is a prevalent problem though it is not expressed freely by the employees with the fear of facing consequences despite the existing problems. Findings conclude that employees to be sensitized about the healthy workplace culture and awareness to be created regarding the measures adopted by the institution to prevent workplace harassment. The study recommends that it is quintessential that institutions highlight conduct rules in workplace settings which will prevent traumatic experience for those experiencing harassment. Healthy environment in the workplace will also promote maximum work output.

Acknowledgment

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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