

ASSESSMENT OF POSH IMPLEMENTATION ON GENDER INCLUSIVITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IN WORKPLACES

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Sakshi

Under the Supervision and Guidance of

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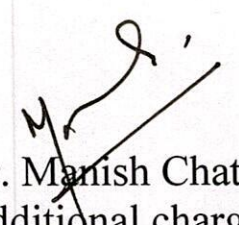
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TO WHOM SO EVER IT MAY CONCERN

This is to certify that **Dr. Sakshi**, currently enrolled in the MBA (Hospital and Health Management), student from IIHMR University, Jaipur has successfully completed her Summer Training/ Internship programme on the Project Report entitled– "**An Assessment of POSH Implementation on Gender Inclusivity and Organizational Culture in Workplaces**" at The National Institute of Health and Family Welfare, New Delhi for the period from 10th March, 2025 to 30th May, 2025 under the guidance of Prof. Meerambika Mahapatro.

Her conduct during the Summer Training Programme was good and I wish her a bright career ahead.


(Dr. Manish Chaturvedi)
Additional charge Dean

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that dissertation titled “**ASSESSMENT OF POSH IMPLEMENTATION ON GENDER INCLUSIVITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IN WORKPLACES**” is a record of the research work undertaken by **Dr Sakshi** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **MBA (Hospital and Health Management)** from the IIHMR University, Jaipur under my guidance and supervision and her approach to the research study has been sincere, scientific, and analytical.

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DECLARATION BY STUDENT

I Sakshi, student of MBA in Hospital and Health Management at IIHMR University, Jaipur, hereby declare that I have completed my dissertation entitled “**An Assessment of POSH Implementation on Gender Inclusivity and Organizational Culture in Workplaces**” at the National Institute of Health and Family Welfare, New Delhi, from 10 March 2024 to 30 May 2025. The information submitted here is entirely true.

I undertook and carried out the entire dissertation under the guidance of Dr. Meerambika Mahapatrao, Professor and Head, Department of Social Sciences, NIHFV. I am deeply thankful to her for her invaluable guidance and support throughout the research process.

I further declare that this dissertation is a bonafide record of my original research work and has not been submitted to any other university or institution for the award of any degree or diploma. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been duly acknowledged in the text.


(Signature)

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Abstract

Background:

Despite a decade since the enactment of the POSH Act (2013), workplace sexual harassment continues to be inadequately addressed in Indian institutions, particularly in public health settings. While formal mechanisms like Internal Committees (ICs), periodic awareness training, and redressal systems are mandated under the law, their implementation often remains procedural and symbolic, failing to catalyse meaningful cultural transformation. Compliance is frequently reduced to checkbox activities such as displaying posters and conducting annual training without deeper engagement or sustained leadership involvement. Workplace environments in many public sector institutions still reflect hierarchical power dynamics, limited inclusivity, and lack of emotional or psychological safety for employees. This study was undertaken to critically examine the effectiveness of POSH implementation in two major public health institutions NIHFW and NHSRC by focusing on its influence on gender inclusivity, organizational culture, and mental health support systems. It also aims to understand how institutional obligations under POSH intersect with the lived realities, perceptions, and challenges faced by employees across different levels of the workplace.

Objective:

To assess the extent to which the POSH Act is operationalized in public health institutions and to explore its influence on gender inclusivity, organizational dynamics, and employee well-being.

Methods:

A qualitative research design was adopted involving in-depth interviews with 30 employees and one focus group discussion across NIHFW and NHSRC. A semi-structured tool guided discussions on five thematic areas: POSH awareness, understanding of harassment, organizational culture, gender inclusivity, and emotional/mental health support. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity across gender, employment types, and hierarchy. Data were analysed using thematic coding and inductive interpretation.

Results:

Thematic analysis of the interviews and focus group discussion revealed that while awareness of the POSH Act and the presence of Internal Committees (ICs) was widespread, the actual engagement with the policy was predominantly surface-level and compliance-driven. Training programs were held annually, but participants both employees and leadership perceived them as routine formalities lacking contextual depth. POSH-related posters and communications were visible but failed to provoke meaningful engagement or explain the nuanced behaviours that constitute harassment.

Male employees reported adopting overly cautious and withdrawn behaviours, such as avoiding informal interactions with female colleagues, to prevent misinterpretation. This reflected a fear-based compliance culture rather than genuine awareness or gender sensitivity. Female employees, although aware of redressal mechanisms, expressed hesitation in filing complaints particularly when the accused held a position of power due to fear of retaliation, reputational harm, or lack of family support. This indicated a persistent disconnect between institutional confidence and actual usage of complaint mechanisms.

A significant concern identified was the absence of emotional and psychological support structures during or after POSH proceedings. Most participants were unaware of any counselling services or trauma-informed provisions. ICs were perceived as technically functional but lacking in empathetic and survivor-centric approaches. Furthermore, inconsistencies in leadership visibility, delayed updates to POSH information, and absence of routine evaluation of redressal processes further weakened institutional trust.

Overall, the findings reveal that POSH implementation is often symbolic limited to posters and periodic training rather than being embedded into the organizational culture. Emotional safety, mental health integration, and leadership commitment were found to be the most critical gaps in transforming compliance into meaningful inclusion and protection.

Conclusion:

Effective POSH implementation demands more than compliance it requires cultural transformation. Institutions must integrate trauma-informed counselling, strengthen leadership involvement, adopt anonymous reporting systems, and foster continuous gender-sensitization efforts. By presenting the lived experiences of employees, the study underscores the need to reposition POSH as a holistic framework for safety, dignity, and inclusivity, rather than a procedural obligation.

Keywords: POSH Act, gender inclusivity, workplace harassment, organizational culture, public health institutions.

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I extend my sincere thanks to the faculty and staff members of NIHFW who facilitated the training and supported me throughout my research.

I extend my sincere thanks to the faculty and staff members of NIHFW who facilitated the training and supported me and participated in my research. My heartfelt appreciation also goes to my university mentor, **Dr. Anupam Mehrotra**, whose encouragement and insightful suggestions significantly contributed to my academic growth. I would also like to express my gratitude to **Dr. Sanjay Gupta**, Dean of IIHMR University, for his valuable support.

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Sincerely,

Dr. Sakshi

MBA Hospital and Health Management, (2023- 25)

IIHMR University, Jaipur

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Sexual harassment in the workplace remains a pervasive and persistent issue, disproportionately affecting women across various sectors. It undermines their safety, dignity, and ability to participate equally in professional environments. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) defines sexual harassment as *"any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behaviour of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offense or humiliation to another person."* This definition underscores the broad and often subjective nature of harassment, highlighting the importance of awareness, prevention, and institutional accountability in addressing such behaviour.^[1] Indian law defines sexual harassment as any unwelcome behaviour of a sexual nature that infringes on an individual's dignity. This includes physical, verbal, or non-verbal acts as outlined in the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013. ^[2] The effective implementation of the POSH Act not only ensures compliance with legal mandates but also plays a pivotal role in shaping an inclusive and equitable organizational culture. By mandating the formation of Internal Complaints Committees, regular awareness programs, and transparent redressal mechanisms, the Act compels organizations to prioritize employee safety and dignity. Beyond legal compliance, robust POSH practices foster trust, promote gender inclusivity, and reinforce a zero-tolerance stance against harassment, thereby contributing to a healthier and more productive work environment. Assessing how organizations operationalize these requirements provides valuable insights into their commitment to gender equality and the broader impact on workplace culture.^[3]

While comprehensive global data on sexual harassment awareness remains limited, several international surveys (Fig 1.1) have investigated public perceptions of its prevalence. These surveys consistently highlight a substantial gap between the actual incidence of sexual harassment and public understanding of its frequency. Across countries, both men and women tend to underestimate how widespread harassment truly is. This misperception is often rooted in factors such as social stigma, limited reporting, lack of open dialogue, and the normalization of inappropriate behaviour. Such perceptual gaps not only indicate a lack of awareness but also hinder the development and implementation of effective policies and cultural shifts necessary to prevent workplace harassment.^[4]

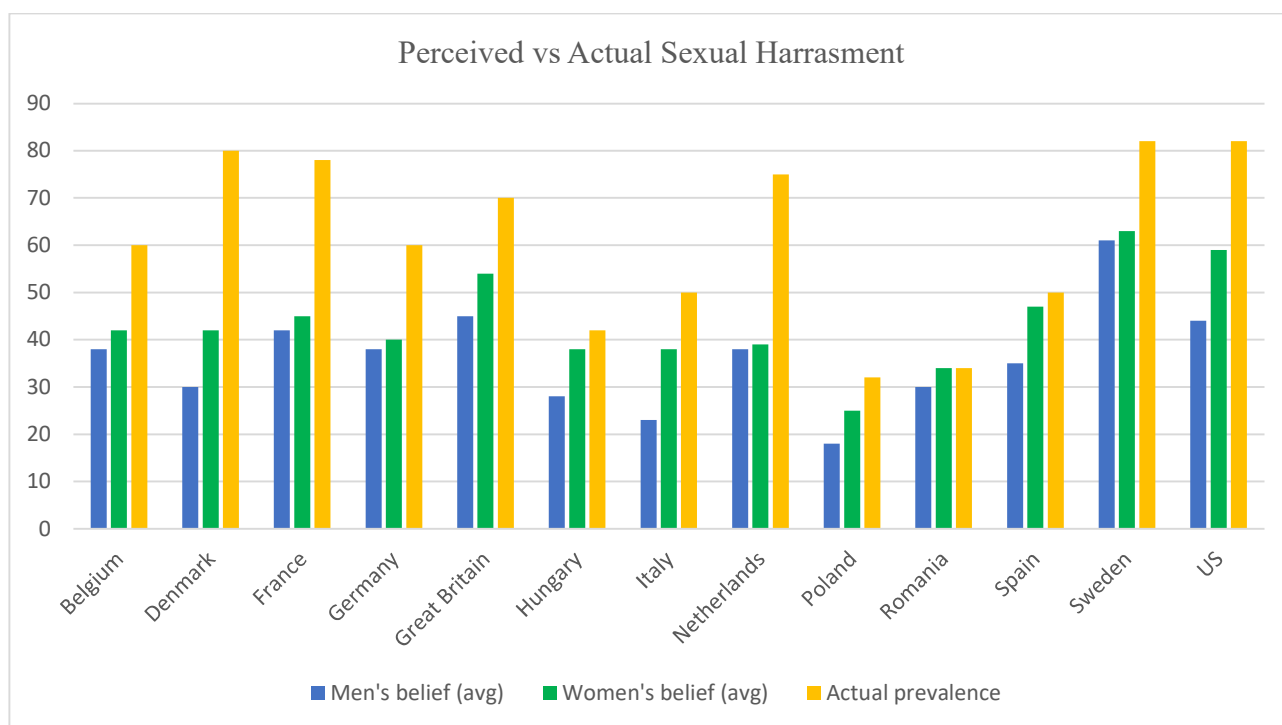


Figure 1.1 Average beliefs about the prevalence of sexual harassment by country. The average beliefs of men and women about the percentage of women they think have been sexually harassed in their own country over a year. The x axis in the figure is the average prevalence of sexual harassment for other women. The Y axis plots this for men and women in the country referenced source: Ipsos, 2018.

For instance, more than half of women in the European Union and four in five women in Delhi report experiencing sexual harassment during their lifetime. Such pervasive harassment can have serious consequences on women's psychological health, economic security, and social inclusion [4][5]. In Sweden, potential victims of sexual harassment were more likely to leave their workplaces, while in Delhi, many women chose lower quality educational institutions to avoid harassment. These patterns reveal how fear of sexual harassment can severely restrict women's professional and academic opportunities [6][7].

Workplace sexual harassment remains a systemic issue in India, with 27% of women in formal employment reporting incidents in 2023. The prevalence is even higher rising to 41% in high stress sectors like healthcare and education.[8]. The psychological, professional, and economic impacts of workplace sexual harassment are profound, with Indian organizations estimated to lose ₹1.2 trillion annually due to attrition, absenteeism, and legal costs. [9]. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013, or POSH Act, marked a pivotal step in enforcing institutional accountability following the 1997 Vishaka Guidelines. Yet, a decade later, persistent implementation gaps led to key 2023 amendments addressing digital harassment, bystander duties, and mental health support for survivors. [10].

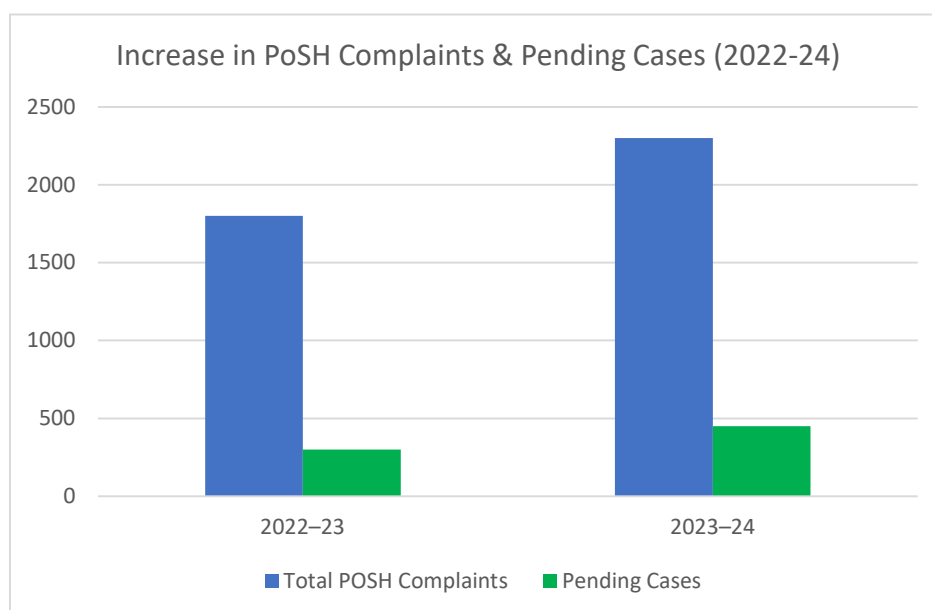


Figure 1.2 Increase in POSH Complaints & Pending Cases

The 2023 amendments to the POSH Act expanded the definition of harassment to include cyber harassment via platforms like Zoom and WhatsApp, reflecting the realities of remote work. They also introduced stricter penalties for non-compliance—up to ₹50 lakh—and mandated mental health counselling support for survivors. [11]. According to the National Crime Records Report 2024, underreporting of workplace sexual harassment remains prevalent despite legislative progress. A 2024 pan India survey found that 68% of women cited fear of retaliation as the main reason for not reporting, with structural barriers like rigid hierarchies and normalized everyday sexism—particularly in male dominated sectors like public health—further deterring disclosure [12].

The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 and ratified by India, is regarded as an international bill of rights for women. It upholds gender equality across all spheres and affirms that discrimination and violations of women's dignity are fundamental breaches of equal rights. [13] In recent years, women's participation in the organized sector has grown steadily across diverse fields, fuelled by industrialization, modernization, and globalization. However, this advancement has been accompanied by rising challenges, including physical and mental harassment, gender discrimination, and, notably, workplace sexual harassment. [14] Sexual harassment is the unwelcome imposition of sexual demands or behaviour within relationships marked by unequal power dynamics. It encompasses physical contact, requests for sexual favours, sexually coloured remarks, exposure to pornography, and verbal or non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature. [15]. Sexual harassment inflicts both physical and psychological distress on women. With increasing female workforce participation, its manifestations have diversified, as colleagues and supervisors often misuse their authority, perpetuating harassment across varied forms and scales within the workplace. [16]. Sexual

harassment is widely recognized as an emotionally intrusive act that creates a toxic and unproductive work environment. Globally, it is acknowledged as one of the most distressing and pervasive forms of violence experienced by women in the workplace.[\[17\]](#) Sexual harassment, in all its forms, is complex and challenging to define uniformly due to its varied manifestations and contextual nuances. However, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) provides a widely accepted definition, describing it as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual Favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when:

1. Submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a condition of employment.
2. Submission to or rejection of such conduct is used as a basis for employment decisions affecting the individual. [\[18\]](#)

Undoubtedly, sexual harassment is a grave and deeply distressing offense that many women faces, whether at work or during their daily commute. Fear of social backlash or further victimization often silences victims, and those who speak out risk more severe violence including assault, rape, or acid attacks—underscoring the systemic devaluation of women and the persistent grip of patriarchal norms in society. [\[19\]](#).

The Genesis

The women parliamentarians of the Indian legislature have demonstrated notable concern and responsiveness toward the issue of sexual harassment. In May 1994, Ms. Kamla Sinha introduced a bill in Parliament to prevent the sexual harassment of women employees at their workplaces. In her statement of objects and reasons, she highlighted that although women form a significant part of the workforce across nearly all economic sectors, many are compelled to work under poor conditions and are frequently subjected to harassment by male colleagues, superiors, and employers. While offenses like physical assault and molestation were punishable under the Indian Penal Code, Ms. Sinha emphasized that the law lacked comprehensive provisions to address the full spectrum of workplace harassment, prompting the introduction of the bill to bridge these gaps and ensure greater safety for working women. [\[20\]](#). Before the introduction of the bill, a landmark incident highlighted the urgent need for legal protections against sexual harassment. In 1992, Bhanwari Devi, a rural development worker appointed as a *sathi* by the Rajasthan government, faced brutal retaliation while attempting to prevent a child marriage. Her intervention angered influential men in the community, who later gang raped her—despite her prior reports of threats to local authorities, which went unaddressed. In response to this grievous injustice, Vishaka and other women's rights organizations filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Supreme Court against the State of Rajasthan and the Union of India, setting the stage for the historic *Vishaka Guidelines*. [\[21\]](#). Subsequently, in 1997, a three-judge bench

of the Supreme Court of India delivered the landmark *Vishaka Judgment*, which established comprehensive guidelines to prevent and address sexual harassment of women at the workplace. Recognizing such harassment as a violation of fundamental rights under Articles 14, 15, and 21 of the Indian Constitution, the Court mandated preventive measures, redressal mechanisms, and a duty of care by employers. Until formal legislation was enacted, the *Vishaka Guidelines* held the force of law nationwide.

The *Vishaka Guidelines* included several key provisions:

- **A clear definition of sexual harassment**, encompassing unwelcome physical, verbal, or non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature.
- **Shifting accountability from individuals to institutions** places the responsibility on employers to create a safe working environment.
- **Prioritizing prevention**, emphasizing awareness, sensitization, and proactive measures to deter harassment.
- **Provision of an innovative redress mechanism**, mandating the formation of complaints committees within workplaces to handle grievances promptly and fairly. [\[2\]](#)

Furthermore, many organizations, institutions, and employers frequently neglect their responsibility to ensure the safety and security of women in the workplace. This failure to uphold institutional accountability fosters unsafe work environments and significantly weakens the impact of legal safeguards designed to protect women from harassment. [\[22\]](#). Following the *Vishaka Judgment*, several institutions and organizations expressed a commitment to addressing workplace sexual harassment. The National Commission for Women (NCW) was a key contributor, and it submitted multiple drafts of a Code of Conduct for the workplace in 2000, 2003, 2004, 2006, and 2010. In 2007, then Minister for Women and Child Development Krishna Tirath introduced *The Protection of Women against Sexual Harassment at Workplace Bill*. The Union Cabinet approved it in January 2010 and was introduced in the Lok Sabha in December of the same year.

The bill was referred to the Parliamentary Standing Committee, which submitted its report in November 2011. Based on its recommendations, the Cabinet introduced amendments in May 2012. The amended bill was passed by the Lok Sabha in September 2012 and by the Rajya Sabha in February 2013. It was signed into law by the President in April 2013 and came into effect on December 9, 2013, as *The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013*.

This Act upheld the foundational principles of the Vishaka Guidelines while significantly broadening their scope:

- It expanded the definition of “aggrieved woman” to include all women regardless of age, employment status, or designation including clients, customers, and domestic workers.
- It extended the concept of "workplace" to include non-traditional settings such as remote workspaces, telecommuting roles, and any location visited by an employee during work hours.
- A critical provision mandates forming an Internal Committee (IC) in every organization with ten or more employees.
- The law also imposes penalties for non-compliance, including a fine of up to ₹50,000. Repeated violations may result in higher penalties or the cancellation of business licenses.

This legislative framework marks a significant step toward institutionalizing accountability and protecting women's right to a safe and dignified work environment.

The Act also delineates clear responsibilities for employers, including conducting regular workshops and awareness programs to educate employees about the provisions of the law, as well as orientation and training programs for members of the Internal Committee (IC). To ensure proper legal recourse, it mandates that proceedings under the Act be tried by a Metropolitan Magistrate or a Judicial Magistrate of the first class, thereby upholding due legal process in cases of workplace sexual harassment. [23]. Together, these legislative and institutional measures have enhanced the sense of security for women in both government and private sectors against sexual harassment. By fostering a safe and respectful workplace, they empower women to thrive professionally, unlocking their full potential and driving meaningful contributions to organizational growth.

The POSH Act identifies two primary forms of sexual harassment:

1. **Quid Pro Quo (Tangible Employment Action):** Derived from the Latin phrase "this for that," *Quid Pro Quo* refers to situations where employment benefits—such as promotions, raises, or favourable assignments—are offered in exchange for sexual favours. It also includes cases where individuals face adverse consequences, like demotion or termination, for refusing such demands.
2. **Hostile Work Environment:** This type of harassment occurs when the workplace becomes intimidating, offensive, or abusive due to inappropriate sexual behaviour. It includes verbal, non-verbal, or physical conduct that creates an environment where employees feel unsafe, uncomfortable, or unable to perform their professional duties effectively. [2].

The successful implementation of the POSH Act within any organization is deeply influenced by its culture. Organizational culture defined by shared values, beliefs, and norms shapes employee behaviour and their willingness to report workplace harassment. A positive, inclusive culture promotes safety, respect, and accountability, empowering individuals to speak up without fear.

To uphold this, organizations must establish functional Internal Committees (ICs) that handle complaints impartially and efficiently. Regular training on POSH provisions, clear reporting procedures, and widespread awareness initiatives are essential. Such a culture ensures legal compliance and fosters a proactive environment where workplace harassment is actively prevented and dignity at work is upheld for all. The law on sexual harassment mandates that every organization, whether public or private, must report the number of cases received and resolved by the Internal Committee (IC). These figures are required to be published in the organization's Annual Report and shared with the Board of Directors, serving as a mechanism for transparency and accountability. However, in practice, these checks often fail, particularly when the accused hold leadership positions or are considered high value "star performers."

Many women in the workforce remain unaware of the protections and procedures available under the POSH Act, mainly due to inadequate training and poor information dissemination by employers. As a result, when they experience harassment, they often do not know how to initiate a complaint or seek redress. Even when women come forward, the internal redressal mechanisms are frequently opaque and flawed. In many cases, employers manipulate procedures to shield powerful perpetrators, pressure victims into silence or withdrawal, or even retaliate by removing the complainants—highlighting a culture of institutional complicity. Unfortunately, such practices are more common than exceptional in implementing POSH.

The low conviction rates under the Act further exposes these systemic weaknesses. One major challenge lies in the Act's unique legal framework: complaints handled by the Internal Committee (IC) remain within the domain of civil law and only escalate to criminal proceedings when formally reported to the police. Navigating the path from workplace harassment to legal redress is fraught with obstacles—ranging from lack of awareness and fear of retaliation to job insecurity and limited institutional support. These barriers often discourage women from seeking justice, leading many to abandon the process at its very outset.

Psychological factors such as perception, cognition, emotions, and attitudes significantly shape how individuals experience workplace safety. These elements affect employees' willingness to report harassment and influence their sense of engagement and trust within the organization. A

psychologically safe environment encourages openness, participation, and assertive action against misconduct.

Equally important are social factors such as cultural norms, peer dynamics, organizational behaviour, and societal attitudes that deeply impact how workplace policies like POSH are perceived and implemented. Depending on how the organization acknowledges and addresses these influences, they can either foster a culture of accountability and respect or reinforce silence and complicity.

Harassment has profound workplace and health related consequences, often resulting in burnout, absenteeism, and reduced job performance. Many women experience declining motivation and professional engagement, with some ultimately resigning or being transferred against their will [24]. The fear of retaliation or job loss is particularly heightened in hierarchical or public sector settings, where rigid power structures deter victims from reporting incidents. These imbalances and the fear of career damage create a culture of silence.

Social stigma, victim blaming, and concerns about marital or social reputation further discourage women from coming forward. Such fears are entrenched in societal norms that shame survivors instead of holding perpetrators accountable. Moreover, intersectional vulnerabilities such as caste, class, religion, disability, or single status exacerbate the risks and barriers faced by women, deepening their marginalization and further limiting their access to justice and institutional support. [25] The psychological toll of harassment often manifests in physical symptoms, including headaches, sleep disturbances, digestive issues, and other psychosomatic complaints. Faced with chronic stress and mental trauma, some survivors turn to maladaptive coping mechanisms such as substance misuse or emotional eating. This distress is further intensified by the prevalence of a "tolerance culture," which normalizes inappropriate behaviour by dismissing it as harmless, trivial, or inevitable within workplace dynamics ultimately silencing victims and allowing misconduct to persist unchecked [26].

Despite POSH mandates, many Internal Committees (ICs) are undertrained, biased, or unapproachable. [25] Lack of confidentiality and fear of workplace gossip are significant barriers to reporting sexual harassment. When victims anticipate privacy breaches or become targets of informal speculation, they are less inclined to speak up. Furthermore, delays in redressal, hostile retaliation, or *gaslighting* by colleagues or HR exacerbate the trauma and undermine trust in institutional mechanisms deterring not only the affected individuals but also others from seeking justice. [27] Workplace counselling and mental health support remain limited, with many employees reluctant to seek help due to stigma, shame, or fear of judgment. Mental health is rarely integrated into workplace training, and few organizations offer regular check ins or access to professional counsellors. This lack

of institutional support deepens the emotional impact of workplace harassment and hinders survivors' recovery and overall well-being.

Gender inclusivity and the effective implementation of the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act in India are closely linked to organizational culture, leadership commitment, and the dismantling of systemic barriers. While the POSH Act (2013) mandates the establishment of internal committees and redressal mechanisms, research shows that its effectiveness is frequently compromised by fear of retaliation, limited awareness, and deeply rooted patriarchal norms that persist in many workplaces. For instance, studies indicate that underreporting of sexual harassment remains widespread, even in organizations with formal POSH policies. This is mainly due to persistent stigma, fear of judgment, and a lack of trust in institutional processes to ensure fair and confidential redressal. [28]

Organizational Culture and Inclusivity

Indian workplaces, particularly in male dominated sectors such as manufacturing, have historically struggled with low female participation and entrenched hierarchical structures. These environments often lack inclusivity, making it difficult for women to enter, thrive, or rise within the organizational ranks. Case studies like Cummins India's 16 year gender diversity initiative demonstrate that inclusive leadership and systemic interventions such as targeted recruitment, mentorship programs, and gender sensitization can effectively shift organizational culture and significantly improve female representation in the workforce. [29] Social Identity Theory further explains that employees are more likely to feel valued and accepted when organizations foster authenticity and psychological safety through inclusive practices. This strengthens their identification with the organization, leading to higher engagement, collaboration, and overall organizational efficiency. [30]

Challenges in POSH Implementation

Despite clear legal mandates, significant gaps persist between policy and practice. Many organizations lack robust accountability mechanisms, and Internal Committees (ICs) are often underutilized due to procedural ambiguities, lack of training, and prevailing power imbalances that discourage reporting and fair resolution.[28] For example, marginalized groups such as Dalit and Adivasi women face compounded barriers stemming from the intersection of caste and gender discrimination. These intersecting biases are seldom acknowledged or addressed in mainstream diversity and inclusion initiatives, further limiting their access to justice, representation, and equitable opportunities in the workplace.[31]

Leadership and Institutional Levers

Sustainable change requires aligning organizational values with a genuine commitment to inclusivity. The success of Cummins India underscores the importance of leadership actively modelling inclusive behaviours, embedding diversity metrics into performance evaluations, and establishing anonymous reporting channels to ensure accountability and trust within the workplace.[\[29\]](#) However, broader systemic challenges such as inadequate enforcement of existing laws and deep rooted cultural resistance underscore the need for stronger regulatory oversight and sustained grassroots advocacy to drive meaningful and lasting institutional change.[\[28\]](#)

This intersection of legal frameworks, cultural norms, and institutional practices forms a critical foundation for examining how Indian organizations can transform gender inclusivity from compliance driven checkboxes to meaningful cultural change.

The Rationale of the Study

Workplace sexual harassment remains a persistent challenge in India, even more than a decade after the enactment of the POSH Act, 2013. Although the law has fostered greater awareness and established formal redressal mechanisms, many women continue to face unsafe work environments, limited institutional support, and organizational inaction. Research indicates that enforcement is especially weak in the public sector and hierarchical institutions, where deeply entrenched power asymmetries hinder effective implementation and accountability.[\[32\]](#) The growing backlog of unresolved cases, coupled with the emotional toll on survivors, underscores the slow and often distressing nature of justice delivery under the current system. This delay not only prolongs trauma but also undermines confidence in institutional redressal mechanisms.

Public discourse and existing research often focus heavily on legal compliance and structural provisions while overlooking the lived realities of employees who must navigate complex and, at times, hostile institutional processes. This gap limits our understanding of how workplace harassment is experienced and addressed.[\[33\]](#) Organizations' complex cultural, behavioural, and structural barriers remain largely underexplored. This Study seeks to address that gap by moving beyond procedural implementation to examine the real-world dynamics of POSH enforcement specifically, how women experience workplace redressal mechanisms and how men and institutions either facilitate or obstruct the creation of safe, respectful work environments.

Current research primarily focuses on private and corporate sectors, leaving public health and other bureaucratic institutions significantly underrepresented. While women's experiences have received some scholarly attention, a marked gap exists in understanding men's attitudes, preventive

behaviours, and their role in fostering gender sensitive workplaces. Most studies frame men primarily as perpetrators rather than as potential allies and stakeholders in cultural transformation.

Furthermore, the mental health implications of harassment redressal mechanisms both positive and negative remain insufficiently examined through empirical research. Additionally, the broader institutional culture, shaped by leadership, resource allocation, and informal norms, plays a pivotal role in implementing the POSH framework but is seldom analysed in depth. Addressing these gaps is essential for a holistic understanding of workplace harassment and the systemic change required to combat it.

Additionally, many public institutions lack the political will, adequate training, and operational support to run effective Internal Committees (ICs). Consequently, employees often fear retaliation or harm to their professional standing, leading to widespread underreporting and silent tolerance of harassment. This Study thus fills a critical research gap by examining the intersections of gender, institutional obligation, and compliance culture, shedding light on how these dynamics shape the effectiveness of workplace redressal mechanisms.

The core motivation for this research is to move beyond mere tick box legal compliance and toward a holistic, intersectional understanding of workplace safety. It aims to explore how gendered norms, institutional leadership, and organizational dynamics shape the perception and implementation of the POSH Act. By integrating the perspectives of both women and men, the Study aspires to offer a balanced and critical analysis of the Act's effectiveness, uncover its limitations, and illuminate the practical realities of enforcement within public sector institutions.

Workplace harassment and the formal complaint process can exert a profound psychological toll on survivors, yet mental health support is rarely embedded within institutional redressal structures. Many victims endure trauma, anxiety, and emotional distress in isolation, amplifying the harm caused by the initial misconduct. Understanding whether institutions provide psychological or emotional support and how such support is perceived is crucial for developing a trauma informed, survivor centric approach to workplace safety. Addressing mental health is an ethical imperative and vital to organizational well-being. Unresolved psychological stress can lead to reduced productivity, increased absenteeism, and higher attrition, ultimately weakening institutional culture and efficiency. Integrating mental health into the POSH framework is essential to building inclusive, supportive, and accountable workplaces.

This Study addresses these critical gaps by interrogating women's lived experiences, men's perceptions, organizational practices, and mental health outcomes. It aims to offer actionable

frameworks that transform the POSH Act from a procedural mandate into a vehicle for cultural justice, fostering truly safe, inclusive, and accountable workplaces.

The value of POSH extends beyond legal compliance, shaping a safer, more productive, and emotionally secure workplace (see Figure 1.3).

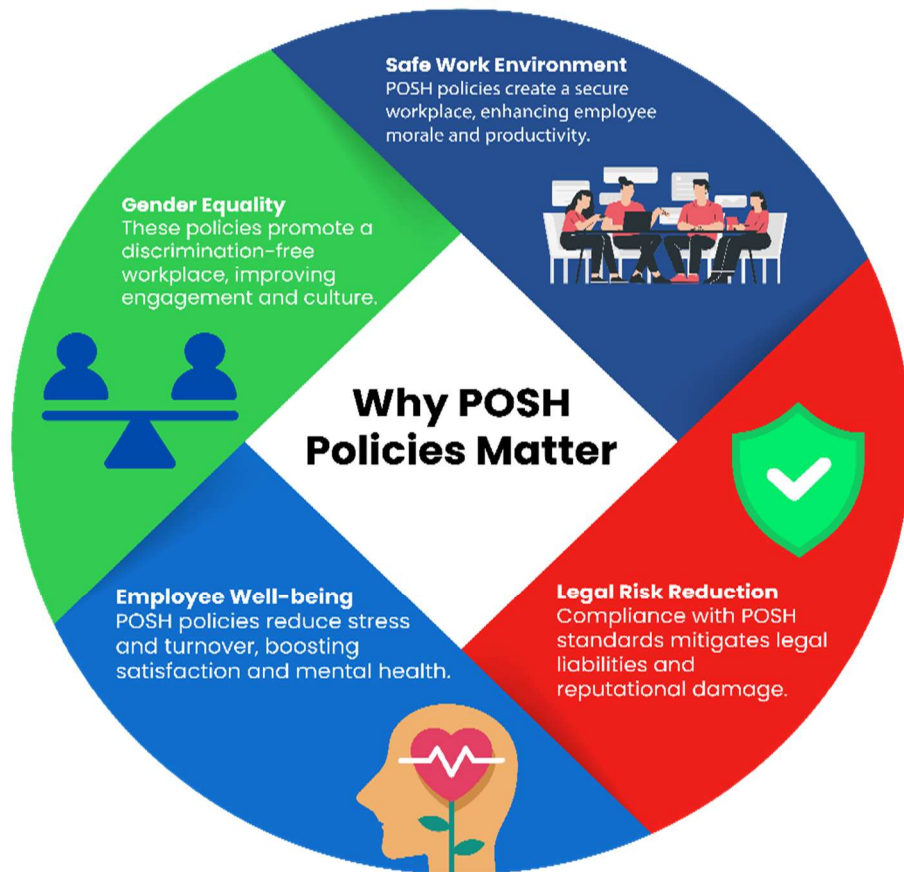


Figure 1.3: Why POSH Policies Matter

This infographic highlights the multidimensional value of POSH implementation including its role in ensuring workplace safety, promoting gender equality, improving mental well-being, and minimizing legal risk.

Primary Research Question:

- How is the POSH Act being implemented in public health institutions, and what is its impact on gender inclusivity and organizational culture in the workplace.

Secondary Research Questions:

1. What is the level of awareness among employees and management regarding POSH policies, and how do they perceive their roles in fostering a respectful workplace environment?
2. In what ways has the implementation of the POSH Act influenced organizational culture, particularly with respect to gender sensitivity, mutual respect, and inclusivity?
3. How do employees perceive safety, inclusivity, and support in their workplace?
4. To what extent do organizations comply with the key requirements of the POSH Act, such as establishing Internal Committees and conducting regular training, and what are the implications of this compliance?
5. How are POSH complaints handled by organizations, and what is the perceived impact of these redressal mechanisms on employees' mental health?

Primary Objective:

To assess the POSH implementation of gender inclusivity and organizational culture in workplaces

Secondary Objectives:

1. To examine the awareness level of employees and management of POSH policies and their roles in promoting a respectful workplace.
2. To analyse the influences of POSH implementation on organizational culture, particularly concerning gender sensitivity, respect, and inclusivity.
3. To assess employees' perceptions of safety, inclusivity, and support within the workplace.
4. To examine the level of compliance with POSH Act requirements and its implications for organizational practices (establishment of the Internal Committee (IC) and the conduct of training programs).
5. To document the handling of POSH complaints and organizational redressal mechanisms that influence employees' mental well-being.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review focuses on key aspects of workplace sexual harassment, including the legal framework of the POSH Act, organizational compliance, and institutional redressal mechanisms. It examines gaps in implementation, underreporting, and the role of organizational culture and leadership. The review also highlights the limited attention given to men's perceptions, public sector settings, and the mental health impact on survivors, underscoring the need for a more intersectional and inclusive approach.

Table 2.1 Tabulation of Reviewed Literature

Author(s)	Study Location	Sample Size	Methodology	Salient Features
Pulkit Raj (2023)	India (various service sector firms)	80 employees	Descriptive survey	The Study found a strong positive correlation between awareness of the POSH Act and the perception of a safe, respectful work environment. Employees who were well informed about POSH provisions reported greater trust in redressal mechanisms and organizational support. However, the research also highlighted significant gaps in implementing POSH policies, especially in smaller firms, where training, regular sensitization, and clear reporting structures were either weak or absent. The findings stress the need for consistent awareness building measures across all organizational levels to ensure effective enforcement of the Act.

Vanita Odedara, Mr. Satish Makadiya, Mr. Bhavesh Jadav (2025)	Gujarat	15 female faculty staff	Descriptive research design; primary data via interviews and questionnaires with 15 female respondents; purposive sampling	While most employees were aware of the existence of the POSH Act, there was a significant gap in their understanding of its provisions and procedural aspects. Many organizations had not conducted regular training or awareness programs, resulting in only superficial knowledge of the Act among employees. Furthermore, a considerable number of respondents were unaware of the Internal Committee (IC) or its role in addressing sexual harassment complaints. The Study also found that employees were often uncertain about reporting incidents, indicating a lack of clarity in communication and procedural transparency within organizations. These findings point to a critical need for structured, organization wide sensitization efforts and more effective implementation of the POSH framework.
I Arun & Dr. C.R. Christi Anandan (2023)	Schneider Electric, Poonamallee, Tamil Nadu	68 women employees	A descriptive study with questionnaires	More than 50% of the participants had limited awareness of the provisions of the POSH Act, including the role and functioning of the Internal Committee (IC). This low awareness extended to the

				reporting procedures and the protections guaranteed under the Act. The Study emphasized a critical need for regular training sessions, awareness programs, and open communication channels to empower women employees and improve compliance with the POSH Act within corporate settings.
Lakshmi Jayapal & Manoj S. (2023)	Chennai, Tamil Nadu	58 Students	Survey among college students	There is a significant lack of knowledge and understanding among students regarding the existence and function of these mechanisms, even in institutions that are legally mandated to have them. The Study pointed to the urgent need for proactive awareness campaigns and gender sensitization programs within educational institutions to prepare students especially women for entering professional environments with the knowledge and confidence to seek redressal in cases of workplace harassment.
Ms. Basanti Negi , Dr Razia Chauhan 2025	<i>India</i>	Review	Empirical data, case studies & stakeholder perspectives	Introduction of the POSH Act contributed to a positive cultural shift in workplaces, fostering greater sensitivity and dialogue around sexual harassment. However, the Study also revealed significant compliance

				challenges, including inconsistent formation and functioning of Internal Committees (ICs) and irregular training programs. Employee awareness of their rights and the mechanisms for redressal varied widely, indicating that many organizations had yet to internalize the Act beyond surface level compliance. The authors recommended that companies invest in regular, structured sensitization and training initiatives to ensure the Act is understood and effectively implemented at all organizational levels.
Gupta, Fatima & Kandikuppa (2021)	India	6 Cases	Qualitative analysis	Marginalized women particularly those from lower castes or economically disadvantaged backgrounds often face additional barriers, such as social stigma, power imbalances, and limited institutional support when attempting to report harassment. The research highlighted systemic challenges within both organizational cultures and legal frameworks, arguing that merely having a law like POSH is insufficient without context sensitive enforcement and

				inclusive implementation practices.
Sindhu KK & Satheesh Kumar Rangasamy (2025)	Bengaluru, Karnataka	80 employees	Descriptive survey with correlation analysis	established a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.691$) between the effective enforcement of the POSH Act and the presence of a safe, supportive, and positive work environment. Employees in organizations with active Internal Committees (ICs), regular sensitization programs, and transparent reporting systems reported feeling more secure and respected at work. The researchers emphasized the importance of routine training, visible management support, and accessible complaint mechanisms to reinforce the preventive and protective intent of the POSH framework.
M. Krishnaveni & S.P. Nandhini (2025)	Vadodara, Gujarat	80 employees	Stratified random sampling survey	87.5% of respondents knew of the legal consequences of non-compliance with POSH, indicating a fair level of basic awareness. However, 17.5% reported that no POSH related training or awareness sessions had been conducted in their organizations, pointing to significant inconsistencies in implementation and sensitization efforts. The Study concluded

				that while formal awareness of the Act's existence may grow proactive engagement through regular training and communication remains inadequate in many workplaces.
Amit Rathore (2024)	Gandhinagar	88 Male & Female Respondents	Mixed methods	The research identified several sociocultural and institutional barriers that hinder the effectiveness of the Act, including deep rooted gender norms, fear of retaliation, lack of trust in complaint mechanisms, and inadequate internal support systems. Employees, particularly women, often hesitate to report harassment due to concerns about workplace backlash and reputational harm. The Study advocated for comprehensive reforms, such as strengthening the role of Internal Committees, mandatory training across organizational levels, and stricter compliance monitoring to bridge the gap between policy and practice.
Roselin V.N. & B. Someswara Rao (2024)	Chennai	Review	Qualitative Analysis	social stigma, fear of professional consequences, and lack of confidentiality were major deterrents preventing victims from filing complaints under the POSH framework. Many respondents expressed

				scepticism about the impartiality of Internal Committees and feared retaliation or being blamed. The authors emphasized the need for robust gender sensitization initiatives, anonymous reporting mechanisms, and strict confidentiality protocols to build trust and encourage more women to come forward without fear.
Dr. Kanak Wadhwani (2024)	Maharashtra	Review	Analytical Study	The research identified critical issues, such as inefficiencies in the functioning of Internal Committees (ICs), lack of accountability, inadequate training, and deep-rooted cultural resistance to acknowledging and addressing sexual harassment. Many organizations treated POSH compliance as a checkbox exercise rather than a transformative process. The Study recommended strengthening the training of IC members, enhancing institutional transparency, and improving regulatory oversight to ensure the Act is implemented meaningfully and uniformly across sectors.

Mosaic (2024)	Ahmedabad	Review	Critical Legal Analysis	Argued that the Act's current language and implementation largely exclude queer, transgender, and non-binary persons, leaving them without adequate legal protection in cases of workplace harassment. It emphasized the need for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to sexual harassment legislation, urging amendments to explicitly recognize diverse gender identities and extend the same protections and redressal mechanisms to all individuals, regardless of gender.
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Navjeet Kaur, Dr. Pallvi Arora (2021)	<i>Jammu</i>	60+ Articles	Cross sectoral (review of Indian and global organizations across industries)	The strategic importance of gender diversity and inclusion (D&I) in organizational growth. Drawing insights from Indian and global organizations across sectors, the Study finds that inclusive workplaces enhance creativity, innovation, problem solving, and decision making, positively impacting overall performance and competitiveness. It emphasizes that organizations committed to gender diversity tend to have better reputations, stronger employee engagement, and improved productivity. However, the authors also note a persistent gap in the participation and representation of women in the Indian workforce, calling for deliberate efforts to create female friendly and inclusive workplace cultures.
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Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Design: A qualitative research design was adopted to deeply explore the dynamics of gender inclusivity, the efficacy of POSH implementation, and organizational culture within selected institutions.

Study Area: The Study was conducted at two key institutions, the National Institute of Health and Family Welfare (NIHFW) and the National Health System Resource Centre (NHSRC), selected due to their strategic role and influence in shaping public health policies and institutional practices in India.

Study Population: To capture diverse perspectives and experiences, the participants included both male and female employees, encompassing permanent and ad hoc staff from NIHFW and NHSRC.

Sampling Technique: Purposive sampling intentionally selected the institutions and participants. This technique is particularly suitable for qualitative studies where an in depth understanding of information rich cases is prioritized over statistical generalization.

Sample Size: 30 individual interviews were conducted, with data saturation indicating sufficient depth and diversity of insights.

Tools and Instruments: A semi structured questionnaire was specifically developed to facilitate detailed discussions on workplace safety, perceptions of the POSH Act, organizational accountability, and mental well-being. The tool underwent pretesting among 10 diverse individuals to ensure clarity, comprehensiveness, and effectiveness.

Data Collection Procedure: A preliminary scoping review was undertaken to identify key thematic areas related to POSH implementation, workplace safety, and gender dynamics. Based on these findings, the interview guide was developed. Detailed personal interviews were conducted, complemented by one Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), involving 7 mixed gender participants, to foster interactive dialogue and capture nuanced insights.

Data Analysis: The collected qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis approach involved multiple stages: initial reading and familiarization with the data, followed by open coding to identify emerging concepts. Codes were then organized into categories, and overarching themes were developed. This iterative process ensured that patterns related to women's experiences, men's perceptions, organizational accountability, and the influence of redressal mechanisms on mental well-being were systematically interpreted and linked back to the research objectives.

Chapter 4: Result

This section presents key findings derived from employee responses regarding the implementation and impact of the POSH Act in their institutions. The data is organized under Four thematic areas:

Table 2 Themes and Sub themes

Theme	Sub Theme
Awareness of POSH	Awareness of Policy and IC Structures
	Visibility vs Engagement
	Training Gaps
	Interpretive Ambiguity
	Misuse Concerns
Organizational Culture	Fear Based Adjustment
	Emotional Distance
	Leadership Gaps
Gender Inclusivity	Social Deterrents
	Power Imbalance
Mental Health and Psychological Support	Lack of Awareness
	Procedural vs Mental Support

1. Awareness of POSH

Awareness forms the foundation for effective implementation of any institutional policy, and POSH is no exception. This theme explores how employees and leadership perceive the visibility, dissemination, and accessibility of information related to the POSH Act and the Internal Committee (IC). It examines whether awareness efforts go beyond symbolic gestures and contribute to meaningful understanding or whether they remain procedural checkboxes in compliance frameworks.

Subtheme 1.1 Awareness of Policy and IC Structures:

Awareness of the POSH Act and the Internal Committee (IC) was well established among both employees and leadership. Many participants stated they were introduced to POSH through organizational orientation or formal communication. Leaders shared that POSH trainings are held annually, though they also confirmed that there is no specialized training for senior staff or IC members.

When asked, "How frequently does your organization conduct POSH related training or orientation for employees?" leaders consistently responded: "Annually."

Similarly, when asked, "Are management level employees and IC members given separate or advanced POSH training sessions?" the response was, "No, same as others."

This standardization of training limits depth and role specific understanding. While many employees indicated familiarity with the Act and the IC, a few participants particularly those in junior or ad hoc based roles reported having no awareness of the POSH Act. This finding underscores significant gaps in the dissemination and reach of POSH awareness efforts, suggesting a need for more inclusive, targeted, and comprehensive outreach strategies.

Subtheme 1.2 Visibility vs. Engagement

Most employees acknowledged institutional efforts to ensure POSH visibility. Posters with IC contact information were commonly seen in workplaces. However, these displays often lacked educational depth. When asked, "Have you seen any POSH related posters or material displayed in your workplace?" Most participants said yes, but they also remarked on the superficiality of the content.

One respondent shared: "The posters are there, with IC members' names, email IDs, and telephone numbers, but they don't spark any further awareness or explain what actually constitutes sexual harassment."

This illustrates that while POSH is visible in institutional signage, its messaging does not engage employees meaningfully or provoke dialogue.

Indicating awareness of POSH and the IC is widespread but mostly procedural and symbolic. Annual training and posters meet minimum standards but fall short of encouraging reflective understanding. A deeper and continuous awareness strategy is necessary.

Subtheme 1.3 Interpretive Ambiguity and Misuse Concerns

Understanding what constitutes sexual harassment is critical for ensuring both prevention and appropriate redressal. This theme focuses on how employees interpret the definitions and boundaries of harassment, their confidence in identifying inappropriate conduct, and whether institutional education supports nuanced, real-world comprehension. It highlights the tension between legal definitions and interpersonal complexities that shape how harassment is understood and addressed.

While awareness of POSH was evident among most participants, employees demonstrated varied interpretations of what constitutes harassment. The lack of contextual and situational clarity left many feeling unsure. When asked, "In your opinion, how effectively is the POSH Act being implemented

in your organization? Have you noticed any issues or concerns with how it is being used or handled??" several respondents expressed mixed feelings.

One male respondent stated: "It is used effectively... but can be misused sometimes."

These comments suggest that although the Act is generally appreciated, there is uncertainty about its application, particularly in complex interpersonal scenarios.

Participants further noted that even though poster content listed IC details, it did little to clarify actual behavioural boundaries:

"The posters are there with IC members' names and contact details, but they don't explain what sexual harassment actually is."

This reflects a gap between institutional definitions and employee comprehension.

This shows employees grasp the need for POSH but lack interpretive clarity, particularly in subtle, situational interactions. Institutions must go beyond static definitions and create more participatory, role specific, and example driven engagement.

During FDG Participants broadly acknowledged awareness of the POSH Act and the Internal Committee (IC). Most reported seeing posters and receiving official communications detailing POSH procedures. However, these efforts were often described as surface level.

"The posters are always visible, but they don't educate about sexual harassment."

Training sessions were said to be conducted annually, but several participants felt that these were treated as compliance routines rather than opportunities for deeper engagement.

"Real world cases should be discussed otherwise it stays theoretical."

One participant pointed out a significant gap in understanding the scope of the Act:

"One of the group members didn't know that the POSH Act doesn't cover men, which raised their concern."

There was also notable uncertainty in interpreting what qualifies as harassment, particularly in interpersonal or informal contexts.

"Sometimes it's hard to say if something is harassment or just a misunderstanding."

Male participants expressed apprehension about being misjudged, which led to more reserved behaviour in daily interactions. These findings highlight the need for contextual training that includes case studies, discussions, and space for clarifying grey areas.

2. Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is pivotal in how the POSH Act is internalized and enacted within institutions. This theme explores how leadership visibility, behavioural norms, workplace communication, and team dynamics shape the real impact of POSH beyond its procedural existence. Insights were drawn from both employee and leadership responses, shedding light on the interaction between formal policy and lived experience.

Subtheme 2.1 Fear Based Behavioural Adjustments Among Male Employees

A key pattern emerging from male employee responses was the conscious shift in interpersonal behaviour following POSH implementation. The introduction of POSH has led many men to become more cautious, adopting strategies to minimize perceived risk rather than foster understanding. In response to questions about what practices they have adopted to avoid misunderstandings, men shared that they now avoid physical gestures like handshakes, limit personal conversations, and maintain formal distance.

As one respondent noted:

“I avoid physical contact like handshakes or pats.”

“I try not to make personal comments or jokes.”

“I double check my tone, what I say, and how close I stand.”

Their actions were often driven by protective intent rather than proactive awareness:

“To avoid being misinterpreted.”

"To show respectful behaviour towards female colleagues."

These reflections indicate that the culture of POSH compliance has fostered hyper vigilance among male staff, which, while reducing inappropriate conduct, has also introduced discomfort and social distance. The emphasis on risk avoidance suggests that POSH is interpreted more as a disciplinary instrument than a framework for respectful collaboration. Institutions must invest in empathy-based communication training to ensure men feel empowered to engage respectfully, not withdrawn by fear.

Subtheme 2.2 Emotional Distance and Communication Breakdown

While professional conduct was generally acknowledged, female participants observed a consistent pattern of restrained communication within teams particularly among male colleagues during group interactions. Several women reported that men now engage with more restraint, especially in group settings.

As one female employee commented:

“Men are cautious now; they don't speak freely in group settings.”

Responding to questions about team interaction and workplace behaviour, this comment highlights that emotional safety is not one-sided overcorrection can also leave women feeling alienated from informal professional spaces.

The organizational environment, though more formal, risks becoming socially fragmented. An inclusive workplace is not defined by silence or over formality but by open, respectful dialogue. Addressing these calls for team building interventions that normalize respectful gender interactions while maintaining accountability.

Subtheme 2.2 Diverging Views on POSH's Impact

Employees held varied opinions on whether the introduction of POSH had meaningfully changed the organizational environment. Some reported clear improvements in interpersonal conduct and professionalism. Others, however, were sceptical of whether any real transformation had occurred.

Respondents shared:

"There's better professionalism, awareness, and respect now."

“Improved how people talk and behave in meetings.”

"Not sure if anything would be different without POSH."

These perspectives emerged when participants were asked about changes observed in workplace behaviour since POSH was implemented.

This divergence suggests that while POSH has increased formal compliance, its depth of influence is inconsistent. The impact is felt in departments where leadership actively reinforces POSH. In others, the policy is perceived as symbolic. This unevenness underscores the need for localized leadership accountability to embed POSH more uniformly across teams.

Subtheme 2.3 Leadership Visibility and Cultural Ownership

Leadership behaviour greatly influences how seriously POSH is taken across an institution. When asked to reflect on how leadership contributes to creating a respectful and POSH compliant environment, some leaders described their engagement as "passive or indifferent." In contrast, others said they were "somewhat actively involved."

These responses illustrate a visible gap between policy endorsement and policy embodiment. While the existence of policy may be approved at the top level, its day-to-day modelling and enforcement remain inconsistent.

Institutional culture reflects leadership priorities. When leaders are disengaged, employees sense indifference. Conversely, when leadership demonstrates respect, accountability, and openness around POSH, it signals a collective cultural commitment. A POSH compliant culture requires leaders to be visible actors.

Subtheme 2.4 Gaps in POSH Monitoring and Institutional Follow up

The strength of POSH implementation relies on how regularly it is revisited, discussed, and evaluated. Leadership responses to questions on the frequency of formal discussions around POSH and IC performance revealed concerning patterns. Many admitted that such meetings are held “only when issues arise” or “not at all.” Similarly, when asked whether all employees receive communication on their roles in maintaining respectful workplaces, the answer was often “no” or “occasionally.”

These statements reveal that POSH is often treated as a one-time orientation topic rather than a living part of organizational operations.

Without consistent review and communication, POSH remains static and procedural. Institutions must institutionalize scheduled policy reviews, regular IC performance meetings, and ongoing educational updates to maintain relevance and accountability.

Subtheme 2.5 Operational Delays and Weak Communication Systems

Effective POSH compliance also depends on operational clarity. When asked how promptly POSH posters are updated following changes in IC membership, many leaders admitted that updates are “delayed or inconsistent.” In addition, they acknowledged that POSH related information on the organization's website was “available but not updated.”

These communication gaps may seem minor, but they can significantly erode employee trust and access to grievance channels.

Even minor administrative oversights send powerful signals about institutional priorities. Timely, visible updates to POSH information are not just logistical they're symbolic of how much the institution values transparency. Establishing a dedicated protocol for POSH information management is essential.

Subtheme 2.6 Challenges to Institutional Enforcement

Leaders were also asked about the obstacles to maintaining accountability under POSH. Their responses pointed to structural constraints and interpersonal resistance, citing issues like "resource or time constraints," "staff resistance," and "fear of false complaints."

These challenges highlight how policy enforcement often collides with real world limitations and scepticism.

Creating a POSH compliant culture is not only a legal responsibility but also a leadership challenge that requires emotional intelligence, policy knowledge, and cultural adaptability. Institutions must equip leaders with resources, training, and peer support systems to confidently uphold POSH even in the face of pushback.

During the FGD, participants mentioned there is increased formality and cautious behaviour at the workplace. Male employees shared that they were more mindful of their language and body language around female colleagues, often as a self-protective measure.

"You start watching every word or gesture, just to be safe."

Female participants acknowledged the presence of respectful conduct in the workplace; however, they noted that this seemed to be part of the broader organizational culture rather than a direct outcome of the POSH Act

"I feel safer, but not always comfortable."

Concerns were raised about how hierarchical power dynamics could influence the outcome of POSH complaints. Some participants shared doubts about whether senior or influential individuals would be held equally accountable.

"We aren't sure, but if the person in question is influential, the evidence and witnesses can be turned against you."

These reflections suggest that while visible improvements in professional behaviour and respectful conduct are present in the organization, these changes are perceived more as general features of the institutional culture rather than as direct outcomes of the POSH Act. The increased formality and caution among male employees indicate a shift towards risk averse interactions rather than proactive inclusivity.

Moreover, the emotional disconnect experienced by female participants suggests that respectful behaviour alone does not guarantee a sense of belonging or psychological comfort. The persisting concerns around hierarchical power dynamics further highlight an underlying mistrust in the impartiality of redressal mechanisms. Together, these insights reveal that while the surface level

culture may appear compliant and respectful, deeper cultural transformation particularly one rooted in accountability, openness, and emotional safety remains incomplete.

3. Gender Inclusivity

Gender inclusivity goes beyond policy implementation; it reflects how safe, heard, and supported employees feel across diverse roles and identities. This theme investigates how inclusive the organizational environment truly is, especially for women, and whether formal mechanisms translate into equitable participation, emotional safety, and confidence in institutional support. It also explores the influence of social and cultural norms on reporting and professional comfort.

Subtheme 3.1 Institutional Confidence vs. Social Deterrents

Female employees expressed confidence in the system's ability to address complaints but also cited social and familial pressures that might prevent them from filing one. When asked, "Would you feel confident in filing a complaint?" one respondent noted:

"Although I'll be confident enough to file a complaint if I share it with my family, they may ask me to avoid conflict and ignore it. They won't support me filing it."

This reveals that internal trust in the system does not always translate into action due to external constraints.

Subtheme 3.2 The Safety Comfort Gap

The question, "Do you feel safe and comfortable working with male colleagues?" prompted mixed responses. While most women said they felt safe, several reported emotional discomfort.

As one stated: "I do feel safe within the organization. but I'm not entirely comfortable."

This underscores that physical safety does not always equate to psychological ease.

Subtheme 3.3 Accountability and Power

When asked, "Do you think someone in a powerful position would be held accountable under POSH?" some expressed doubt. One respondent reflected:

"Because powerful people can use threats, pressure, or influence."

This indicates that institutional trust is undermined by perceptions of unequal accountability.

Thus, gender inclusivity is supported procedurally but undermined by cultural norms, emotional dynamics, and perceived power asymmetries. Institutions must build inclusive practices that account for emotional safety, social pressure, and equitable redressal.

During the focus group discussion, participants confirmed the presence of institutional redressal mechanisms, varying levels of trust were expressed in their accessibility and effectiveness. Many women stated that while they would feel confident filing a complaint internally, external social and familial pressures could influence their decision.

"I know I can file a complaint, but I'd think ten times before doing it it's not just about the law, it's about what follows."

Such responses illustrate that inclusivity must extend beyond policy availability to include cultural sensitivity and support systems that empower individuals to act without fear of backlash within the organization or at home.

4. Mental Health and Psychological Support

The psychological well being of employees involved in POSH related incidents is often overlooked in institutional processes. This theme examines the extent to which organizations recognize and respond to the emotional toll of harassment and its redressal. It explores the availability of mental health services, the preparedness of support systems, and whether employees feel emotionally safe and supported throughout POSH proceedings.

Subtheme 4.1 Absence of Institutional Support Systems

When asked about access to psychological support during POSH related processes, employees were generally unaware of such services.

Responses included:

"I'm not sure if counselling is available."

"There's no formal support as far as I know."

This reflects a failure in communication and prioritization of mental well-being.

Subtheme 4.2 Procedural but Not Emotional Engagement

While employees acknowledged that procedures are followed, they expressed dissatisfaction with the emotional support offered during POSH inquiries.

As one participant put it:

"They follow the process, but not the emotional side."

This indicates a lack of mental health support from institutional actors. The institutional response to POSH is technically sound but lacks psychological depth. Without meaningful mental health support availability, the system feels unapproachable. Institutions must integrate well communicated support services and foster emotionally intelligent POSH engagement.

During the FGD, a unanimous insight across participants was the lack of visible or accessible mental health support during or after POSH related processes. Most were unaware of counselling provisions or emotional support services available through the institution.

"If something traumatic happens, you have to deal with it alone—there's no support group or counsellor we know of."

While the procedural side of POSH implementation was acknowledged, the emotional aspect was largely absent. Participants emphasized the value of integrating optional counselling, emotional check ins, and trauma informed practices to support employees holistically.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings of this Study illuminate a layered and often fragmented implementation of the POSH Act within public health institutions. While the presence of policy structures such as ICs, training, and posters demonstrates basic institutional compliance, the lived realities of employees suggest that deeper, more human centered integration of POSH is still a work in progress.

A key insight from the theme of Awareness of POSH is that although most employees and leaders are aware of the Act and its mechanisms, this awareness is largely procedural. Training is often annual and standardized, with little room for role specific engagement or sustained learning. Posters and visual materials, while frequently displayed, do not offer meaningful interpretive content. This reflects a system that meets the letter of the law but struggles to foster an environment of reflection and clarity. To be effective, awareness must be a continuous and evolving process that links legal knowledge with workplace realities.

The theme of Knowledge of Harassment highlights how poorly defined many behavioural boundaries remain in practice. While employees are generally clear that harassment is unacceptable, they express uncertainty over what qualifies as harassment in nuanced interpersonal situations. The recurring concern over the potential misuse of POSH points to a climate driven policy driven more by apprehension than by clarity. Without practical, scenario-based learning, employees are left to navigate grey areas without the tools to distinguish between miscommunication and misconduct.

In terms of Organizational Culture, the findings suggest a shift towards formalism, especially among male employees who reported avoiding informal interaction with female colleagues. While this reflects a heightened awareness, it also introduces emotional distance that inhibits collaboration and team cohesion. Leadership responses further revealed significant gaps in institutional monitoring, weak communication infrastructure, and a lack of consistent cultural modelling. POSH is often treated as an administrative requirement rather than a living, adaptive part of organizational life. The absence of motivational programs and routine assessments of team dynamics suggest that institutions have yet to fully embrace POSH as a pillar of ethical workplace culture.

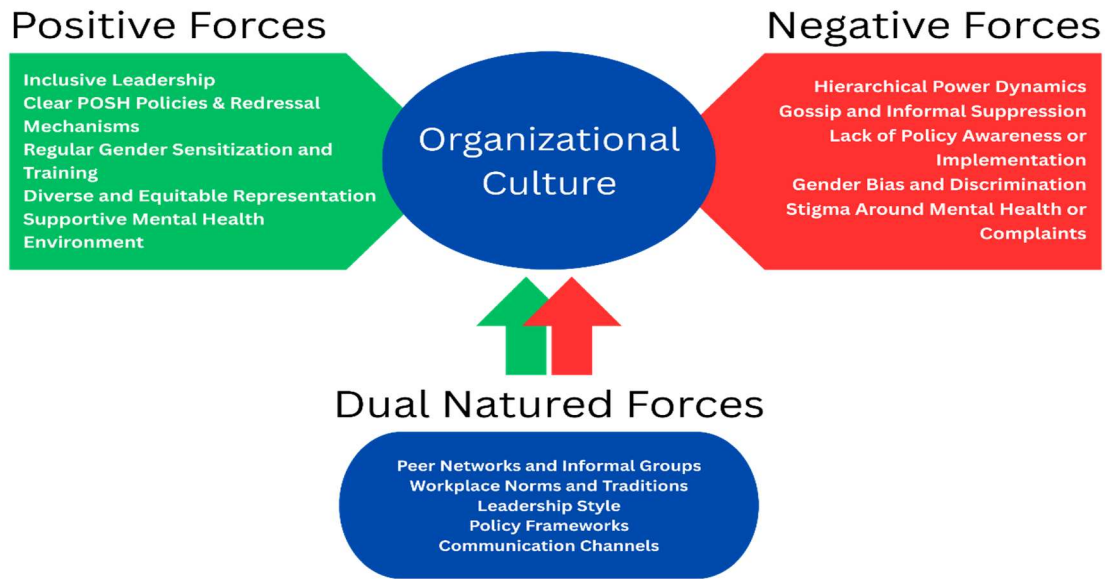
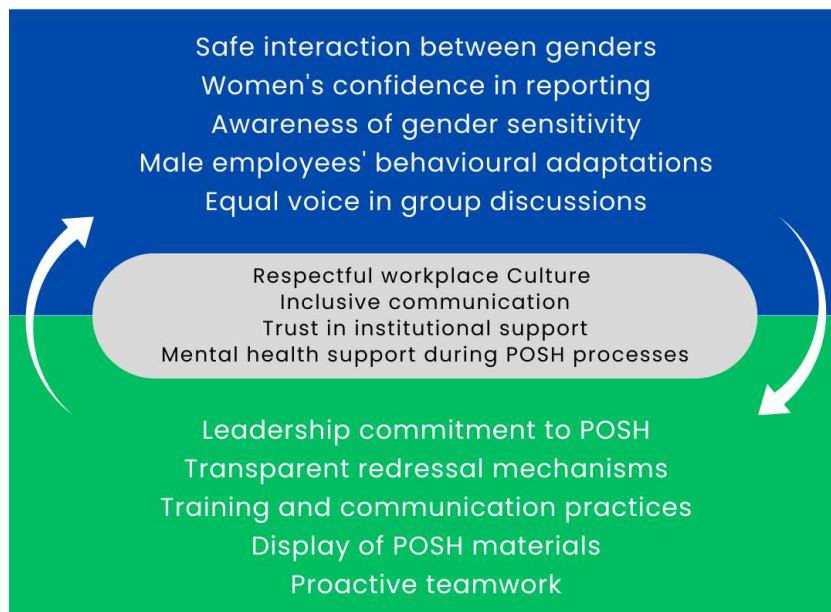


Figure 5.1 Forces that Affect Organizational Culture

The theme of Gender Inclusivity uncovers a paradox: women feel safer in formal terms but remain emotionally hesitant or socially constrained. Many women expressed confidence in the institutional framework yet also cited fear of family disapproval, reputational harm, or lack of confidentiality as reasons they might not pursue complaints. Furthermore, while women report feeling physically safe, they do not always feel psychologically at ease or equally included in informal settings. Perceptions of unequal accountability, particularly regarding influential individuals, continue to erode institutional trust.

Gender Inclusivity Factors



Organizational Culture Factors

Figure 5.2 Factors of Gender Inclusivity and Organizational Culture that Align with each other

Lastly, Mental Health and Psychological Support emerges as one of the most overlooked yet critical aspects of POSH implementation. While most organizations have clear procedural pathways, few offer emotional support or trauma sensitive engagement during or after complaints. Employees reported not knowing whether counselling was available or whether the IC was trained to handle the emotional aspects of redressal. The distinction between procedural fairness and emotional support is critical: justice must be both delivered and felt.

Overall, the results reveal that while the infrastructure for POSH exists, its effectiveness depends heavily on how it is communicated, modelled, and internalized. Institutions that treat POSH as a compliance mechanism alone risk alienating employees and reinforcing silence. True transformation will require a shift from formalism to empathy, from awareness to engagement, and from isolated enforcement to integrated culture building. Only then can the promise of POSH as a safeguard of dignity and equality be meaningfully realized.

True compliance with the POSH Act requires a structured, multi-level approach as illustrated in the lighthouse framework (Figure 5.3).

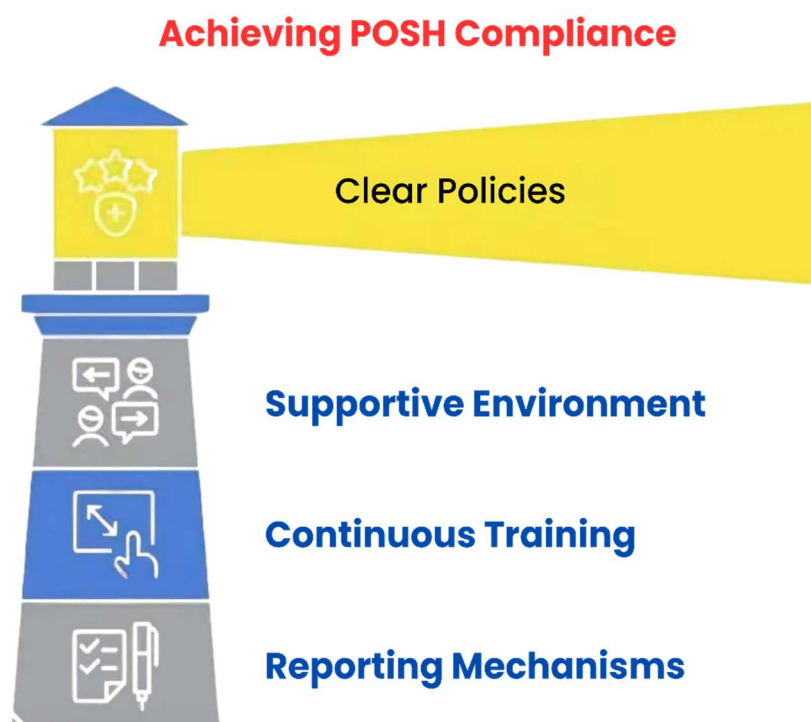


Figure 5.3: Achieving POSH Compliance – A Lighthouse Model

This illustration presents a visual metaphor of POSH compliance as a lighthouse. The four foundational components—clear policies, supportive environment, continuous training, and accessible reporting mechanisms—are essential to guiding institutions toward a culture of inclusion and accountability.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study explored how employees in public health institutions perceive and experience the implementation of the POSH Act. By examining their understanding of the law, the effectiveness of its operationalization, the behavioural shifts it has generated, and the emotional support structures surrounding it, the study reveals both progress and persisting gaps.

Findings affirm that the POSH Act is considered a necessary and legitimate safeguard. Its presence has contributed to increased awareness, professional conduct, and formal mechanisms for redressal. However, the extent to which these outcomes are deeply internalized across institutions remains uneven. Many employees, particularly men, have adjusted their behaviour to align with the Act, but often in defensive or cautious ways rather than confident or collaborative.

At the same time, women employees' express concerns about whether reporting processes are safe, inclusive, and capable of holding those in power accountable. These findings highlight a disconnect between formal compliance and the lived realities of institutional culture.

A particularly concerning gap lies in emotional and psychological safety. Despite the inherent stress of filing or responding to harassment complaints, there is little awareness or availability of structured mental health support. This omission affects individual well-being and undermines institutional trust and the effectiveness of the POSH framework itself.

The findings point to a need for public health institutions to move beyond procedural compliance toward a culture of genuine safety and inclusion. The success of the POSH Act cannot be measured merely by the number of cases filed or resolved. It must be assessed by the extent to which employees, across genders and hierarchies, feel heard, protected, and empowered.

Building such a culture requires leadership commitment, trauma informed support systems, continuous education, and a deep institutional belief that safety is not just a legal obligation but a shared ethical responsibility.

Recommendations

1. Develop an Inclusive, Role Specific, and Continuous POSH Awareness Ecosystem

This study highlights that POSH awareness in institutions remains largely procedural. To address this, it is recommended that organizations implement ongoing, role specific training that includes real life scenarios and tailored content for staff, leadership, and IC members. Awareness should be reinforced through regular workshops, peer discussions, and interactive campaigns that go beyond compliance. To promote mutual understanding and reduce emotional distance among colleagues, institutions should also organize inclusive team building events, such as gender sensitization workshops, sports, and informal gatherings that encourage healthy interaction between male and female employees. Clear and accessible communication of POSH policies and procedures must also be ensured across all organizational levels.

2. Integrate Mental Health and Emotional Support into POSH Implementation

Findings from the study indicate a lack of mental support in current POSH processes. Institutions should embed trauma informed practices by offering confidential counselling services and training Internal Committee members to recognize and respond to emotional needs. Establishing a supportive environment that prioritizes mental well being can help survivors feel safer and more empowered to report incidents. Making mental support a visible and integral part of POSH implementation will shift the approach from reactive compliance to one that genuinely centres dignity, care, and psychological safety.

standardized psychological assessments. Lastly, the sensitive nature of the topic may have led some participants to withhold or moderate their responses, potentially affecting the depth of disclosure. These limitations suggest the need for broader, more inclusive, and longitudinal studies in the future.

Limitation of the Study

This study, while offering valuable insights into the implementation of the POSH Act within public health institutions, is subject to certain limitations. Firstly, the research was confined to two institutions with a relatively small sample size, which may not fully represent the broader landscape of workplace harassment experiences across sectors or regions in India. The use of purposive sampling, though appropriate for qualitative research, may have introduced bias by including participants who were more aware or comfortable discussing POSH related issues. Additionally, the study focused exclusively on public sector settings, limiting the applicability of its findings to private or informal workspaces where dynamics and enforcement may differ. Although both male and female perspectives were included, the study did not incorporate voices from individuals with diverse gender identities, which could have enriched the understanding of inclusivity. Furthermore, while mental health emerged as a key theme, the study relied on self-reported experiences without using

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