

An Assessment of POSH Implementation On Gender Inclusivity and Organizational Culture in Workplaces

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Why address Workplace sexual Harassment

- Sexual harassment in the workplace **remains a pervasive and persistent issue**, disproportionately affecting women
- UNDP defines it as **any unwelcome sexual advance or behavior causing offense or humiliation**.
- Sexual harassment **undermines women's safety, dignity, and participation** in the workplace.
- Legal provisions exist, but **awareness and accountability** are **inconsistent**.
- **Underreporting** is driven by fear, stigma, and lack of trust in institutions.
- The POSH Act, 2013, aims to address this issue by enforcing institutional accountability and providing a legal redressal framework. Despite its implementation, **underreporting, fear of retaliation, and normalization of inappropriate behavior** continue to hinder its impact.
- My study seeks to **analyze the actual enforcement and cultural integration** of POSH policies in public health institutions, focusing on **how gender inclusivity and organizational behavior are shaped by compliance practices**.

Prevalence and Consequences

- 1 Women may self-restrict education/career due to fear of harassment.
- 2 Harassment leads to mental distress, economic loss (₹1.2 trillion annually), attrition, and absenteeism.
- 3 27% of Indian women in formal employment faced harassment in 2023; 41% in healthcare & education.
- 4 4 in 5 women in Delhi and over 50% in the EU report lifetime harassment.

Evolution of the POSH Act

1992

Bhanwari Devi Case

- Bhanwari Devi, a grassroots worker in Rajasthan, was gang-raped for trying to prevent a child marriage.
- Her case highlighted the lack of workplace protection for women and triggered national outrage, leading to demands for institutional safeguards.

1997

Vishaka Guidelines

- The Supreme Court, in Vishaka & Others v. State of Rajasthan, issued guidelines recognizing sexual harassment at the workplace as a violation of women's fundamental rights under Articles 14, 15, and 21 of the Constitution.
- The guidelines mandated preventive steps, redressal mechanisms, and employer accountability until a formal law was enacted.

2013

POSH Act Enacted

- The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act) was enacted. It made Internal Committees (ICs) mandatory in workplaces with 10 or more employees.
- Defined sexual harassment broadly, covering all working women, including domestic workers. Allowed for conciliation (if requested by the complainant) and set a 3-month time limit for filing complaints.

2023

Procedural Update

- Supreme Court clarified that the 90-day timeline for Internal Committee inquiries under the POSH Act is advisory, not mandatory. Inquiries are valid even if they exceed 90 days
- The penalty for non-compliance was proposed to be increased to ₹50 lakhs

2024

POSH Amendment Bill

- The Government of India introduced the POSH Amendment Bill in 2024, proposing Complaint filing time extension, Removal of conciliation, Rationale, Objective.

Rationale of the Study

Persistent Issue: Workplace sexual harassment continues in India despite the POSH Act being in force for over a decade.

Weak Enforcement: Implementation remains weak, particularly in public sector and hierarchical institutions, due to: Power asymmetries & Limited institutional support.

Literature Gaps: Focus on legal compliance & Neglect of lived experiences and structural/cultural barriers.

Study Focus:

- Women's experiences with redressal mechanisms
- Role of male employees and institutional actors in creating safe spaces
- Men as allies – an underexplored perspective
- Mental health impact of redressal processes – rarely addressed

Contribution:

- Offers a holistic, intersectional view of workplace harassment
- Targets systemic change within public health institutions

Literature Review

Research Article	Key Findings
Pulkit Raj (2023)	Awareness of POSH linked to safer environments; gaps in implementation in small firms due to weak training and reporting structures.
Vanita Odedara et al. (2025)	Superficial awareness; no regular training; poor understanding of IC roles; unclear reporting procedures.
I Arun & Dr. Anandan (2023)	Over 50% lacked awareness of IC role; recommended ongoing training and communication channels.
Lakshmi Jayapal & Manoj (2023)	Students unaware of POSH systems; need for awareness campaigns in educational institutions.
Basanti Negi & Razia Chauhan (2025)	POSH improved dialogue, but IC formation/training inconsistent; many unaware of rights.
Gupta, Fatima & Kandikuppa (2021)	Marginalized women face more barriers; law alone is insufficient without inclusive enforcement.
Sindhu KK & Rangasamy (2025)	Strong correlation between POSH enforcement and a respectful workplace; emphasized leadership support.
M. Krishnaveni & Nandhini (2025)	87.5% aware of POSH law, but 17.5% had no training; engagement inconsistent.
Amit Rathore (2024)	Barriers: gender norms, fear of retaliation, poor trust in ICs; advocated IC strengthening and monitoring.
Roselin & Rao (2024)	Stigma, fear of retaliation, and lack of confidentiality deterred complaints; trust in ICs low.
Dr. Kanak Wadhvani (2024)	POSH treated as a checkbox; ICs undertrained; cultural denial; suggested transparency and oversight.
Mosaic (2024)	POSH excludes queer/trans identities; called for legal amendment and inclusive provisions.
Navjeet Kaur & Pallvi Arora (2021)	Inclusive workplaces improve outcomes; highlighted persistent gender gaps in representation.

Primary Objective

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

Secondary Objective

1. Examine awareness levels of employees and management regarding POSH policies.
2. Analyze the influence of POSH implementation on gender sensitivity and inclusivity.
3. Evaluate perceptions of safety and support post POSH implementation.
4. Assess compliance with POSH Act requirements (IC formation, training).
5. Document the impact of complaint redressal on employee mental health.

Methodology

Qualitative Research Design

Data Collection

1. Semi-structured interviews
2. One Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

Sample Size

30 Employees of NIHFW and NHSRC selected, through Purposive sampling

Area of Interest

1. Gender inequality
2. Organizational culture
3. Effectiveness of POSH implementation

Thematic Analysis approach used for Data Analysis

Result

Thematic findings from interviews and FGDs organized into four key areas:

Awareness of POSH

1. Awareness of Policy & IC Structures
2. Visibility vs Engagement
3. Training Gaps
4. Interpretive Ambiguity
5. Misuse concerns

Gender Inclusivity

1. Social Deterrents
2. Power Imbalance

Organizational Culture

1. Fear based Adjustment
2. Emotional Distance
3. Leadership Gaps

Mental Health & Psychological Support

1. Lack of Awareness
2. Procedural vs Mental Support

Awareness of POSH

Subtheme	Key Insight	Participant Quotes
Awareness of Policy and IC Structures	POSH is known institutionally, but trainings are generic and do not vary by role; ad hoc staff often left out.	"Annually." – on training frequency "No, same as others." – on training differentiation "Some ad hoc staff had no awareness of POSH at all."
Visibility vs Engagement	POSH materials are visible but lack explanatory content; posters seen as symbolic.	"The posters are there, with IC members' names, email IDs, and telephone numbers, but they don't spark any further awareness." "The posters are always visible, but they don't educate about sexual harassment."
Interpretive Ambiguity and Misuse Concerns	Employees struggle with grey areas; fear misuse; lack of clarity in real scenarios.	"It is used effectively... but can be misused sometimes." "The posters... don't explain what sexual harassment actually is." "Sometimes it's hard to say if something is harassment or just a misunderstanding." "One of the group members didn't know that the POSH Act doesn't cover men, which raised their concern." "Real world cases should be discussed otherwise it stays theoretical."

Awareness of POSH

1. Annual training and posters exist but lack interpretive depth.
2. Employees know of ICs but are unclear on what constitutes harassment.
3. Fear of misuse exists among male staff, especially regarding informal interaction.
4. Awareness of POSH Act and IC exists but is mostly symbolic.
5. Trainings are standardized, with no special sessions for IC or senior staff.
6. Posters are visible, but lack clarity or engagement.
7. Employees show confusion about what constitutes harassment.
8. Misuse concerns and interpretive ambiguity exist.
9. FGD insights: training is annual and theoretical, lacks real-life scenarios.

Organizational Culture

Subtheme	Key Insight	Participant Quotes
Fear-Based Behaviour	Men became hyper-vigilant post-POSH; avoiding gestures or casual interactions.	"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." "To avoid being misinterpreted." "To show respectful behaviour towards female colleagues."
Emotional Distance	Cautious male behaviour creates communication gaps and alienation for women.	"Men are cautious now; they don't speak freely in group settings."
Diverging Views on Impact	Mixed opinions on whether POSH has meaningfully changed workplace culture.	"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."
Leadership Gaps	POSH implementation is passive or inconsistent without active leadership.	"Some leaders are passive or indifferent."
Monitoring & Follow-up	Policy reviews and IC evaluations occur rarely or reactively.	"Meetings are held only when issues arise."
Operational Delays	IC poster updates and web info are often delayed, reducing trust.	"POSH information is available but not updated."
Enforcement Challenges	Barriers include resource constraints, resistance, and fear of false complaints.	"You start watching every word or gesture, just to be safe." "I feel safer, but not always comfortable." "We aren't sure, but if the person in question is influential, the evidence and witnesses can be turned against you."

Organizational Culture

- Formal behavior has increased, but emotional distance persists.
- Leadership involvement is uneven, and communication gaps are prevalent.
- POSH implementation is seen as procedural, not cultural.
- Male employees reported hyper-vigilant behaviour (avoiding gestures/informal conversations).
- Fear based adjustment have led to emotional distance
- Mixed views: Some feel POSH improved professionalism; others see no real change.
- Leadership engagement is inconsistent—often passive or reactive.
- Gaps in communication, outdated IC posters, and weak follow-up practices.
- FGD concerns: hierarchical power may affect outcomes of complaints.

Gender Inclusivity

Subtheme	Key Insight	Participant Quotes
Institutional Confidence vs. Social Deterrents	Women trust internal systems but face social/family pressure not to report.	"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." "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."
The Safety Comfort Gap	Women report physical safety but emotional discomfort at work.	"I do feel safe within the organization. but I'm not entirely comfortable."
Accountability and Power	Concerns that powerful individuals may escape accountability under POSH.	"Because powerful people can use threats, pressure, or influence."

Gender Inclusivity

- Women feel safer but not always comfortable, with external social pressures affecting complaint reporting.
- Doubts remain about whether powerful individuals are held accountable.
- Women trust the redressal system internally, but external social pressure deters action.
- Many women feel physically safe but emotionally uncomfortable at work.
- Concerns about inequality in holding powerful people accountable.
- FGD reflections: Policy access exists, but social backlash is a key deterrent.

Mental Health & Support

Subtheme	Key Insight	Participant Quotes
Absence of Institutional Support Systems	Employees were largely unaware of any counselling or emotional support during POSH processes.	"I'm not sure if counselling is available." "There's no formal support as far as I know."
Procedural but Not Emotional Engagement	POSH processes are followed, but emotional needs are unmet; mental health support is lacking.	"They follow the process, but not the emotional side." "If something traumatic happens, you have to deal with it alone—there's no support group or counsellor we know of."

Mental Health Support

- Women feel safer but not always comfortable, with external social pressures affecting complaint reporting.
- Doubts remain about whether powerful individuals are held accountable.
- Women trust the redressal system internally, but external social pressure deters action.
- Many women feel physically safe but emotionally uncomfortable at work.
- Concerns about inequality in holding powerful people accountable.
- FGD reflections: Policy access exists, but social backlash is a key deterrent.

Limitations of the Study

- Study was limited to two public health institutions with a relatively small, purposively selected sample, which may not fully capture the broader diversity of workplace harassment experiences across sectors in India.
- The exclusive focus on public settings limits the applicability of findings to private or informal workplaces.
- Additionally, while both male and female perspectives were included, voices from diverse gender identities were not represented.
- The study also relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to bias and lacked clinical assessment of mental health impacts.

Recommendations

Develop an Inclusive, Role-Specific, and Continuous POSH Awareness Ecosystem:

- Conduct ongoing, scenario-based training for all staff levels.
- Promote open discussions through workshops, team-building, and sensitization activities.
- Ensure easy access to POSH policy material across platforms.

Integrate Mental Health and Emotional Support:

- Train IC members in trauma-informed handling of complaints.
- Provide confidential counselling services and visible emotional support.
- Normalize mental well-being as a core part of organizational safety culture.

Thank You