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Research

Prevention of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace (POSH)

India Legal & HR Considerations

December 2023



POSH ACT

in collaboration with



Research

Prevention Sexual Harassment at the Workplace (POSH)

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Introduction

Long bygone are the days when men used to be the sole bread-winners of a family. Globalization has brought a radical change in the status of women worldwide. However, with the larger influx of women in the main-stream workforce of India, sexual harassment at workplace has assumed greater dimensions.

Workplace sexual harassment is a form of gender discrimination which violates a woman's fundamental *right to equality and right to life*, guaranteed under Articles 14, 15 and 21 of the Constitution of India ("**Constitution**"). Workplace sexual harassment not only creates an insecure and hostile working environment for women but also impedes their ability to deliver in today's competing world. Apart from interfering with their performance at work, it also adversely affects their social and economic growth¹ and puts them through physical and emotional suffering.

India's first legislation specifically addressing the issue of workplace sexual harassment; the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 ("**POSH Act**") was enacted by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, India in 2013. The Government also subsequently notified the rules under the POSH Act titled the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Rules, 2013 ("**POSH Rules**"). The year 2013 also witnessed the promulgation of the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 ("**Criminal Law Amendment Act**") which has criminalized offences such as sexual harassment, stalking and voyeurism.

The POSH Act has been enacted with the objective of preventing and protecting women against workplace sexual harassment and to ensure effective redressal of complaints of sexual harassment. While the statute aims at providing every woman (irrespective of her age or employment status) a safe, secure and dignified working environment, free from all forms of harassment, proper implementation of the provisions of the statute remains a challenge.

Although the law preventing sexual harassment at workplace has been in force since 2013, there remains lack of clarity on various aspects pertaining to the statute, including what constitutes sexual harassment, obligations of an employer, remedies/safeguards available to the victim, procedure of investigation, etc. Many are also not fully aware of the criminal consequences of sexual harassment. Lewd jokes, inappropriate comments etc. are dismissed as normal, with women being hesitant to initiate actions due to apprehension of being disbelieved or ridiculed; which underpins the need for greater awareness and greater enforcement.

Any tool would be useless if the person operating it is unaware of the way it is to be used. Therefore, the objective of this booklet is to serve as a ready reckoner to all the stakeholders and re-educate them on the law relating to workplace sexual harassment.

This booklet focusses mainly on the POSH Act and other relevant laws in India pertaining to workplace sexual harassment. Further, the objective of this booklet is to create more awareness on the issue and simultaneously equip employers in providing women a safe and secure working environment. The booklet also discusses the importance of 'prevention' as the best tool for elimination of this menace in a multi-cultural society as ours.

1 Statement of Objects and Reasons, Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013.

Evolution of the Law on Workplace Sexual Harassment

The elimination of gender-based discrimination has been one of the fundamentals of the Constitutional edifice of India. The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Constitution, in its Preamble, fundamental rights, fundamental duties and Directive Principles. However, workplace sexual harassment in India, was for the very first time recognized by the Supreme Court of India (“**Supreme Court**”) in its landmark judgment of *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan*¹ (“**Vishaka Judgment**”), wherein the Supreme Court framed certain guidelines and issued directions to the Union of India to enact an appropriate law for combating workplace sexual harassment. Nothing less of an irony, the POSH Act and the POSH Rules was enacted 16 years after the Vishaka Judgement.

In the absence of a specific law in India, the Supreme Court, in the Vishaka Judgment, laid down certain guidelines making it mandatory for every employer to provide a mechanism to redress grievances pertaining to workplace sexual harassment (“**Vishaka Guidelines**”) which were being followed by employers until the enactment of the POSH Act.

I. The Vishaka Judgement

In 1992, Bhanwari Devi, a *dalit* woman employed with the rural development programme of the Government of Rajasthan, was brutally gang raped on account of her efforts to curb the then prevalent practice of child marriage.² This incident revealed the hazards that working women were exposed to on a day to day basis and highlighted the urgency for safeguards to be implemented in this regard. Championing the cause of working women in the country, women’s rights activists and lawyers filed a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court under the banner of Vishaka.

The Supreme Court for the first time, acknowledged the glaring legislative inadequacy and acknowledged workplace sexual harassment as a human rights violation. In framing the Vishaka Guidelines, the Supreme Court placed reliance on the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations, in 1979, which India has both signed and ratified. As per the Vishaka judgment, the Vishaka Guidelines issued under Article 32 of the Constitution, until such time a legislative framework on the subject has been drawn-up and enacted, would have the effect of law and would have to be mandatorily followed by organizations, both in the private and government sector.

As per the Vishaka judgment, “*Sexual Harassment includes such unwelcome sexually determined behavior (whether directly or by implication) as:*

- a. *Physical contact and advances*
- b. *A demand or request for sexual favours;*
- c. *Sexually coloured remarks;*
- d. *Showing pornography;*
- e. *Any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of sexual nature.*

¹ 1997 6 SCC 241; AIR 1997 SC 3011.

² Indira Jaising, Law Relating to Sexual Harassment at the Workplace (2014).

 Evolution of the Law on Workplace Sexual Harassment

Where any of these acts are committed in circumstances under which the victim of such conduct has a reasonable apprehension that in relation to the victim's employment or work (whether she is drawing salary or honorarium or voluntary service, whether in government, public or private enterprise), such conduct can be humiliating and may constitute a health and safety problem, it amounts to sexual harassment in the workplace. It is discriminatory, for instance, when the woman has reasonable grounds to believe that her objection would disadvantage her in connection with her employment or work (including recruiting and promotion), or when it creates a hostile working environment. Adverse consequences might result if the victim does not consent to the conduct in question or raises any objection thereto."

II. Post Vishaka – Some Other Judgments

A. Apparel Export Promotion Council v. A.K Chopra

The Vishaka judgment initiated a nationwide discourse on workplace sexual harassment and threw out wide open an issue that was swept under the carpet for the longest time. The first case before the Supreme Court after Vishaka in this respect was the case of *Apparel Export Promotion Council v. A.K Chopra*.³ In this case, the Supreme Court reiterated the law laid down in the Vishaka Judgment and upheld the dismissal of a superior officer of the Delhi based Apparel Export Promotion Council who was found guilty of sexually harassing a subordinate female employee at the workplace. In this judgment, the Supreme Court enlarged the definition of sexual harassment by ruling that physical contact was not essential for it to amount to an act of sexual harassment. The Supreme Court explained that *“sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination projected through unwelcome sexual advances, request for sexual favours and other verbal or physical conduct with sexual overtones, whether directly or by implication, particularly when submission to or rejection of such conduct by the female employee was capable of being used for affecting the employment of the female employee and unreasonably interfering with her work performance and had the effect of creating an intimidating or hostile work environment for her.”*

B. Medha Kotwal Lele & Ors. v. Union of India & Ors.

A letter written by Dr. Medha Kotwal of Aalochana (an NGO) highlighted a number of individual cases of sexual harassment stating that the Vishaka Guidelines were not being effectively implemented. Converting the letter into a writ petition, the Supreme Court took cognizance and undertook monitoring of implementation of the Vishaka Guidelines across the country by directing state governments to file affidavits emphasizing on the steps taken by them to implement the Vishaka Guidelines. In its judgment, the Supreme Court observed that *“the implementation of the Vishaka Guidelines has to be not only in form but also in substance and spirit so as to make available safe and secure environment for women at workplace in every aspect and thereby enabling working women to work with dignity, decency and due respect.”* Not being satisfied with the implementation of the Vishaka Guidelines, it directed states to put in place sufficient mechanisms to ensure effective implementation of the Vishaka Guidelines. Finally, the Supreme Court asserted that in case of a non-compliance or non-adherence of the Vishaka Guidelines, it would be open to the aggrieved persons to approach the respective High Courts.

³ (1999) 1 SCC 759.

Evolution of the Law on Workplace Sexual Harassment

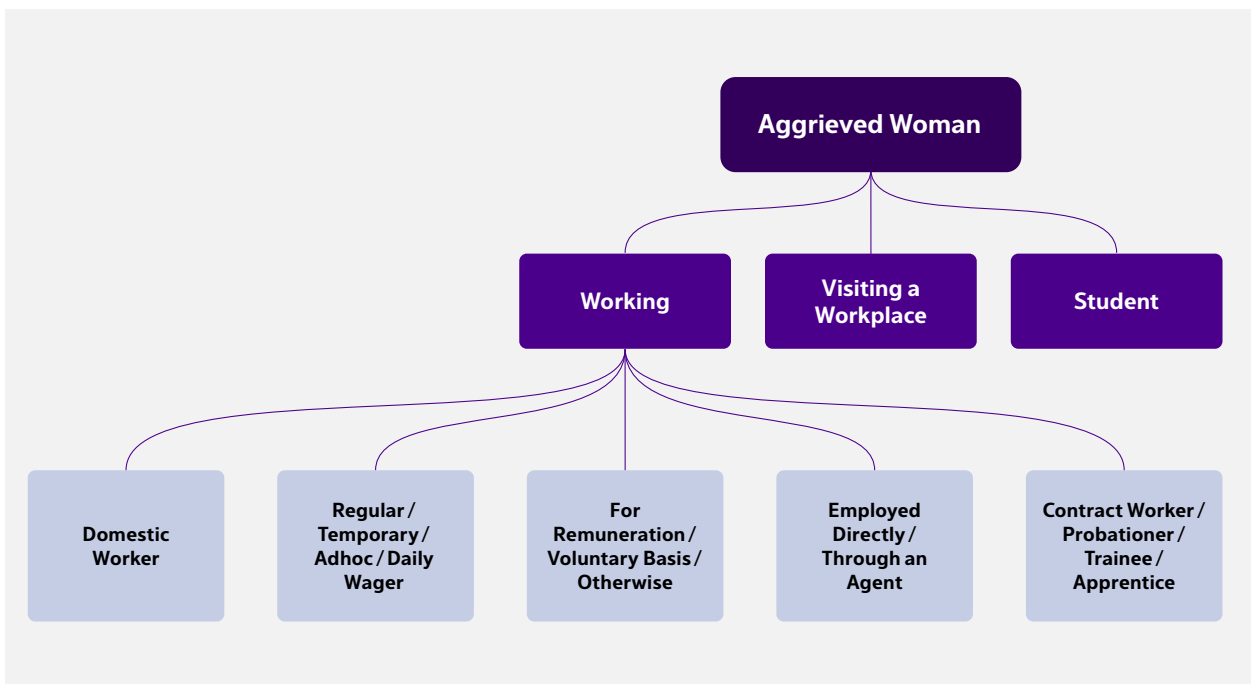
Legislative Timeline of Posh Act and Posh Rules

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| 2007 | Draft Protection of Women against Sexual Harassment at Workplace Bill, 2007 ("Bill") approved by the Union Cabinet. |
| 2010 | The Bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha. |
| 2012 | The Bill was amended and re-introduced in the Lok Sabha. |
| September 03, 2012 | The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Re-dressal) Bill, 2012 was passed by the Lok Sabha |
| February 26, 2013 | The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Re-dressal) Bill, 2012 was passed by the Rajya Sabha. |
| April 23, 2013 | The POSH Act received the President's assent and was published in the Gazette of India as Act No. 14 of 2013. |
| December 09, 2013 | The Indian Ministry of Women and Child Development notified December 09, 2013 as the effective date of the POSH Act and the POSH Rules. |

Key Provisions of the POSH Act

I. Applicability and Scope

- **Applicable Jurisdiction:** The POSH Act extends to the ‘whole of India’.¹
- **Aggrieved Woman:** As per the POSH Act, an ‘aggrieved woman’ in relation to a workplace, is a woman of any age, whether employed or not, who alleges to have been subjected to any act of sexual harassment.² Given that the definition does not necessitate the woman to be an employee, even a customer/client who may be sexually harassed at a workplace can claim protection under the POSH Act.
- The POSH Act further stipulates that a woman shall not be subjected to sexual harassment at her workplace.³ Accordingly, it may be noted that in order for a woman to claim protection under the POSH Act, the incident of sexual harassment should have taken place at the ‘workplace’.
- The POSH Act is not a gender-neutral legislation and protects only women. Therefore, the safeguards under the POSH Act are not applicable to ‘men’ victims although employers may choose to extend the protection through their policy.



- **Covered Bodies:** The POSH Act applies to both the organized and unorganized sectors⁴ in India. It *inter alia*, applies to government bodies, private and public sector organizations, non-governmental organizations, organizations carrying out commercial, vocational, educational, entertainment, industrial, financial activities, hospitals and nursing homes, educational institutes, sports institutions and stadiums used for training individuals and also applies to a dwelling place or a house.⁵

1 Section 1 of the POSH Act.

2 Section 2(a) of the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act.

3 Section 3 of the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act.

4 Having less than 10 workers.

5 Section 2(o) of the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act.

II. What Amounts to Sexual Harassment?

The POSH Act defines ‘sexual harassment’ in line with the Supreme Court’s definition of ‘sexual harassment’ in the Vishaka Judgment. As per the POSH Act, ‘sexual harassment’ includes unwelcome sexually tinted behaviour, whether directly or by implication, such as (i) physical contact and advances, (ii) demand or request for sexual favours, (iii) making sexually coloured remarks, (iv) showing pornography, or (v) any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature.⁶

The following circumstances, among other circumstances, if they occur or are present in relation to or connected with any act or behaviour of sexual harassment may amount to sexual harassment:

- implied or explicit promise of preferential treatment in employment;
- implied or explicit threat of detrimental treatment in employment;
- implied or explicit threat about present or future employment status;
- interference with work or creating an intimidating or offensive or hostile work environment; or
- humiliating treatment likely to affect the lady employee’s health or safety.⁷

As you would note from above, the definition of ‘sexual harassment’ under the POSH Act is wide enough to cover both direct or implied sexual conduct which may involve physical, verbal or even written conduct. The key distinguishing feature is that the conduct is unwanted and unwelcome by the recipient. It includes quid pro quo sexual harassment, a form of sexual blackmail (which if translated in English, would mean ‘this for that’). In a typical situation of quid pro quo harassment, the respondent being a person in power, pressurizes the woman employee (usually a subordinate) for sexual favours in exchange for advancement in the workplace or threat of adverse employment action. The definition also includes reference to creating an ‘intimidate, offensive or hostile working environment’. An example would be a work environment where an individual is subject to unwelcome comments about her body type resulting in the woman employee feeling embarrassed and unable to work properly.

While some forms of sexual harassment such as sexual assault are inherently offensive and egregious, and may need to occur only once for it to be treated as ‘sexual harassment’, some other forms may not be easily distinguishable. Since there is no fine line test in determining what would amount to a ‘hostile working environment’, the burden will lie on the internal committee to decide whether the harassment suffered by a victim is sufficiently severe to have created a hostile working environment or not. Further, determining what constitutes ‘sexual harassment’ depends upon the specific facts and the context in which the conduct has occurred.

In 2010, the High Court of Delhi⁸ endorsed the view that sexual harassment is a subjective experience and for that reason held “A complete understanding of the complainant’s view requires... an analysis of the different perspectives of men and women. Conduct that many men consider unobjectionable may offend many women... Men tend to view some forms of sexual harassment as “harmless social interactions to which only overly-sensitive women would object. The characteristically male view depicts sexual harassment as comparatively harmless amusement... Men, who are rarely victims of sexual assault, may view sexual conduct in a vacuum without a full appreciation of the social setting or the underlying threat of violence that a woman may perceive.”

⁶ Section 2(n) of the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act.

⁷ Section 3(2) of the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act.

⁸ Dr. Punita K. Sodhi v. Union of India & Ors. W.P. (C) 367/2009 & CMS 828, 11426/2009.

Please refer to **Chapter 5** for examples of conduct that amounts to ‘sexual harassment’.

III. Employee

The definition of an ‘employee’ under the POSH Act is fairly wide to cover regular, temporary, ad hoc employees, individuals engaged on a daily wage basis, either directly or through an agent, contract labourers, co-workers, probationers, trainees, and apprentices, with or without the knowledge of the principal employer, whether for remuneration or not, working on a voluntary basis or otherwise, whether the terms of employment are express or implied.⁹

IV. Workplace

While the Vishaka Guidelines were confined to the traditional office set-up, recognizing the fact that sexual harassment may not necessarily be limited to the primary place of employment, the POSH Act has introduced the concept of an ‘extended workplace’. As per the POSH Act, ‘workplace’ includes any place visited by the employee arising out of or during the course of employment, including transportation provided by the employer for the purpose of commuting to and from the place of employment.¹⁰

In the case of *Saurabh Kumar Mallick v. Comptroller & Auditor General of India*,¹¹ the respondent who was facing departmental inquiry for allegedly indulging in sexual harassment of his senior woman officer contended that he could not be accused of sexual harassment at workplace as the alleged misconduct took place not at the workplace but at an official mess where the woman officer was residing. It was also argued that the complainant was even senior to the respondent and therefore no ‘favour’ could be extracted by the respondent from the complainant and thus the alleged act would not constitute ‘sexual harassment’. The Delhi Court while considering this matter held this as ‘clearly misconceived’.

The Delhi Court observed that *“the aim and objective of formulating the Vishaka Guidelines was obvious in order to ensure that sexual harassment of working women is prevented and any person guilty of such an act is dealt with sternly.”* Keeping in view the objective behind the judgment, a narrow and pedantic approach cannot be taken in defining the term ‘workplace’ by confining the meaning to the commonly understood expression “office”. It is imperative to take into consideration the recent trend which has emerged with the advent of computer and internet technology and advancement of information technology. A person can interact or do business conference with another person while sitting in some other country by way of video-conferencing. It has also become a trend that the office is being run by CEOs from their residence. In a case like this, if such an officer indulges in an act of sexual harassment with an employee, say, his private secretary, it would not be open for him to say that he had not committed the act at ‘workplace’ but at his ‘residence’ and get away with the same.

⁹ Section 2(f) of the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act.

¹⁰ Section 2(o) of the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act.

¹¹ Decided on May 9, 2008 [Citation not available].

Key Provisions of the POSH Act

Noting the above, the High Court observed that the following factors would have bearing on determining whether the act has occurred in the ‘workplace’:

- Proximity from the place of work;
- Control of the management over such a place/residence where the working woman is residing; and
- Such a residence has to be an extension or contiguous part of the working place.

In conclusion, the Delhi High Court held that the official mess where the employee was alleged to have been sexually harassed definitely falls under ‘workplace’.

V. Complaints Committee

An important feature of the POSH Act is that it envisages the setting up of a grievance redressal forum.

A. Internal Committee¹²

The POSH Act requires an employer to set up an ‘internal committee’ (“**IC**”) at each office or branch, of an organization employing 10 or more employees, to hear and redress grievances pertaining to sexual harassment.¹³ Failure to constitute the IC has led to imposition of a fine under the POSH Act.¹⁴

B. Constitution of the IC

| Presiding Officer | Woman employed at a senior level at the workplace from amongst the employees. |
|---|--|
| Members | Not less than 2 members from amongst employees. Preferably committed to the cause of women or who have had experience in social work or have legal knowledge. |
| External member | From an NGO or association committed to the cause of women or person familiar with issues relating to sexual harassment. ¹⁵ |
| Not less than half of the IC Members shall be women | |
| The term of the IC Members shall not exceed 3 years | |
| A minimum of 3 Members of the IC including the Presiding Officer are to be present for conducting the inquiry. | |

¹² As per Repealing and Amending Act, 2016, the nomenclature of Internal Complaints Committee was changed to Internal Committee.

¹³ Section 4 of the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act.

¹⁴ Global Health Private Limited & Mr. Arvinder Bagga v. Local Complaints Committee, District Indore and Others (W.P.No.22314 and 22317 of 2017).

¹⁵ A person who has expertise on issues relating to sexual harassment and includes a social worker with atleast 5 years of experience in the field of social work towards empowerment of women and in particular in addressing workplace sexual harassment; or someone who is familiar with labour, service, civil or criminal law (as per Rule 4 of the POSH Rules).

C. Registration of the IC

The Department of Women and Child Development of Telangana and Maharashtra has issued a circular (on 01.07.2019 for Telangana) and an office order (on 23.03.2017 for Mumbai) mandating registration of the IC in Telangana & Mumbai.

While employers in Mumbai were required to register their ICs with the office of the District Women and Child Development Officer in the prescribed format, employers in the state of Telangana were required to register their ICs on the Sexual Harassment Electronic Box (“**T-she box**”).

Some Practical Tips for HR / IC Constitution

- As far as possible, the IC should comprise of women members who have been trained on the POSH Act and POSH Rules and their roles and responsibilities;
- It is preferable to have an odd number of members in order for the IC to arrive at a decision based on majority in case of a divided opinion.
- The IC members should be selected based on evaluation of various factors including whether they are accessible, approachable, committed, sensitive and understanding.
- They should be sensitive to issues pertaining to gender-based violence and should have good credibility and technical competency to handle grievance procedures.
- The functioning of the IC should be made autonomous such that there is no scope of allegations of bias or favouritism.
- As far as possible, provide the IC separate space for conducting their meetings and maintaining records of cases of sexual harassment.
- Hold periodic discussions between the IC members and conduct regular trainings.

D. Local Committee¹⁶

At the district level, the government is required to set up a ‘local committee’ (“**LC**”) to investigate and redress complaints of sexual harassment from the unorganized sector or from establishments where the IC has not been constituted on account of the establishment having less than 10 employees or if the complaint is against the employer.¹⁷ The LC has special relevance in cases of sexual harassment of domestic workers or where the complaint is against the employer himself or a third party who is not an employee.

¹⁶ As per Repealing and Amending Act, 2016, the nomenclature of Local Complaints Committee was changed to Local Committee.

¹⁷ Section 5 of the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act.

Key Provisions of the POSH Act

Constitution of the LC

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| Chairperson | An eminent woman in the field of social work and committed to the cause of women. |
| Local Woman | One of the members to be nominated from amongst the women working in block, taluka, tehsil or ward or municipality in the district. |
| NGO Members | Two members, out of which, atleast one shall be a woman to be nominated from a NGO or an association committed to the cause of women or a person familiar with issues pertaining to sexual harassment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Atleast one of the members should have a background in law. ▪ Atleast one of the members should be a woman belonging to the Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes. |

E. Powers of the IC/LC

The POSH Act stipulates that the IC and LC shall, while inquiring into a complaint of workplace sexual harassment, have the same powers as vested in a civil court under the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908 when trying a suit in respect of:

- i. summoning and enforcing the attendance of any person and examining him on oath;
- ii. requiring the discovery and production of documents; and
- iii. any other matter which may be prescribed.¹⁸

VI. Complaint Mechanism

An aggrieved woman who intends to file a complaint is required to submit six copies of the written complaint, along with supporting documents and names and addresses of the witnesses to the IC or LC, within 3 months from the date of the incident and in case of a series of incidents, within a period of 3 months from the date of the last incident. Prompt reporting of an act of sexual harassment is probably as important as swift action to be taken by the authorities on receiving a complaint. Infact the more prompt the complaint is, the more authentic can it be treated. In instances where sufficient cause is demonstrated by the complainant for the delay in filing the complaint, the IC/LC may extend the timeline for filing the complaint, for reasons to be recorded in-writing. The law also makes provisions for friends, relatives, co-workers, psychologist & psychiatrists, etc. to file the complaint in situations where the aggrieved woman is unable to make the complaint on account of physical incapacity, mental incapacity or death.¹⁹

¹⁸ Section 11(3) of the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act.

¹⁹ Section 6 of the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act.

Key Provisions of the POSH Act

Given that the POSH Act and the POSH Rules do not prescribe any format in which the complaint needs to be filed, the following tips may be kept in mind:

A Well Drafted Complaint

- The complaint should be addressed to the IC members and not the employer/HR representative.
- The complaint should be concise, i.e. it should be written in simple language which can be understood easily. Complaints that are well written and presented properly have greater credibility.
- Details of exact incident, date and time, witness etc. to be included.
- Circumstances preceding and following the incident to be recorded.
- Whether the complainant asked the respondent to desist from the unwelcome act(s).
- Append as many documents as possible in whatever format i.e. relevant e-mails, screenshots of SMS's/ whatsapp messages, call details, photographs, recordings etc.
- Details of the respondent including name, designation, reporting structure between complainant and respondent if any (whether subordinate, colleague or superior).
- Do not state any fact that is false or incorrect.
- The relief that is sought from the employer.

VII. Conciliation

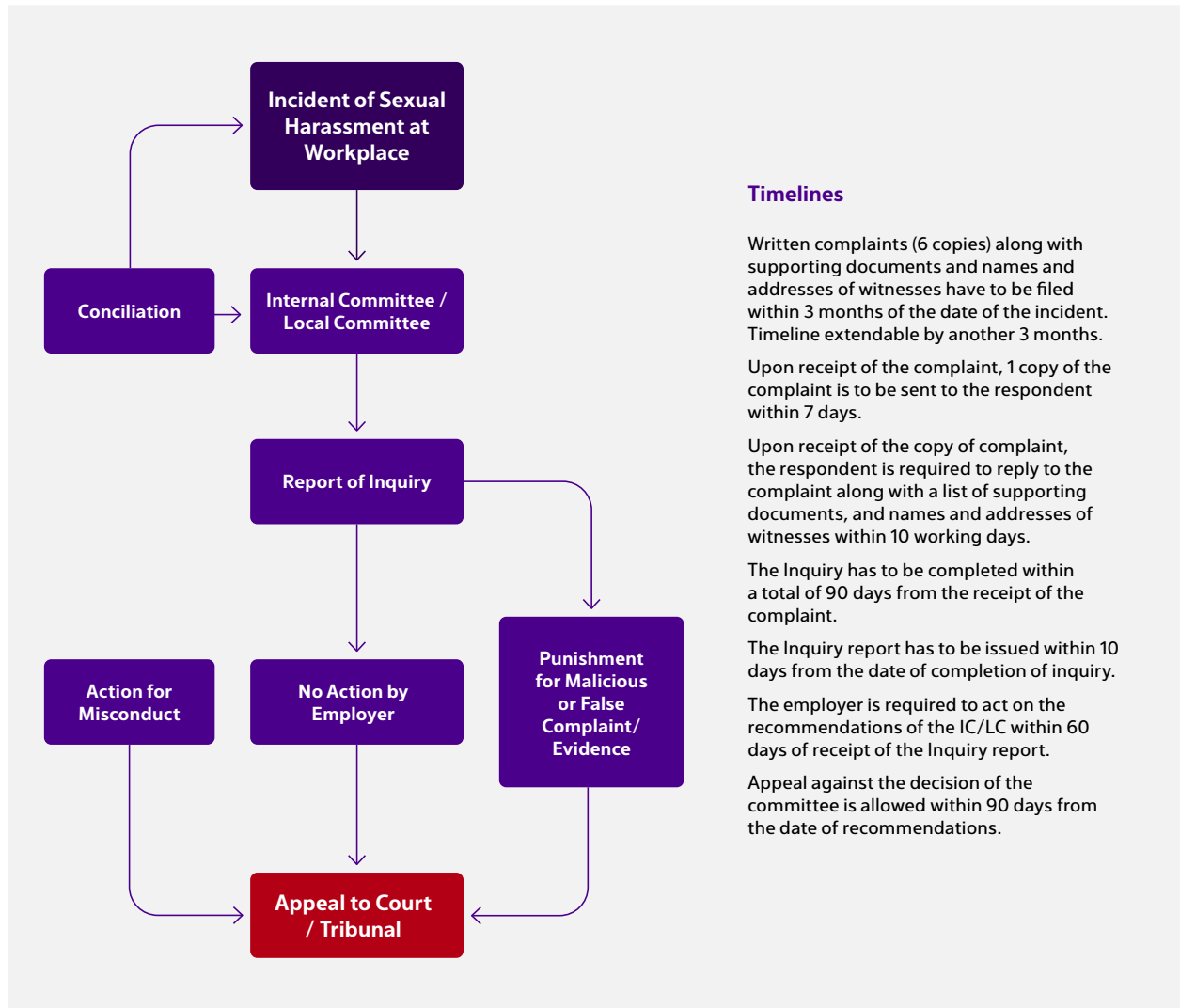
Before initiating action on a complaint, the IC on the request of the aggrieved woman, can make efforts to settle the matter between the parties through conciliation by bringing about an amicable settlement. Conciliation is basically an informal method of resolving complaints before the complaint escalates into a fully blown formal inquiry. Thus, after a complaint of sexual harassment has been lodged, the aggrieved woman may request the IC to resolve the matter by conciliating between the parties before commencement of the inquiry proceedings, although monetary settlement should not be made as a basis of conciliation.²⁰

Once the settlement has been arrived at, the IC or the LC (as the case maybe) shall record the settlement arrived at and thereafter provide copies of the settlement to the aggrieved woman as well as the respondent. Once a settlement has been arrived at, the IC shall not proceed with an inquiry under the POSH Act.

²⁰ Section 10 of the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act.

VIII. Redressal Process / Inquiry

Please refer to the flowchart below which provides an overview of the process to be followed by the aggrieved employee to make the complaint and by the IC/LC to inquire into the complaint.



IX. Interim Reliefs

At the request of the complainant, the IC or the LC (as the case maybe) may recommend to the employer to provide interim measures such as:

- i. transfer of the aggrieved woman or the respondent to any other workplace;
- ii. granting leave to the aggrieved woman up to a period of 3 months in addition to her regular statutory/ contractual leave entitlement;
- iii. restrain the respondent from reporting on the work performance of the aggrieved woman or writing her confidential report, which duties may be transferred to other employees.

X. Punishment and Compensation

The POSH Act prescribes the following punishments that may be imposed by an employer on an employee for indulging in an act of sexual harassment:

- i. punishment prescribed under the service rules of the organization;
- ii. if the organization does not have service rules, disciplinary action including written apology, warning, reprimand, censure, withholding of promotion, withholding of pay rise or increments, terminating the respondent from service, undergoing a counselling session, or carrying out community service; and
- iii. deduction of compensation payable to the aggrieved woman from the wages of the respondent.²¹

The POSH Act also envisages payment of compensation to the aggrieved woman. The compensation payable shall be determined based on:

- i. the mental trauma, pain, suffering and emotional distress caused to the aggrieved employee;
- ii. the loss in career opportunity due to the incident of sexual harassment;
- iii. medical expenses incurred by the victim for physical/ psychiatric treatment;
- iv. the income and status of the alleged perpetrator; and
- v. feasibility of such payment in lump sum or in installments.²²

In the event that the respondent fails to pay the aforesaid sum, IC may forward the order for recovery of the sum as an arrear of land revenue to the concerned District Officer.

XI. Frivolous Complaints

In order to ensure that the protections envisaged under the POSH Act are not misused, provisions for action against “false or malicious” complainants have been included in the statute. As per the POSH Act, if the IC/LC concludes that the allegation made by the complainant is false or malicious or the complaint has been made knowing it to be untrue or forged or misleading information has been provided during the inquiry, disciplinary action in accordance with the service rules of the organisation can be taken against such complainant.

Where the organisation does not have service rules, the statute provides that disciplinary action such as written apology, warning, reprimand, censure, withholding of promotion, withholding of pay rise or increments, terminating the respondent from service, undergoing a counselling session, or carrying out community service may be taken. The POSH Act further clarifies that the mere inability to substantiate a complaint or provide adequate proof need not mean that the complaint is false or malicious.²³

²¹ Section 13 of the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act.

²² Section 15 of the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act.

²³ Section 14 of the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act.

XII. Confidentiality

Recognising the sensitivity attached to matters pertaining to sexual harassment, the POSH Act attaches significant importance to ensuring that the complaint and connected information are kept confidential. The POSH Act specifically stipulates that information pertaining to workplace sexual harassment shall not be subject to the provisions of the Right to Information Act, 2005.

The POSH Act further prohibits dissemination of the contents of the complaint, the identity and addresses of the complainant, respondent, witnesses, any information relating to conciliation and inquiry proceedings, recommendations of the IC/LC and the action taken to the public, press and media in any manner. That said, the POSH Act allows dissemination of information pertaining to the justice that has been secured to any victim of sexual harassment, without disclosing the name, address, identity or any other particulars which could result in the identification of the complainant or the witnesses.²⁴ Disclosure of the justice secured could not only deter other individuals from engaging in acts of sexual harassment, but also instil in the minds of employees and public that the employer is serious about providing a safe work environment and harbours zero tolerance for any form of sexual harassment at the workplace.²⁵

Breach of the obligation to maintain confidentiality by a person entrusted with the duty to handle or deal with the complaint or conduct the inquiry, or make recommendations or take actions under the statute, is punishable in accordance with the provisions of the service rules applicable to the said person or where no such service rules exist, a fine of INR 5,000 (approx. US\$70).²⁶

XIII. Consequences of Non-Compliance

If an employer fails to constitute an IC or does not comply with the requirements prescribed under the POSH Act, a monetary penalty of up to INR 50,000 (approx. US\$ 700) may be imposed. A repetition of the same offence could result in the punishment being doubled and/or de-registration of the entity or revocation of any statutory business licenses. It is however unclear as to which business licenses are being referred to in this case.²⁷ It is also pertinent to note that all offences under POSH Act are non-cognizable.²⁸

²⁴ Section 16 of the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act.

²⁵ Shivangi Prasad and Attreyi Mukherjee, Handbook on the law of Sexual Harassment at Workplace 179 (2015).

²⁶ Section 17 of the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act and Rule 12 of the Prevention of Sexual Harassment Rules.

²⁷ Section 26 of the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act.

²⁸ Section 27 of the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act.

Employer's Duties and Obligations

'Prevention is Better than Cure'

In addition to requiring an employer to set up an IC and ensure redressal of grievances of workplace harassment in a time bound manner, the POSH Act casts certain other obligations upon an employer which includes:

- a. Promoting a gender sensitive workplace and removing the underlying factors that contribute towards creating a hostile working environment against women;
- b. provide a safe working environment;
- c. formulate and widely disseminate an internal policy or charter or resolution or declaration for prohibition, prevention and redressal of sexual harassment at the workplace;
- d. display conspicuously at the workplace, the penal consequences of indulging in acts that may constitute sexual harassment and the composition of the IC;
- e. declare the names and contact details of all members of the IC;
- f. organize workshops and awareness programmes at regular intervals for sensitizing employees on the issues and implications of workplace sexual harassment and organizing orientation programmes for members of the IC;
- g. provide necessary facilities to the IC for dealing with the complaint and conducting an inquiry;
- h. cause to initiate action, under the Indian Penal Code, 1860 ("IPC") or any other law in force, against the perpetrator, or if the aggrieved woman so desires, where the perpetrator is not an employee, in the workplace at which the incident of sexual harassment took place;
- i. provide assistance to the aggrieved woman if she so chooses to file a complaint in relation to the offence under the IPC or any other law for the time being in force;
- j. treat sexual harassment as a misconduct under the service rules and initiate action for misconduct;
- k. prepare an annual report with details on the number of cases filed and their disposal and submit the same to the District Officer;
- l. monitor the timely submission of reports by the IC.

The Anti-Sexual Harassment Policy – Some Tips to Follow

- Clearly define 'sexual harassment' and outline the scope and applicability (gender neutral or not);
- Mention how the employer practices zero-tolerance towards sexual harassment at workplace;
- Extended concept of workplace;
- Complaint mechanism;
- Regularly distribute and promote the policy at all levels of the organization;
- Ensure that the policy is easily accessible;
- Provide a copy of the policy to new joiners as part of their induction;
- Review the policy periodically & update information regarding IC members etc. on a timely basis.

Examples of Conduct Amounting to Sexual Harassment

Whether an act or conduct would amount to 'sexual harassment' is dependent on the specifics of the act and the circumstances. The following is an indicative list of conduct that could be considered as sexual harassment:

1. Unwanted sexual advances or propositions;
2. Pestering for dates or receiving unwelcome sexual suggestions or invitations;
3. Offering employment benefits in exchange for sexual favours;
4. Leering;
5. Making sexual gestures;
6. Displaying sexually suggestive objects or pictures, cartoons, calendars or posters;
7. Making or using derogatory comments, comments about a person's body or dress, slurs, epithets or sexually suggestive jokes;
8. Written communications of a sexual nature distributed in hard copy or via a computer network, suggestive or obscene letters, notes or invitations;
9. Physical conduct such as unwanted touching, assault, impeding or blocking movements;
10. Being forcibly kissed or hugged;
11. Having someone expose their private parts to you or repeatedly staring at a woman's body parts that makes her uncomfortable;
12. Making or threatening retaliation after a negative response to sexual advances or for reporting or threatening to report sexual harassment;
13. Eve-teasing;
14. Sexually tinted remarks, whistling, staring, sexually slanted and obscene jokes, jokes causing or likely to cause awkwardness or embarrassment;
15. Subtle innuendoes or open taunting regarding perfection, imperfection or characteristics of physical appearance of a person's body or shape;
16. Gender based insults and/or sexist remarks;
17. Displaying pornographic or other sexually offensive or derogatory material;
18. Forcible invitations for dates;
19. Forcible physical touch or physical assault or molestation;
20. Suggesting or implying that failure to accept a request for a date or sexual favours would adversely affect the individual in respect to performance evaluation or promotion;

Examples of Conduct Amounting to Sexual Harassment

21. Explicitly or implicitly suggesting sexual favours in return for hiring, compensation, promotion, retention decision, relocation, or allocation of job/responsibility/work;
22. Any act or conduct by a person in authority and belonging to one sex which denies or would deny equal opportunity in pursuit of career development or otherwise making the environment at the work place hostile or intimidating to a person belonging to the other sex, only on the ground of such individual providing or refusing sexual favours;
23. Physical confinement against one's will and any other act likely to violate one's privacy.

Other Laws Pertaining to Workplace Sexual Harassment

I. Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946¹

The Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946 (“**Standing Orders Act**”) is a central enactment which, *inter alia*, requires an employer to define and publish uniform conditions of employment in the form of standing orders. As per the statute, the standing orders should contain terms of employment including, hours of work, wage rates, shift working, attendance and late coming, provision for leaves and holidays and termination or suspension/dismissal of employees.

At the first instance, the Standing Orders Act is applicable to industrial establishments employing a minimum of 100 workmen. The Standing Orders Act prescribes Model Standing Orders, serving as guidelines for employers and in the event that an employer has not framed and certified its own standing orders, the provisions of the Model Standing Orders shall be applicable.

The Model Standing Orders prescribed under the Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Central Rules, 1996 (“**Standing Orders Rules**”) prescribe a list of acts constituting ‘misconduct’ and specifically includes sexual harassment. The Model Standing Orders not only defines ‘sexual harassment’ in line with the definition under the Vishaka Judgment, but also envisages the requirement to set up a complaints committee for redressal of grievances pertaining to workplace sexual harassment. It is interesting to note that ‘sexual harassment’ is not limited to women under the Standing Orders Rules.

II. Indian Penal Code, 1860

Conduct that may be construed as sexual harassment not only violates the Prevention of Workplace Sexual Harassment Act, but also could constitute an offence under the IPC. Listed out below are the key offenses under the IPC that could be triggered in a case of sexual harassment.

| Section # | Offence | Punishment | Cognizable / Non-Cognizable |
|-----------|--|--|-----------------------------|
| 354 | <p>Outraging the modesty of a woman</p> <p>Assault or use of criminal force to any woman, intending to outrage or knowing it to be likely that modesty would be outraged.</p> | Simple/Rigorous Imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than one year but which may extend to five years; and fine | Cognizable |

¹ This law is proposed to be replaced by the Code on Industrial Relations, 2020.

Other Laws Pertaining to Workplace Sexual Harassment

| Section # | Offence | Punishment | Cognizable/ Non-Cognizable |
|-----------|---|---|-------------------------------|
| 354-A | <p>Sexual harassment by a man</p> <p>i. Physical contact and advances involving unwelcome and explicit sexual overtures;</p> <p>ii. Demand or request for sexual favours;</p> <p>iii. Showing pornography against the will of a woman; or</p> <p>iv. making sexually coloured remarks.</p> | <p>Offences (i), (ii) and (iii) are punishable with rigorous imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years, or with fine, or with both.</p> <p>Offence (iv) is punishable with simple/ rigorous imprisonment for a term which may extend to one year, or with fine, or with both.</p> | Cognizable |
| 354-B | <p>Assault or use of criminal force to woman with intent to disrobe</p> <p>Assault or use of criminal force to any woman or abetment of such act with the intention of disrobing or compelling her to be naked.</p> | Simple/Rigorous imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than three years but which may extend to seven years and fine. | Cognizable |
| 354-C | <p>Voyeurism</p> <p>Watching, or capturing the image of a woman engaging in a private act in circumstances where she would usually have the expectation of not being observed either by the perpetrator or by any other person at the behest of the perpetrator or disseminates such image.</p> | <p>First conviction: Simple/ Rigorous imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than one year, but which may extend to three years, and fine.</p> <p>Second or subsequent conviction: Simple/ Rigorous imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than three years, but which may extend to seven years, and fine.</p> | Cognizable |
| 354-D | <p>Stalking</p> <p>Following a woman and contacting or attempting to contact such woman to foster personal interaction repeatedly despite a clear indication of disinterest by such woman; or Monitoring the use by a woman of the internet, email or any other form of electronic communication.</p> | <p>First conviction: Simple/ Rigorous imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years, and fine;</p> <p>Second or subsequent conviction: Simple/ Rigorous imprisonment for a term which may extend to five years and fine.</p> | Cognizable |
| 509 | <p>Insulting the modesty of a woman</p> <p>Uttering any word, making any sound or gesture, or exhibiting any object, intending that such word or sound shall be heard, or that such gesture or object shall be seen, by a woman, with an intention to insult her modesty, or intruding upon the privacy of such woman.</p> | Simple imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years, and fine. | Cognizable |

III. Companies Act, 2013

In 2018, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA) introduced an amendment effective as of July 31, 2018, to the Companies (Accounts) Rules 2014. As a result, companies are now obligated to include a statement in the Director's Report confirming their compliance with the provisions regarding the constitution of the IC. This disclosure is made in the Director's report, which is then filed along with the annual returns to the Registrar of Companies.

The amendment Rule 8 of the Companies (Accounts) Rules, 2014 requires companies to incorporate a statement disclosing their compliance with the provisions relating to constitution of an Internal Complaints Committee under the POSH Act.

Failure to include disclosures mandated under Section 134 of the Companies Act, 2013 and the rules framed thereunder in the Board of Director's report is punishable with fine of not less than INR 50,000 (approx. USD 715) which may extend to INR 25,00,000 (approx. USD 35,850). Additionally, every officer of the company who is in default is punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 3 years or with fine of not be less than INR 50,000 (approx. USD 715), which may extend to INR 5,00,000 (approx. USD 7,150), or with both.

Frequently Asked Questions for HR

1. **Can both men and women be victims of workplace sexual harassment?**
Yes, both men and women can be victims of sexual harassment. However, the safeguards/protection under the POSH Act is available only to women.
2. **Can verbal conduct amount to sexual harassment?**
Verbal harassment that is sexually coloured can constitute sexual harassment. Words can be just as offensive as physical acts and contact. Sexually coloured jokes, comments and stories can be sexually harassing and can create a hostile work environment.
3. **Is the employer responsible if an employee is sexually harassed at a company-sponsored event (a) during working hours and (b) outside of working hours?**
The POSH Act introduces the concept of 'extended workplace' covering under its ambit any place visited by the employee arising out of or during the course of employment including transportation provided by the employer for undertaking such journey. Hence, any form of sexual harassment at a company-sponsored event whether within or outside of the normal working hours would also fall under the scope of the POSH Act.
4. **When is an establishment required to constitute an IC?**
Every establishment having 10 or more employees is required to constitute an IC.
5. **Is an IC required to be constituted at every branch/office?**
Yes, an IC is required to be set up at every branch/office of the company wherein at least 10 employees are employed.
6. **Can the complaint be filed with and inquired by the HR manager of the company?**
No, the complaint needs to be filed with and inquired into by the IC.
7. **Is there a time limit for filing a complaint of sexual harassment?**
A complaint of sexual harassment needs to be filed within 3 months of the date of incident and in case of a series of incidents, within a period of 3 months from the date of the last incident. However, the IC or the LC, as the case may be, may extend the time limit, however, not exceeding 3 months, for reasons to be recorded in writing if it is satisfied that the circumstances were such that the victim was unable to file a complaint within the said period.
8. **Can a complaint of sexual harassment be conciliated/mediated between the parties?**
Yes (at the request of the aggrieved woman), but no monetary settlement shall be allowed.

Annexure I

Hotline: Court Decides not to Interfere with Decision of Internal Complaints Committee Set up by Employer

- Court does not interfere with the order of punishment by Disciplinary Authority unless it is shockingly disproportionate to the act of misconduct.
- Court does not re-appreciate evidence once the Committee has conducted a domestic enquiry.
- Employer to have proper mechanism for prevention and redressal of sexual harassment complaints and to create greater awareness regarding gender sensitization at workplaces.

The Bombay High Court (“**Court**”) ruled that it would not interfere with an order of punishment passed by the Internal Complaints Committee (“**ICC**”) in relation to a sexual harassment complaint, unless the order is shockingly disproportionate.

The Court passed this judgment in the case of *Vidya Akhave* (“**Petitioner**”) *v. Union of India and Ors*¹ in relation to the new Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 of India (“**Sexual Harassment Act**”). The Court observed that the employer must sufficiently comply with the duties cast upon it under the Sexual Harassment Act. The Court also stated that (a) an employer must provide for an effective mechanism for prevention of sexual harassment of women at workplace; (b) male employees must be sensitized towards the concerns of female employees and (c) the ICC must deal with complaints of sexual harassment in an expedited manner.

I. Facts

The employee (petitioner) was employed with an Indian government owned development bank. She had filed a complaint of sexual harassment against the General Manager, who was her immediate superior officer (“**Supervisor**”). However, no action was taken by the employer. Thereafter, the employee filed another complaint seeking establishment of an ICC as was necessary to be set up, as per the law laid down by the Supreme Court in the case of *Vishakha v. State of Rajasthan*.²

As for the incidents that took place before February/March 2012, the limitation period of three months prescribed under the Sexual Harassment Act had expired and thus, were not taken into account by the ICC. However, the Human Resource department could take separate action based on those instances, which would be beyond the scope of the Sexual Harassment Act. Based on the ICC’s report, the Disciplinary Authority passed an order, by which the Supervisor was (a) demoted to a lower rank by two ranks; (b) transferred to another city and (c) received a pay cut as per his lower rank (“**Order**”).

¹ Writ Petition 796 of 2015.

² AIR 1996 SC 1.

II. Contentions

The employee however challenged the validity of the Order before the Court under Article 226 of the Constitution of India (“**Constitution**”). The employee contended that a higher punishment should be imposed on the Supervisor. Also, the employee challenged the validity of the observations of the ICC as it had not adequately taken on record all evidences. Also, the Supervisor had not been declared guilty under the Sexual Harassment Act and a mere condemnatory statement was made by the Disciplinary Authority against the Supervisor. As for expiration of the period of limitation, the employee argued that because the Supervisor was her immediate superior, she was under reasonable apprehension to file a complaint as it would endanger her career.

The Supervisor argued that the penalty imposed was harsh enough as a result of which the Supervisor had suffered psychologically and financially. It was contended that the Supervisor had to stay apart from his family, as he had to shift to another city. It was further contended that it was not open to the Court to re-appreciate the evidence once the Disciplinary Committee had considered it and ruled over it. Lastly, it was contended that the Court cannot look into the proportionality of the Order passed by a Disciplinary Committee.

III. Judgment

The Court referred to its decision in *Om Kumar v Union of India*³ and reaffirmed the principles of judicial restraint to be exercised by courts under Article 226 of the Constitution. The Court held that unless the Order is shockingly disproportionate to the act of the delinquent employee, it will be circumspect in interfering with the Order. Reiterating the decision of *Om Kumar*, the Court held that interference is warranted only when there is non-compliance of the principles of administrative law, Wednesbury Principles and doctrine of proportionality by the Disciplinary Authority.

As for compliance with the Wednesbury Principles, interference was held to be not permissible unless any of the following conditions were satisfied: (a) the Order was contrary to law, (b) relevant factors were not considered, (c) irrelevant factors were considered and (d) no reasonable person would have taken such a decision.

Under the principle of proportionality, the Court stated that it would have to be seen whether the legislature and administrative authority maintained a proper balance between the adverse effects which the legislation or order may have on the rights, liberties or interests of persons, keeping in mind the purpose which they were intended to serve. The Court also observed that the inquiry by the Disciplinary Authority was conducted dispassionately and all evidences were appropriately considered and ruled upon in a fair and proper manner. Therefore, the Court was not entitled to give a second opinion merely because it had the discretion to do so.

However, the Court felt that there was a need to have an effective mechanism in place at workplaces for addressing issues of sexual harassment of women. The Court also observed that male employees must be made aware of concerns of female employees by undertaking an exercise of gender sensitization as more and more women were becoming part of the national workforce and contributing to the national economy.

3 (2001) 2 SCC 386.

The Court also remarked as to how many companies, corporations and government undertakings have not complied with the Sexual Harassment Act and do not have an adequate mechanism to deal with issues of sexual harassment.

IV. Analysis

This judgment reaffirms the importance and powers of the ICC that is required to be formed under the Sexual Harassment Act. Given the sensitivities surrounding sexual harassment allegations, it is important that the ICC is trained to deal with such cases in a fair, proper and dispassionate manner and based on the principles of natural justice. It is also necessary for the ICC to ensure that it completes the investigation and issues its order within the time frame set under the law.

The judgment also clarifies the already enshrined principles of judicial restraint by the courts. The interference of the courts should be limited to ensuring that there are no procedural irregularities or violations of principles of natural justice. Once the ICC has adequately and appropriately addressed a complaint of sexual harassment, it is not open to the courts to look into the merits of the matter.

Annexure II

Sexual Harassment Committee – Time for a Change!

This article was first published on SHRM (India) website on February 9, 2017.

India's new sexual harassment law is now more than three years old. And that should serve as a reminder to start the process to change the members of your Internal Complaints Committee (ICC).

India's Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013 (Sexual Harassment Act) was notified in December 2013. The law has been a catalyst in creating greater awareness of the issue of sexual harassment at the workplace. It has also given huge confidence to female employees to report any adverse incidents. Progressive employers on their part have gone to great lengths to implement the law, not just in form but also in spirit.

The Sexual Harassment Act requires the employer to constitute an ICC at every office location having a minimum of 10 employees. The law prescribes the details on how the members of the ICC need to be nominated by the employer based on their seniority, experience and familiarity with issues relating to sexual harassment.

The law allows the Presiding Officer and other members of the ICC to hold office for up to 3 years. Assuming most employers set up their ICC in or after December 2013, as per the Sexual Harassment Act, its time they initiate the process of replacing the members of their ICC.

Accordingly, in the next couple of months, employers should identify and start training the new members. The training should be in terms of the provisions of law, requirements of the employer's anti-harassment policy and charter, investigation process and timelines, manner of collecting and documenting evidence, ways of examining the parties (including witnesses), drafting the report and its conclusion, types of penalties that may be levied, etc. Employers should also focus on helping their new members develop soft skills in terms of dealing with the complainant and the respondent. To the extent the existing ICC has undergone a training programme, a similar initiative should also be extended to the new members. Subject to complying with confidentiality obligations, the employer may also request the existing ICC to include the new members as 'observers' in some of the ongoing matters being investigated by the ICC, as part of their training.

But this change is unlikely to be an easy process. While some employers and their ICCs are still getting familiar with the requirements of the Sexual Harassment Act, its already time to change the members. In a way, the process followed by employers in December 2013 will need to be repeated.

Annexure II

Some of the questions that are likely to arise while implementing the change are:

1. Does the employer need to change the entire ICC at one go or gradually, especially to retain continuity?
2. Can the employer extend the term of an existing member of the ICC to another 3 years?
3. What happens if the employer is unable to identify an appropriate Presiding Officer of the ICC, given the importance of such a role?
4. Does the employer also need to change the external member on the ICC who may be appointed from a non-governmental organisation or association committed to the cause of women?
5. What happens to complaints that are being investigated by the existing ICC and likely to continue for some more time?
6. What if another complaint is received in relation to a matter that has been previously investigated and closed by the existing ICC?
7. Can there be two ICCs constituted in parallel – the current ICC to complete investigations relating to existing complaints while the other for any new complaints?
8. How will the new ICC prepare the annual report if they are not familiar with the previous complaints?

All answers may not be easily available at this stage. There may also be a need to consider some of these questions on a case-by-case basis given the sensitivities involved. At the end of the day, while taking any decision, employers must ensure that the intent and principles of the Sexual Harassment Act are adhered to and the interest of women remains secured at all times. Incidentally, the guidelines issued by the Supreme Court in 1997 in the case of *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan* did not prescribe such a three year period and hence these questions did not arise previously.

The Bombay High Court has recently¹ ruled that it would not interfere with an order of punishment passed by the ICC in relation to a sexual harassment complaint, unless the order is shockingly disproportionate.² This judgment reaffirms the importance and powers of the ICC that is required to be formed under the Sexual Harassment Act. Given the sensitivities surrounding sexual harassment allegations, it is important that the ICC is trained to deal with such cases in a fair, proper and dispassionate manner and based on the principles of natural justice. It is also necessary for the ICC to ensure that it completes the investigation and issues its order within the time frame set under the law.

This judgment also clarifies the already enshrined principles of judicial restraint by the courts. The interference of the courts should be limited to ensuring that there are no procedural irregularities or violations of principles of natural justice. Once the ICC has adequately and appropriately addressed a complaint of sexual harassment, it is not open to the courts to look into the merits of the matter.

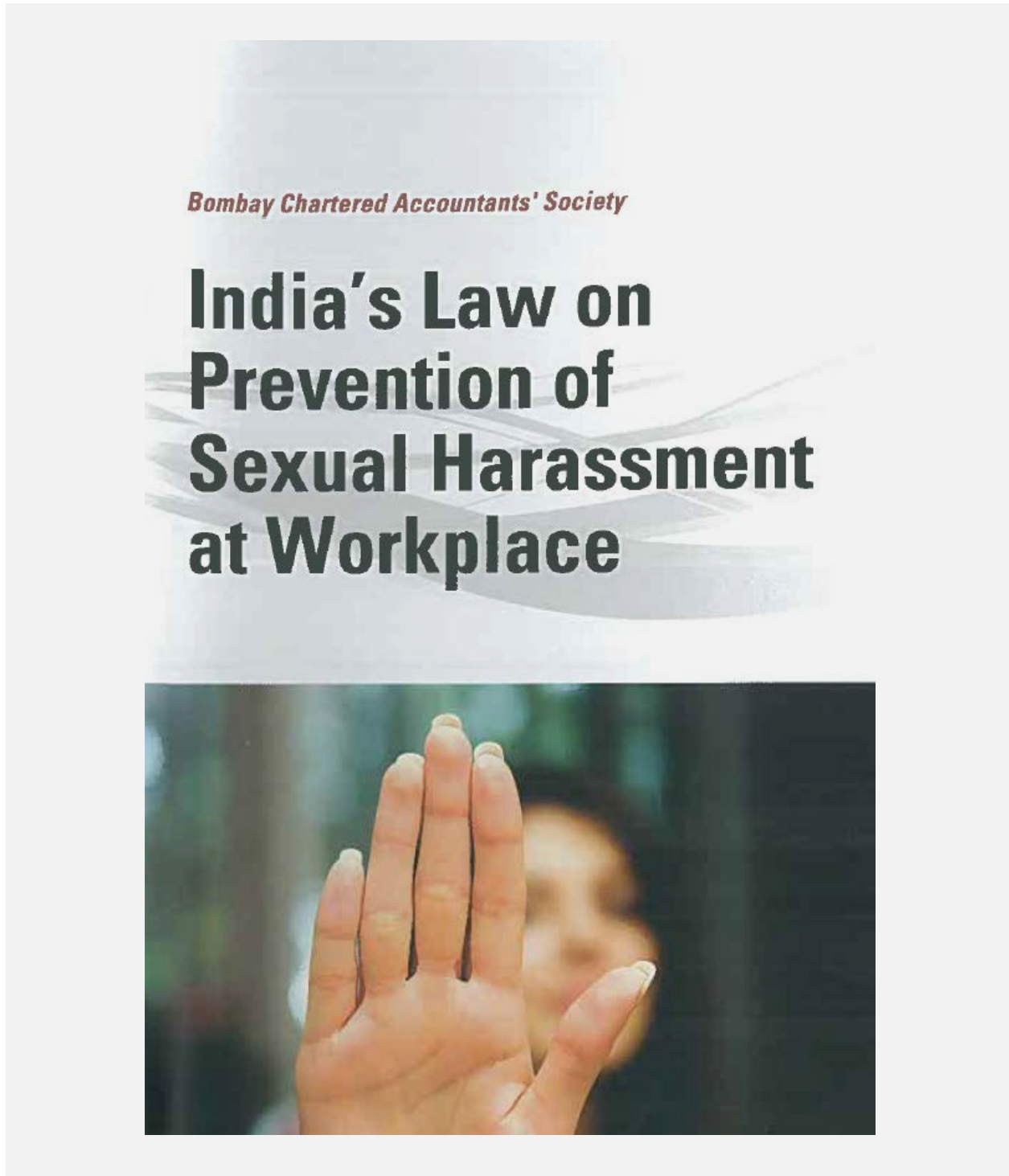
This time though, employers are not alone – the government, on its part, faces similar issues and questions as mentioned above. Members of the Local Complaints Committee set up by the District Officers in each district, are also subjected to the same timeline of 3 years.

1 Vidya Akhave v. Union of India and Ors. (Writ Petition 796 of 2015).

2 For more information, please refer to our legal alert: <https://www.nishithdesai.com/SectionCategory/33/Research-and-Articles/12/65/NDAHOTline/5899/1.html>.

Annexure III

Bombay Chartered Accountants' Society – India's Law on Prevention of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace



India's Law on Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace

About the book

A stitch in time saves nine. And especially if it is in relation to measures for prevention of sexual harassment at the workplace.

Studies reveal that almost 3 out of every 5 (working) women have faced some form of sexual harassment in their lives! Isn't that alarming? Although the law preventing sexual harassment at workplace has been in force for over 3 years, there still remains a lack of clarity on the objective of the statute, Acts that constitute sexual harassment, obligations of the employer, remedies available to the victims, process for investigation, etc. Many are also not fully aware of the criminal consequences of sexual harassment.

Any tool would be useless if the person operating is unaware of the manner in which it to be used. The objective of this publication is to serve as a ready reckoner to the stakeholders. We have also attempted to provide an insight into the relevant provisions of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 and other relevant laws in India dealing with this topic.

The publication provides a general background on what constitutes sexual harassment and when and where to draw the line. It should enable female employees to understand their rights and the remedies available to them if faced with an act of sexual harassment. We have also outlined the employer's obligations and the steps to be adopted by the employer in redressing grievances pertaining to sexual harassment.

We hope you find this publication relevant and informative.

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Annexure IV

Sexual Harassment at Workplace: Indian Government Introduces Platform for Female Employees to File Complaints

- The Ministry of Women and Child Development has launched “**SHe-Box**”, an online platform for reporting complaints of sexual harassment arising at the workplace.
- The SHe-Box facility can be used by both government and private sector employees.
- Complaints received on SHe-Box shall be directed by the government to the employer’s ICC or LCC.
- Progress of the investigation can be monitored by both the complainant and the Ministry of Women and Child Development.

I. What’s SHe-Box?

The Indian Ministry of Women and Child Development (“**WCD**”) had launched an online complaint platform named “**SHe-Box**”, which stands for “Sexual Harassment Electronic Box”.¹ SHe-Box has been introduced to allow female employees or visitors a platform to raise complaints of sexual harassment at the workplace.² This facility has also been extended to private sector employees.³

‘SHe-box’, which can be accessed at www.shebox.nic.in, seeks to ensure effective implementation of India’s Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (“**Anti-Harassment Law**”). It aims at providing speedy redressal of sexual harassment complaints. In the event that a formal complaint is lodged with SHe-Box, based on an assessment of the complaint, the WCD will direct such complaint to the employer’s Internal Complaints Committee (“**ICC**”) or the Local Complaints Committee set up by the government at each district (“**LCC**”), as the case may be. The WCD also proposes to actively monitor the progress of inquiry conducted by the ICC / LCC and keep the complainant updated.⁴ SHe-Box also proposes to work as a repository providing information related to dealing with workplace sexual harassment complaints. The users are free to access the resources available on SHe-Box for creating awareness.⁵ The WCD promises to ensure that the identity of the aggrieved women / complainant is kept confidential.⁶

1 <http://shebox.nic.in/>.

2 <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=168892>.

3 <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=173299>.

4 <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/she-box-to-the-rescue-of-govt-s-women-employees-facing-sexual-harassment-at-work/story-nb3z7lhcll9yag5MTLOol.html>.

5 <http://www.shebox.nic.in/user/termsConditions>.

6 Ibid.

II. Grievance Redressal under the Anti-Harassment Law

Please refer to our research paper titled ‘**India’s law on Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace**’ for information on India’s Anti-Harassment Law. A brief snapshot is as follows:

- The Anti-Harassment Law was enacted in December 2013, almost 16 years after the guidelines issued by the Supreme Court in the case of Vishakha.⁷ Please refer to our legal alert on this topic **here**.
- As per the Anti-Harassment Law, every employer employing at least 10 employees is required to set up an ICC at each office or branch to investigate and redress sexual harassment grievances.
- The government is also required to set up a LCC in every district to deal with complaints of sexual harassment arising from the unorganized sector or from establishments where the ICC has not been constituted (on account of the establishment having less than 10 employees) or if the complaint is against the employer.
- The law imposes a penalty of upto Rs. 50,000 (approx. USD 775) on employers who do not implement the provisions of the Anti-Harassment Law including failure to constitute an ICC.

III. Analysis

The introduction of SHe-Box is a positive step of the Indian government in its continuing efforts to provide a safe and fair working environment for women. With this initiative, female employees now have another channel to raise workplace sexual harassment complaints.

In spite of the enactment of the Anti-Harassment Law in 2013, the WCD has been receiving sexual harassment complaints.⁸ This indicates that either there are employers that may not have a fully functional ICC or necessary awareness has not been created at the workplace. It could even be possible that female employees do not have enough confidence in their employer’s internal complaint mechanism or that the investigation has been delayed.

The government will however need to quickly implement the requisite infrastructure and resources to manage this initiative to achieve the desired objectives. While SHe-Box has currently been designed to cater to the interests of female employees, enabling them to raise complaints of sexual harassment on a quick time basis without fear of retaliation, the government should also use this platform by providing necessary tools to help employers comply with the Anti-Harassment Law.

By way of examples, SHe-Box could serve as a point of reference for employers or their ICC should they have any questions relating to the process to be followed upon receiving a complaint or how the report should be worded. It could also serve as a repository of experienced personnel who could serve as the external member on the employer’s ICC at different locations.

⁷ Vishaka and others v. State of Rajasthan, 1997 (7) SCC 323.

⁸ <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/she-box-to-the-rescue-of-govt-s-women-employees-facing-sexual-harassment-at-work/story-nb3z7lhcll9yag5MTLOol.html>.

Annexure IV

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, between 2014 and 2015 (that is, after implementation of the Anti-Harassment Law by the Indian government), reporting of sexual harassment complaints has increased significantly.⁹ In terms of statistics, 65.2% of women have reported that their employers do not follow the procedure laid out under the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act and 46.7% of the participant companies have admitted that their ICCs are not aware of the legal provisions pertaining to sexual harassment.¹⁰ The recent worldwide social media campaign *#MeToo* which was started in response to the Harvey Weinstein scandal, depicted the magnitude of sexual harassment issues worldwide. The movement gave many Indian women the space and encouragement to come out with their own experiences of sexual harassment.¹¹

Some women also penned down horrifying instances from their childhood through social media, while some shed light on their daily struggles including incidents of sexual harassment at their workplaces.

In the last couple of years, sexual harassment issues have been widely covered in the Indian media. Given the litigational and reputational risks associated with non-compliance of the Sexual Harassment Law, it is high time that employers take affirmative steps in implementing zero-tolerance policies towards sexual harassment at their workplaces and ensure that the complaint is investigated swiftly, comprehensively and confidentially.

9 http://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/70-working-women-do-not-report-workplace-sexual-harassment-in-india-117030400227_1.html.

10 Ibid.

11 <https://theprint.in/2017/10/16/me-too-indian-victims-sexual-assault/>.

Annexure V¹

India's Law on Workplace Sexual Harassment: Recent Judicial Interpretations

The law on prevention of sexual harassment of women at workplace is nearing its 5th anniversary. And during the period, courts in India have already started analyzing cases, interpreting the law and rendering their decisions. In this legal alert, we have attempted to summarise some important judgements which we hope will provide additional guidance to inhouse counsels and HR practitioners who regularly deal with such matters.

Background

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 of India (“POSH Act”) was enacted in December 2013. For background on the law, please refer to our research publication on the law and the employer's obligations: [click here](#)

A direct outcome of this new law was increased awareness amongst the employee community. The media played a critical role in spreading that awareness and highlighting lack of compliances by employers. All of this led to creating a robust platform for the female workers to report harassment incidents. After enacting the law, the government on its part made it easier by launching SHe-Box initiative. Please refer to our legal alert on this subject: [click here](#)

A. What Constitutes ‘Sexual Harassment’?

1. The Delhi High Court held that there must be physical contact having an undertone of sexual nature to constitute ‘sexual harassment’ under the POSH Act. It opined that an altercation in the context of unwelcoming environment prevailing at the workplace is not a case of sexual harassment.²
2. In another instance, the Kerala High Court held that the act or behavior must be connected with sexual harassment including allegations of promise, threat or an offensive or hostile work environment towards female employees. A solitary allegation of intemperate language against a female employee in a report does not constitute an offence under the POSH Act.³

1 <https://www.peoplesmatters.in/article/diversity/prevention-of-sexual-harassment-at-workplace-lessons-from-case-laws-19210>.

2 Shanta Kumar v. Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CDIR) & Ors, Delhi High Court ((2018) 156 FLR 719).

3 K.P. Anil Rajagopal v. State of Kerala, Kerala High Court ((2018) 1 KLJ 106).

B. What is a Workplace?

1. The Delhi High Court upheld the decision of the employer to terminate the employment of the accused in line with the recommendations of the Internal Committee (“IC”), where the accused was alleged to have sexually harassed a female colleague during an outstation visit for work.⁴
2. The Bombay High Court pointed out that the definition of ‘workplace’ is inclusive and deliberately kept wide by the Parliament to ensure that any area where women may be subjected to sexual harassment is not left unattended or unprovoked for.⁵

C. Filing of a Complaint with the IC

1. The Rajasthan High Court held that the aggrieved woman can file a complaint with the IC without having to submit the complaint in person. The complaint could be sent to the IC through another person or by any other media, the main point being that it should be received by the IC.⁶
2. The Delhi High Court held that merely because the petitioner has an alternate remedy to file the given case before another forum, it would not act as a constitutional bar for the Court to adjudicate upon the matter. It also held that the findings of IC should not be ignored on vague and general grounds.⁷

D. How Can IC be Constituted?

1. The Delhi High Court has opined that the appointment of external member of the IC should be in strict compliance with the POSH Act and the rules thereunder. Accordingly, enquiry proceedings conducted by an IC that is not properly constituted as per the law, may be treated as invalid.⁸
2. In another matter before the Rajasthan High Court, it was held that the external member need not necessarily have legal background or knowledge in the aspects of sexual harassment against women. Having experience in the social work is sufficient for being a valid member of the IC.⁹
3. The Bombay High Court held that an IC which does not have at least two members (who are either dedicated to the cause of women or have experience in social work or have legal knowledge), would be illegal and contrary to the provisions of the POSH Act. In that judgement, the court also re-emphasized that it is employer’s responsibility to constitute proper IC.¹⁰

4 Gaurav Jain v. Hindustan Latex Family Planning Promotion Trust and Ors. (2015 SCC OnLine Del 11026).

5 Jaya Kodate v. Rashtrasant Tukdoji Maharaj Nagpur University (2014 SCC OnLine Bom 814).

6 Shital Prasad Sharma v. State of Rajasthan and Ors. (2018 SCC OnLine Raj 1676).

7 Sarita Verma v. New Delhi Municipal Corporation & Ors, (2016 LLR 785 (2)).

8 Ruchika Singh Chhabra v. Air France India and Anr. (2018 SCC OnLine Del 9340).

9 Shital Prasad Sharma v. State of Rajasthan and Ors. (2018 SCC OnLine Raj 1676).

10 Jaya Kodate v. Rashtrasant Tukdoji Maharaj Nagpur University, Bombay High Court (2014 SCC OnLine Bom 814).

E. Powers of the IC

1. The Delhi High Court held that the IC could extend the time limit for filing a complaint by another 3 months, i.e. up to six months from the date the incident has taken place, by recording reasons in writing, if it is satisfied that circumstances prevented the complainant filing of complaint earlier.¹¹
2. In another case, it was clarified that the petitioner has the right to approach IC for immediate protection that may be required and that the IC is empowered to grant interim relief, if it deems fit.¹²
3. The Delhi High Court has clarified that the IC is empowered to enforce the attendance of any person as per the provisions of the POSH Act.¹³
4. The Bombay High Court held that where the inquiry has been conducted by the IC after giving adequate opportunity to all the parties and it has reached a conclusion, then merely because two views are possible, the court is not expected to re-appreciate the evidence and come to a different conclusion than the one which has been arrived at by the ICC.¹⁴

F. Conducting the Inquiry Proceedings

1. It was ruled that the inquiry proceedings should be fair and impartial. If there is any allegation of bias against any member of the IC, the inquiry proceedings should be stayed or put on hold until the disciplinary authority takes a decision. If the disciplinary authority believes that the allegation of bias is true, then it would invalidate the proceedings, a new committee would be formed and proceedings would need to start afresh.¹⁵
2. The Madras High Court set territorial jurisdiction for conducting the inquiry proceedings – it ruled that the inquiry proceedings should be conducted within 500 kms of the place of the incident. In that case, the Hon'ble Judge opined that requiring the victim to travel more than 500 kms to attend the inquiry proceedings would itself constitute harassment!¹⁶
3. It was held that the inquiry as per the POSH Act is not a preliminary inquiry but instead a full-fledged enquiry, which needs to be done in the same manner as is done to prove misconduct in disciplinary proceedings. The court mandated the IC to follow principles of natural justice and give fair opportunity to the respondent to defend himself.¹⁷
4. The Delhi High Court pointed out that strict rules of evidence are not required to be followed in inquiry proceedings and that the IC can adopt its own procedure in conformity with the principles of natural justice and especially in a case of sexual harassment.¹⁸
5. In another matter before Rajasthan High Court, it was observed that the POSH Act and the rules enable a three-member team to conduct the inquiry so long as the Presiding Officer is present. Therefore, the inquiry report does not stand vitiated unless it is shown that there were less than 3 members who conducted the inquiry.¹⁹

11 Tejinder Kaur v. UOI (2017 SCC Online DeL 12221).

12 Confidential v. Indian Institute of Corporate Affairs (2018 SCC Online Del 6801).

13 Ashok Kumar Singh v. University of Delhi and Ors (2017 LLR 1014).

14 Vidya Akhave v. Union of India, Department of Women & Children & Ors (2017 LLR 357).

15 Tejinder Kaur v. UOI, Delhi High Court, (2017 SCC Online DeL 12221).

16 K.Hema Latha v. State of Tamil Nadu, Madras High Court, (MANU/TN/1414/2018).

17 Sibbu v. Air India Limited, ((2016) 2 KLJ 434).

18 Gaurav Jain v. Hindustan Latex Family Planning Promotion Trust and Ors. (2015 SCC OnLine Del 11026).

19 Shital Prasad Sharma v. State of Rajasthan and Ors. (2018 SCC OnLine Raj 1676).

G. Employers' Rights and Territorial Jurisdiction of the Courts

1. The Patna High Court held that the disciplinary authority can dismiss an employee from the services once the sexual harassment charges are proven.²⁰
2. The Gauhati High Court held that the court which shall have the territorial jurisdiction to hear the matter of sexual harassment shall be the place where the act has occurred. Accordingly, if the harassment occurred in Kolkata while the parties were travelling for office work, the court in Kolkata shall have the jurisdiction even if the workplace of the offender is in Guwahati.²¹

Analysis

Since the POSH Act is still at a nascent stage, these cases help us clarify the position of law and better analyse the matters relating to sexual harassment at workplace. While several of these cases are specific to their unique backgrounds, they serve as an aid to the IC who are required to investigate complaints.

It is pertinent to note that the courts are recognizing and upholding the powers to the IC as provided by law. Accordingly, employers and their ICs need to ensure that the proceedings are conducted in a fair manner and in compliance with the law and the principles of natural justice.

Sexual harassment allegations in the workplace not only run the risk of loss of employer's reputation but also lead to legal troubles. Needless to mention, sexual harassment at workplace continues to remain one of the most sensitive issues that needs to be dealt with immense care and sensitively. As opined by the Bombay High Court, employers need to genuinely be concerned with the safety of women at workplace rather than staging a farce of compliance under the POSH Act.²²

20 Mohan Kumar Singh v. Chief Manager (HRD) Central Bank of India, (2017 SCC OnLine Pat 2483).

21 Biplab Kumar Das v. IDBI Bank Ltd and Others, (2017 LLR 1148).

22 Jaya Kodate v. Rashtrasant Tukdoji Maharaj Nagpur University (2014 SCC OnLine Bom 814).

Annexure VI

India's Law on Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace: Analysis of Recent Case Laws – Part 2

India continues to see a rise in sexual harassment complaints and related litigation, largely due to its Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 of India (“**POSH Act**”) followed by the #MeToo revolution. We are writing this legal alert analysing the important case laws, following our previous **legal alert**.

I. Wider Interpretation of What Constitutes Sexual Harassment

In a case before the High Court of Bombay,¹ the court disagreed with the decision of the Internal Complaints Committee (“**IC**”) who had concluded that the complaint filed by the woman amounts to misconduct and mis-behaviour, rather than sexual harassment. The complainant claimed that her subordinate used abusive and unprofessional language against her. The court observed that the IC had failed to take into consideration the additional circumstances provided under Section 3(2) of the POSH Act which also amounted to sexual harassment including creation of an intimidating or hostile environment for women and humiliating treatment likely to affect health and safety of a woman.

II. Employer's Failure to Constitute the IC

The Madhya Pradesh High Court imposed a fine of INR 50,000 (approx. US\$ 700) on the petitioner, a renowned hospital in Indore, for not having constituted an IC. As per the POSH Act, every employer having at least 10 employees is required to constitute an IC at each of its workplaces to investigate complaints pertaining to workplace sexual harassment of women.² The court also directed the hospital to pay a compensation of INR 2.5 million (approx. US\$ 35,000) to the complainant for the pain & suffering, loss of reputation, emotional distress and loss of salary, which had resulted in deprivation of the complainant's right to live with dignity. harassment.

III. Need of an External Member to Form the IC

The Punjab and Haryana High Court ordered the employer to re-constitute the IC since there was no external member.³ As per the POSH Act, the IC should have an external member who is a person associated with a non-governmental organisation or association committed to the cause of women or a person who is familiar with issues relating to sexual harassment.

1 Sapana Korde Nee Ketaki A. Ghodinde v. the State of Maharashtra and Ors. 2019(1) Bom CR (Cri)415.

2 Global Health Private Limited & Mrs. Arvinder Bagga v. Local Complaints Committee, District Indore and Others.

3 Neelam Bhardwaj v. State of Punjab & Ors., 2018 LLR 1286.

IV. Extent of Extended ‘Workplace’ under Posh Act

The High Court of Calcutta held that the Privy Lounge, Bar-cum-Restaurant at a mall, where the incident of sexual harassment was alleged to have taken place between two fellow students of IIM, Calcutta, cannot be termed as a ‘workplace’ under the POSH Act. Therefore, the court directed the Counselling Officer of IIM, Calcutta to mediate and settle the matter.⁴

V. Conflict of Interest Amongst IC Members

In a case before the High Court of Delhi, the court ruled that a mere apprehension of bias would not be sufficient to exclude a member from the IC. Citing certain previous decisions of the Supreme Court in this respect, the court pointed out that it would be necessary to establish a real likelihood of bias rather than a mere apprehension. The court also said that “*if right minded persons would think that there is real likelihood of bias on the part of an inquiring officer, he must not conduct the inquiry.*”⁵ In this case, since the Presiding Officer of the IC was a witness to the incident, she recused herself from handling the complaint. With respect to the rest of the IC members, there was not even a remote suspicion that any of them had any personal interest which would conflict with their obligations to conduct a fair inquiry under the POSH Act. Therefore, the court held that there was no need to re-constitute the IC.

Please also see our recent article titled “**POSH Committee – Dealing with bias and conflict of interest**” which may be viewed [here](#).

VI. Improper Investigation Procedure Can Vitiating the Inquiry

The Kerala High Court set aside the order of the IC to terminate the accused since it had not followed the procedure set out under law while conducting the inquiry.⁶ In this case, the accused was not provided with a copy of the complaint nor the findings of the IC after completion of the inquiry.

In a similar case before the High Court of Calcutta, the court held that since the respondent was not given an opportunity to cross-examine the complainant, proper investigation procedure has not been followed.⁷ Although the complaint arose before the POSH Act was enacted, the court observed that neither the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan* (1997) nor the provisions of Section 11 of the POSH Act conceives a situation of denying the accused an opportunity of hearing what the victim has to say against the respondent or the opportunity to cross-examine the complainant. In this case, the investigating authority had not recorded any reason as to why it would not be feasible to allow the victim to record her statement in the presence of the alleged offender and also as to why the respondent has been denied the opportunity to cross-examine the complainant. The court observed that “*the right of cross-examination has invariably been recognised as a basic right of an accused in proceedings, whether it be criminal or departmental.*”

4 Shubham Bhawangiri Goswami v. the Union of India and Ors. MANU/WB/1285/2019.

5 Somaya Gupta v. Jawarharlal Nehru University and Ors. 2018 (159) FLR 390.

6 Dr. T.V. Ramakrishnan v. Kannur University 2018 LLR 990.

7 Union of India and Ors. v. Shibaram Sarkar MANU/WB/1016/2019.

Annexure VI

If an inquiry is conducted without extending the opportunity of cross-examination to a delinquent and findings are adverse to the interests of such party, the delinquent can legitimately raise a claim of having been denied the 'reasonable opportunity' to defend himself. If the allegation is found to be correct, the proceedings would stand vitiated.

VII. Need to Comply with The Employer's Service Rules

In a case before the High Court of Calcutta, the court set aside the order of the IC on the ground of procedural impropriety and violation of principles of natural justice.⁸ In this case, the petitioner had alleged that the respondent humiliated and mentally harassed her. Basis the investigations, the IC made a decision in favour of the petitioner. However, the court observed that where there is a procedure prescribed for inquiry under the service rules (HR policies) of the employer, it should be complied with by the employer in addition to the procedure prescribed under the POSH Act.

VIII. Limitation Period for Complaint under Posh Act

In a case before the High Court of Delhi, the order of the Local Complaints Committee (LC) dismissing the complaint was challenged. The LC had dismissed the complaint on the ground that the complaint was filed beyond the limitation period of three months prescribed under Section 9 of the POSH Act. However, the complainant submitted before the court that there were certain previous correspondences which were filed with the employer within the limitation period and that the complaint was brought to the notice of the employer within the limitation period. Since such documents/information were not furnished to the LC while deciding upon the matter being barred by limitation period, the court relegated the parties to the LC by giving the complainant an opportunity to file such communications before the LC, enabling the LC to make an informed fresh decision on the issue of limitation.⁹

IX. Criminal Proceedings Besides Remedy under the Posh Act

The High Court of Jammu & Kashmir held that the POSH Act does not bar the complainant from seeking remedy under the Ranbir Penal Code (equivalent to the Indian Penal Code (IPC)) just because the matter has already been taken cognizance of by the IC constituted under the provisions of the POSH Act.¹⁰

However, the High Court of Karnataka has clarified that initiating criminal prosecution under Section 354 of the IPC in respect of a matter which has already been investigated by the IC on the same facts and evidences and was found to be no claim of sexual harassment by the IC, would be unjust on the part of the court. In this case, except reiterating the very same allegations which were made by the complainant before the IC, no additional material was placed on record to substantiate the said criminal charges.¹¹

8 Debjani Sengupta v. Institute of Cost Accountants of India 2019 SC OnLine Cal 734.

9 X. v. District Magistrate MANU/DE/0361/2019.

10 D.B Singh v. State of Jammu & Kashmir and Ors. MANU/JK/76/2019.

11 Usha Padmini and Ors. v. State of Karnataka and Ors. MANU/KA/0584/2019.

X. Analysis

The POSH Act being a relatively new labour law in India, these judgements analysing various intricate aspects under the POSH Act helps provide better clarity not just for the employer and the IC members, but also for the public at large.

In light of the *#Me Too* movement, a number of cases including those which occurred before the enactment of the POSH Act are now coming into limelight. With the rising number of reported cases of workplace sexual harassment of women, it becomes imperative for employers and their respective HR & in-house legal teams to take pro-active steps to prevent and effectively redress complaints of workplace sexual harassment.

It is also important for employers to regularly train their IC members on the nuances of the POSH Act and investigation formalities. In order to keep litigation at bay, a comprehensive understanding of the interpretation being adopted by courts in India and the ability to look at things from the lens of the judiciary, is necessary.

While employers have in general been following the process of educating/training their IC members on the POSH Act, as a next step, the IC members should be kept abreast of the latest judicial interpretations, so as to avoid any potential mistakes which could end up creating litigation and reputational risks for the employer.

Annexure VII

India's Law on Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace: Analysis of Recent Case Laws – Part 3

India's law on prevention of workplace sexual harassment continues to gain traction in spite of the Covid-19 lockdown and employees working remotely. Incidentally, the definition of 'workplace' under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 of India ("POSH Act") includes "a dwelling place or a house". While that was primarily meant to cover domestic helpers, it could extend to employees working from home.

While the shift to a virtual workspace has reportedly led to a decline in the total number of sexual harassment complaints in India,¹ sexual harassment continues to occur in more subtle ways such as inappropriate messages, calls/texts at odd hours, sexist remarks, taking screenshots without one's knowledge during video calls etc.² Considering the lockdown since March 2020, cases relating to POSH Act have been heard on video conferencing and the judgments have been pronounced virtually, keeping in mind the urgency and gravity of the situation.

Following our previous legal alerts in 2019 and in 2020, we are delighted to share Part 3 of our analysis of some of the recent and pertinent case laws on POSH Act related aspects.

I. What is 'Sexual Harassment'?

1. The Kerala High Court upheld the principles laid down in its previous judgment³ and opined that sexual harassment at the workplace should start from an express or implied sexual advance or unwelcome behaviour which has a 'sexual' tone behind it.⁴ In the absence of a 'sexual' tone to the behaviour, provisions of the POSH Act will not apply. The court further clarified that the definition of 'sexual harassment' under the POSH Act is an inclusive definition and accordingly any other form of 'sexual' treatment or 'sexual' behaviour can fall under the purview of the POSH Act.
2. The Madhya Pradesh High Court observed that the conduct of the supervisor amounted to 'sexual harassment' as such conduct created an intimidating and hostile work environment for the complainant which included acts such as commenting on the complainant's dress and outfits, suggesting that he would make work difficult for her if she was not good to him, speaking in a manner which was offensive to her dignity and chastity etc.⁵ In this case, since the female employee (complainant) was terminated from employment for no fault of hers, the Court held that the aggrieved woman was entitled to compensation of Rs. 2,500,000 (approx. US\$ 34,000) for the pain and suffering, loss of reputation, emotional distress and loss of 18 months' salary, besides provident fund and other monetary dues. The court also directed the employer to issue the female employee a character and experience certificate for the period she was in employment with the employer without attaching any stigma whatsoever. The court imposed a penalty of INR 50,000 (approx. US\$ 680) upon the employer under Section 26 of the POSH Act for not constituting an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) at the relevant time.

1 <https://www.livemint.com/companies/news/sexual-harassment-cases-at-offices-decline-in-fy21-11630864037305.html>.

2 <https://www.livemint.com/news/business-of-life/even-in-the-virtual-office-sexual-harassment-continues-11594561717967.html>.

3 Anil Rajagopal v. State of Kerala and others [I.L.R. 2018 (1) Kerala 719].

4 Prasad Pannian v. The Central University of Kerala and Ors. 2021LLR384 (Kerala HC).

5 Global Health Private Limited v. Local Complaints Committee, District Indore and Ors.2020 LLR 40 (MP HC).

II. Sexual Harassment Does Not Necessarily Have to be Man v. Woman

The High Court of Calcutta clarified that sexual harassment complaints against another individual of the same gender is maintainable under the POSH Act.⁶ In this respect, the court pointed out that there is nothing under the POSH Act which precludes a same gender complaint and that a person of the same gender can also hurt the modesty or dignity of a woman. The court pointed out that *“although it might seem a bit odd at the first blush that people of the same gender complain of sexual harassment against each other, it is not improbable, particularly in the context of the dynamic mode which the Indian society is adopting currently, even debating the issue as to whether same-gender marriages may be legalized.”*

III. Constitution and Functioning of the ICC

1. The Supreme Court of India (SC) held that there was a fundamental defect in the constitution of the ICC as the external member on the ICC was found not to be an independent third party in accordance with the provisions of Section 4(2)(c) of the POSH Act. In this case, it was noted that the external member on the ICC was appearing on behalf of the employer (bank) as a panel lawyer and was therefore not independent.⁷ In this context, the SC observed that the purpose of having an external member is to ensure the presence of an independent person who can aid, advise and assist the ICC.
2. The Bombay High Court set aside the report of the ICC as it was observed that the external member on the ICC was not a member of any non-governmental organisation or association committed to the cause of women or a person familiar with the issues relating to sexual harassment.⁸ In this case, the court also pointed out the importance of organising regular orientation or training programmes for the members of the ICC to deal with complaints and steer through the process of settlement or conciliation with sensitivity.
3. The High Court of Delhi laid down the following requirements with respect to constitution and functioning of the ICC:
 - a. Members of the ICC must be impartial i.e. they should not have any personal knowledge or interest in the case or be connected to the case in any manner;
 - b. Members of the ICC should not have conflict with any of the parties involved;
 - c. Objectivity needs to be maintained in the conduct of the proceedings;
 - d. There should be no cause for bias for or against any of the parties;
 - e. Members of the ICC ought to possess blemish-less credentials;
 - f. Independent members are needed on the ICC to aid, advise and assist the ICC in a fair and impartial manner;
 - g. An independent person should actually be someone external and cannot, for example, be the panel lawyer of a bank in a situation where the complainant and the respondent are employees of the bank;

6 Malabika Bhattacharjee v. Internal Complaints Committee, Vivekananda College and Ors. 2021(1) SCT 431 (Calcutta).

7 Punjab and Sind Bank and Ors. v. Durgesh Kuwar AIR2020SC3040.

8 Ruchika Kedia v. Internal Complaints, Goa Institute of Management, Through Its President Prof. Annamika Sinha And Ors. 2020 SCC Online BOM 139.

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- h. There should be no undue pressure and influence on the ICC from senior levels;
- i. In cases where persons who have been at the helm of affairs are themselves the respondents in a complaint, the ICC cannot be one of their choice or of persons who have worked under them;
- j. The ICC should follow a clear and precise procedure to deal with sexual harassment complaints;
- k. The principles of natural justice should be followed scrupulously;
- l. The proceedings should lend confidence and assurance to the complainant and make her comfortable;
- m. The principles and guidelines laid down by the SC in the Vishaka judgment ought to be followed rigorously and not in a ritualistic manner irrespective of the enactment of the POSH Act;
- n. The inquiry proceedings should inspire the confidence of the Court.⁹

In this case, it was found that the ICC was improperly constituted as it comprised of three members who were part of the same department as the respondent was previously employed in and were in fact subordinate to him at that point in time. Since, it is the settled position under law that the ICC should be a body which is objective and neutral and not biased in any manner, the employer was ordered to re-constitute the ICC.

IV. Powers of the ICC

The Delhi High Court stressed upon the fact that the ICC's role was limited to holding an enquiry and submitting a report as per the provisions of the POSH Act.¹⁰ If a case of sexual harassment is made out, then the recommendations of the ICC can only be for taking appropriate action for misconduct in accordance with the provisions of the service rules as contained in Section 13 of the POSH Act. If a case of sexual harassment is not made out by the ICC, the ICC can only conclude that no action is required to be taken. On the other hand, in this case, it was noted that the ICC had made observations in its report on the conduct of the parties (in spite of the conduct falling outside the scope of 'sexual harassment') and opined that the parties had indulged in an in- appropriate / unbecoming conduct and indiscipline, and recommended that the competent authority take suitable action against them. The court pointed out that the ICC cannot make comments on the personal conduct of the parties and that the ICC's jurisdiction would be restricted to the allegations of sexual harassment and whether a complaint is made out or not to that effect.

⁹ Rashi v. Union of India And Another (MANU/DE/2178/2020).

¹⁰ Bibha Pandey v. Punjab National Bank and Ors. 2021 LLR 359.

V. Disciplinary Action to be Based on the Inquiry and in Accordance with Existing Service Rules

1. The SC held that the termination of an Associate Professor at a University who was alleged to have indulged in acts of sexual harassment, is illegal as it was issued without subjecting him to an inquiry as per the applicable service rules and the provisions of the POSH Act.¹¹ Accordingly, the SC ordered reinstatement of the employee.
2. The High Court of Gauhati pointed out that in order to initiate a disciplinary proceeding under the service rules of the company, it must be preceded by a conclusion arrived at by the ICC that the sexual harassment allegations made against the person concerned have been proved.¹² Accordingly, the court ordered the employer to produce records establishing the fact that the allegations were proved before the ICC before the order of suspension and show-cause notice was issued to the employee.

VI. Role of ICC Vis-à-vis Disciplinary Committee in Sexual Harassment

The High Court of Orissa at Cuttack pointed out that if disciplinary action has been taken against an employee for indulging in an act of sexual harassment on the basis of an ICC report, the employer cannot re-initiate a fresh inquiry by its disciplinary committee as that would amount to a second inquiry.¹³ In other words, once the inquiry report has been prepared by the ICC, the findings and the report of the ICC shall not be treated as a mere preliminary investigation or inquiry leading to a disciplinary action but shall instead be treated as the final finding/report in an inquiry into the misconduct of the delinquent.

VII. Can Employer Deviate from Recommendations of the ICC ?

The High Court of Calcutta opined that the expression “*act upon the recommendation*” contained in Section 13(4) of the POSH Act does not make it imperative for the disciplinary authority to act on the recommendations of the ICC by accepting it.¹⁴ The expression “act upon the recommendation” would mean either accept or reject the recommendation, for reasons to be recorded in writing. If the recommendations were binding, it would cease to be a recommendation and partake the character of a command which obviously is not the legislative intent. Accordingly, the recommendation of the ICC has to be seen and understood as a recommendation, nothing more nothing less. It is entirely upon the disciplinary authority to decide its next course of action upon giving the recommendation due consideration.

VIII. Conclusion

Various courts continue to discuss and interpret the provisions of the POSH Act. Such decisions need to be taken note of and carefully analysed by the employer and the ICC, in view of the sensitivities involved in relation to the topic of sexual harassment at the workplace.

¹¹ Vijaykumar C.P.V. v. Central University of Kerala and Ors. (2020)12 SCC 426.

¹² Ananta Prasad v. Gauhati High Court and Ors. 2020 LLR 980.

¹³ Keshaba Ch. Panda vs. Sambalpur University and Ors 2020 (I) OLR 909.

¹⁴ Institute of Hotel Management, Catering Technology and Applied Nutrition and Ors. vs. Suddhasil Dey and Ors. 2020 (4) SLR 437.

Annexure VIII

India's Law on Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace: Analysis of Recent Case Laws – Part 4

In a first of its kind judgment, the Bombay High Court has issued guidelines to ensure confidentiality of hearings pertaining to matters of workplace sexual harassment of women. The guidelines issued by the court, in the matter of P v. A & Ors.¹ (“**POSH Confidentiality Guidelines**”), relate to inter alia the manner in which such cases should be heard and handled; how decisions should be recorded, pronounced and communicated and the precautionary steps to be followed while reporting such matters including by the media.

The POSH Confidentiality Guidelines shall serve as a working protocol for the courts. The objective is to protect the identities of the parties from even accidental disclosure. The POSH Confidentiality Guidelines as pointed out by the Bombay High Court are the bare minimum to be followed by the courts and are subject to necessary revisions or modifications.

I. Background

One of the key objectives of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (“**POSH Act**”) has been to provide for an effective grievance redressal mechanism for women who have been unfortunately subjected to workplace sexual harassment. However, the fact remains that owing to the fear of having to compromise their privacy resulting in shame, anxiety, humiliation, and fear, a large section of women still continue to take a back seat when it comes to reporting incidents of workplace sexual harassment.

In order to protect the confidentiality of the parties concerned, section 16 of the POSH Act restricts the contents of the complaint, the identity and addresses of the parties (including the aggrieved woman, respondent and witnesses), any information relating to conciliation and inquiry proceedings, recommendations of the Internal Complaints Committee (**ICC**) or the Local Complaints Committee, and the action taken by the employer or the District Officer under the provisions of the POSH Act from being published, communicated or otherwise being made known to the public, press and media in any manner. However, the law permits dissemination of information regarding the justice secured to the victim, subject to the condition that the name, address, identity or any other particulars leading to the identification of the aggrieved woman and witnesses is not disclosed. In the event that any person is found to violate the afore-mentioned confidentiality obligations, the POSH Act provides for a monetary penalty of INR 5,000 (approx. USD 70).²

In spite of the afore-said confidentiality restriction, as observed by the Bombay High Court, there has been no established guidelines so far in such matters, often leading to a scenario where the confidentiality of the parties stood compromised. Therefore, it had become imperative for the court to lay down certain guidelines in this respect.

¹ Suit no. 142 of 2021, Bombay HC, decided on September 24, 2021.

² Rule 12 of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Rules 2013.

II. Guidelines for Handling Cases

The POSH Confidentiality Guidelines include the following directions:

1. To anonymize identities of the parties:

- a. While identity documents may be requisitioned for by the Registry to establish the identity of the deponent, no such document or personally identifiable information (“PII”) shall be retained on file.
- b. The names of the parties will not be mentioned in the order sheets. Instead, they will be referred to as Plaintiff, Defendant No.1, etc.
- c. There will be no mention of any PII in the order whether it be the names, email ids, mobile or telephone numbers, addresses etc. of the parties. Additionally, no witnesses will be mentioned, nor will their addresses be noted.
- d. All orders and judgments will be delivered in private, that is, they will not be pronounced in open court but will be conducted only in chambers or in-camera.
- e. There will be no online or hybrid facility for hearings. All hearings will require physical attendance.
- f. Orders/judgments on merits will not be uploaded.

2. Hearing and access to confidential information:

- a. Only the advocates and the litigants shall be permitted to attend hearings. Except the Court Master/ Associate or Sheristedar and the stenographer or person providing secretarial assistance, all other staff (including clerks, peons, etc) must leave the Court.
- b. No one other than an Advocate on Record with a valid vakalatnama will be allowed to take inspection of the order.

3. Prohibited disclosures:

- a. Any form of recording of any part of the proceedings is strictly forbidden.
- b. If any order is to be released into the public domain, it will require a specific order of the Court. Even if a permission has been obtained, only the fully anonymised version of the order can be published.
- c. Both sides and all parties, advocates and witnesses are forbidden from disclosing the contents of any order, judgment or filing to the media or publishing any such material in any mode or fashion by any means, including social media, without specific leave of the court. In fact, witnesses to the action, in addition to the usual oath, must sign a statement of non-disclosure and confidentiality.

4. Proceedings in other courts:

- a. The Labour Courts and Industrial Courts shall be bound by these guidelines and shall strictly adopt and comply with these and any future guidelines.

Failure to comply with the conditions of anonymity laid down by the courts including by the media and/or any attempt to record or transcribe any part of the proceedings will be treated as an offence amounting to contempt of court and will be punished accordingly.

III. Analysis

The objective of the POSH Act is not only to implement an effective grievance redressal mechanism, but also to create a system wherein women feel secure and confident to file their complaints of sexual harassment at the workplace. While the law accomplishes that goal admirably in several different ways, confidentiality has been a critical element which has often been overlooked especially at the time of litigation.

The POSH Confidentiality Guidelines are therefore an important step in the right direction as it will serve as a guidance not just for the courts but also as a reminder to the employer, ICC members and witnesses, besides the parties who are directly involved in relation to the complaint of sexual harassment at the workplace. The ruling of the Bombay High Court also reinforces the importance for employers to take similar measures to ensure that sexual harassment complaints are investigated and handled in a confidential manner without exposing the identities of the parties involved. In view of the POSH Confidentiality Guidelines, the parties may now feel more confident to make use of the court process.

While there is a good enough reason to protect the confidentiality of the parties given the personal and sensitive nature of such matters, on the flip side, it needs to be seen as to how this can be balanced against the need for transparency and accountability. Also, the POSH Act being a relatively new law, employers and ICC members have been keenly following the principles laid down by various courts in such matters while interpreting provisions of the POSH Act, which may not be possible going forward in view of the POSH Confidentiality Guidelines.

It is hoped that the POSH Confidentiality Guidelines are followed by courts across the country. However, it remains to be seen whether the guidelines would be limited to workplace sexual harassment matters or be extended to cases unrelated to the workplace as well.

Annexure IX

India's Law on Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace: Analysis of Recent Case Laws – Part 5

India's law on prevention of workplace sexual harassment continues to see developments from courts considering workplaces restarting through hybrid mode after some post-Covid normalcy. Previously we discussed how even at virtual workspaces there were cases of sexual harassment.

Following our previous legal alerts we share Part 5 of our analysis of the recent and pertinent case laws on Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act) related aspects.

I. Different Approaches Towards Limitation Period

- a. The Delhi High Court dealt with a question whether Section 5 of the Limitation Act, 1963 will apply to appeals under Section 18 of the POSH Act regarding condonation of delay.¹ Asserting the POSH Act is an ameliorative statute that is intended to redress a serious social evil as victims of sexual harassment at the workplace suffer untold trauma (be it mental, physical and spiritual). The Court held that it cannot be expected from a victim of sexual harassment to immediately move a court seeking appellate remedies. It will be completely antithetical and harmful to the very scope and purpose of POSH Act if a court or tribunal refuses to condone a delay of as little as 36 days in an appeal under Section 18 of the POSH Act against the report of the inquiry committee. Thus, the Court held that Section 5 of the Limitation Act would apply in respect of appeals which may be sought to be preferred under Section 18 of the POSH Act.
- b. On the contrary, the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court has upheld single-judge's decision holding that a complaint of sexual harassment under the POSH Act has to be filed within a period of three months from the date on which sexual harassment is alleged to have taken place.² Accordingly, a complaint filed ten months after the alleged incident was held to be barred by limitation as maximum delay can be only of three months.

II. Application of Posh Act in Complaints Filed by Students

The Calcutta High Court came across an interesting issue pertaining to application of POSH Act in complaints filed by students.³ It held that provisions of the POSH Act can be availed by girl students at a school. The petitioner was a teacher at school against whom multiple girl students through the Principal filed complaints of sexual harassment. The court noted that the definition of 'aggrieved woman' as defined under Section 2(a) of the POSH Act refers to an aggrieved woman in relation to a workplace, a woman, of any age whether employed or not, who alleges to have been subjected to any act of sexual harassment by the respondent. Thus, the POSH Act applies even if a complaint of sexual harassment has been filed by students.

¹ DB Corp Ltd v. Shailja Naqvi, MANU/DE/2590/2022.

² Manonmaniam Sundaranar University v. P. Govindaraju MANU/TN/2894/2022.

³ Pawan Kumar Niroula v. Union of India, 2022 LIVELAW CAL (15).

III. Strict Compliance of the Procedural Requirements

- a. The Madras High Court emphasised that there should be strict compliance with each and every procedural requirement posited by the POSH Act.⁴ It stressed that as per Section 4 of the POSH Act, every employer shall constitute an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) headed by a woman employed at a senior level at workplace from amongst the employees along with two other members and apart from that, one member from non-governmental organisations. One-half of the total members should be women. If any employer fails to constitute an ICC as required under sub-section (i) of Section 4, it is liable to be punished as per Section 26 of the POSH Act.
- b. The Calcutta High Court has stated that the inquiry report based on inquiry by the ICC cannot be said to be merely a preliminary investigation report and ICC has to follow the principles of natural justice.⁵ It stated that upon a complaint of sexual harassment being made, a copy of the complaint is to be forwarded to the employee against whom the complaint is made. The employee gets an opportunity to file his reply to the complaint. The complainant as well as the respondent/employee gets opportunity to adduce oral as well as documentary evidences in support of their respective contentions. The inquiry by ICC is to be made by following the principles of natural justice. The ICC is also vested with the powers of the civil court in respect of certain matters regarding evidence of witnesses. An aggrieved party also has a right to file an appeal against the ICC's report. An inquiry conducted by the ICC is a full-fledged inquiry wherein the parties get ample opportunities to prove their contentions and a finality is also attached to such inquiry. The POSH Act also mandates the employer to act on the recommendations of the ICC. Hence, the inquiry report cannot be said to be merely a preliminary investigation report. The order of punishment has to be passed by following principles of natural justice.
- c. The Madras High Court affirmed that the Presiding Officer of the ICC must be a higher level officer in accordance with Section 4 of the POSH Act.⁶ It directed the employer to appoint a higher level woman officer as Presiding Officer of the ICC in accordance with Section 4(2)(a) of the POSH Act, 2013 and proceed with the inquiry in accordance with the provisions of the POSH Act. The Court further directed employers to furnish the copies of the complaints and all other relevant documents to the accused on reconstitution of the ICC by appointing a higher-level officer as Presiding Officer. The ICC constituted in accordance with Section 4 of the POSH Act should continue the inquiry proceedings by affording opportunity to all the parties and by following the procedures as contemplated. It asked the accused writ petitioner to cooperate for the early disposal of the inquiry proceedings by the ICC.
- d. The Uttarakhand High Court has stressed on the importance of principles of natural justice to be followed by ICC for departmental enquiries.⁷ It commented that principles of natural justice are not a ritual, they are not even a mere formality – they must be followed in letter and spirit.
- e. The Bombay High Court held that disciplinary authority is required to consider the report of the ICC as fact-finding preliminary report and then conduct disciplinary proceedings as per the relevant applicable service rules, by drawing a charge sheet.⁸

4 Amutha v. The Director of Medical and Rural Health Service MANU/TN/5600/2022.

5 Pradip Mandal v. Metal Scrap Trade Corporation Ltd. and Ors. MANU/WB/0828/2022.

6 S.Vinukumar v. The Government of Tamil Nadu And Ors. MANU/TN/3163/2022.

7 Dheeraj Singh Bisht v. Chairman Cum Managing Director Writ Petition (S/S) No. 314 of 2021.

8 Laxman B. Panmand v. Nuclear Power Corpn. of India Ltd., 2022 SCC OnLine Bom 893.

IV. Prima Facie Case of Sexual Harassment Has to be Made out for the Posh Act to Apply

- a. The Allahabad High Court was of the opinion that in absence of prima facie case of sexual harassment being made out, the police authorities cannot enter into inquiry of preliminary investigation for sexual harassment contemplated under the POSH Act.⁹ Victims in such cases can approach the appropriate magistrate as contemplated under the Criminal Procedure Code through which it ensures strict separation between the criminal laws and the POSH Act. As per the court, criminal justice system cannot be utilised for POSH cases through mobility and cannot be merged qua the procedural jurisprudence of both.
- b. The Madras High Court held that sexual harassment cannot be established in the absence of sufficient proof.¹⁰ It observed that the averments have to make out a tangible case to prove sexual harassment by duly establishing the cause of action worthy enough for the court to adjudicate upon the alleged grievances of sexual harassment.

V. Dismissal in Cases of Sexual Harassment

The Gujarat High Court held that dismissal is justified on proved charges of sexual harassment.¹¹ It upheld that the presiding officer of the ICC under POSH Act must be a woman employed at a senior level. Further, it observed that the aggrieved woman who is subjected to sexual harassment can be of any age group.

VI. Organisations Engaging at Least 10 Employees to Constitute ICC

In a writ petition filed by Women in Cinema Collective (petitioner)¹² the Kerala High Court, held that there did, for a fact, exist an employer-employee relationship between the actors and their respective production units, and that the film production units served as their “workplace” as defined under Sec. 2(o)(ii)¹³ of the POSH Act. The petitioner brought to the notice of the Court that the Association of Malayalam Movie Artists (respondent) had failed to set up ICC as per Sec. 4 of the POSH Act to deal with cases of sexual harassment, and as such, wanted the court to direct them to set it up. While the petitioner contended that the absence of the ICC was *illegal, arbitrary and violative of their fundamental rights*, the respondent altogether denied being governed by the provisions of the POSH Act since on the belief that it was neither a “workplace” nor there existed an employer-employee relationship between the members and the organisations.

9 Vashudha Khanna v. State Government of U.P., Criminal Misc. Writ Petition No. – 2904 of 2022.

10 Thabitha David v. Commissioner of Labour, Puducherry; V. Parthiban, J., 2022 LLR 761.

11 Vimalkant Bhanuprasad Shrimali v. IDMC Limited, 2022 LLR 848.

12 Women in Cinema Collective vs State Of Kerala WP(C) NO. 34273 OF 2018.

13 Sec. 2(o) of POSH Act defines workplace to include—

- i) any department, organisation, undertaking, establishment, enterprise, institution, office, branch or unit which is established, owned, controlled or wholly or substantially financed by funds provided directly or indirectly by the appropriate Government or the local authority or a Government company or a corporation or a co-operative society;
- ii) any private sector organisation or a private venture, undertaking, enterprise, institution, establishment, society, trust, non-governmental organisation, unit or service provider carrying on commercial, professional, vocational, educational, entertainment, industrial, health services or financial activities including production, supply, sale, distribution or service;
- iii) hospitals or nursing homes;
- iv) any sports institute, stadium, sports complex or competition or games venue, whether residential or not used for training, sports or other activities relating thereto;
- v) any place visited by the employee arising out of or during the course of employment including transportation by the employer for undertaking such journey;
- vi) a dwelling place or a house.

The Court held that the production unit of each film industry is an establishment employing actor artists and other workers and therefore, such production units have to maintain an ICC, if they are engaging more than 10 workers, as is contemplated under the POSH Act. Any organisation, apart from the political parties, are duty bound to maintain ICC, if they are engaging 10 or more workers for managing the office establishments irrespective of whether the female workers are employed by such office establishments for wages.

VII. Express Acts of Sexual Harassment not Mandatory to Interpret the Act or Behaviour as Sexual Harassment

The Tripura High Court observed¹⁴ that the express mentioning of instances of sexual harassment is not mandatory in the victim's complaint under the POSH Act. The Court pointed out that the definition of sexual harassment as provided under Sec. 2(n) of the POSH Act is not exhaustive, but rather an inclusive one. Adding to that, the Court further held that the "acts or behaviours" as mentioned in Sec. 2(n)¹⁵ of the POSH Act was to ensure that acts of sexual harassment, whether done directly or by implication, are included within its ambit. It was then observed that given the broad ambit of the definition, an express instance of sexual harassment in the complaint was not necessary. During the inquiry by the ICC, it was revealed that the petitioner had called the complainant to his chamber post the working hours and made remarks on her looks and tried putting his hand around her. The Court concluded it was an unwelcoming act to be interpreted as sexual harassment within the meaning of Sec. 2(n).

Conclusion

Various courts continue to discuss and interpret the provisions of the POSH Act. The evolved employment scenarios are presenting newer challenges with respect to different aspects in a workplace. Such challenges like sexual harassment require concerted efforts from the employers and the ICC to deal with the complaints received. In light of the same, the decisions by different courts need to be taken note of and carefully analysed by the employer and the ICC, in view of the sensitivities involved in relation to the topic of sexual harassment at the workplace.

14 Vinay Kumar Rai v. Union of India WP(C) No.596/2019.

15 Sec. 2(n) of POSH Act defines sexual harassment as any one or more of the following unwelcome acts or behavior (whether directly or by implication) namely:— (i) physical contact and advances; or (ii) a demand or request for sexual favours; or (iii) making sexually coloured remarks; or (iv) showing pornography; or (v) any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of sexual nature.

Annexure X

by the Legal Swan for Anvay 2023

Understanding the Constitution of an Internal Committee (IC) under the Law

I. Introduction

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act and Rules, 2013 (“Law”) is a crucial piece of legislation in India aimed at addressing and preventing sexual harassment of women in the workplace. Section 4(1) of the Law mandates that every employer must constitute an Internal Committee (IC).

In this article, we delve into the important aspects of constituting an IC and shed light on its composition and roles.

II. Formal Constitution of IC: Is Any Paperwork Needed?

The Law requires the constitution of the IC to be done formally, through “an order in writing” by the employer. This means that the process of forming the IC should be documented in writing. For different types of organizations, the meaning of “an order in writing” varies depending on their legal registration and the laws they adhere to. For example, companies registered under the Companies Act, 1956/2013 may need a board resolution to constitute the IC.

It’s important to note that an Order in Writing should be issued every time there is a change in the IC. This includes situations where an IC member is removed (as detailed below) or when a member’s term expires, and they need to be replaced (as explained below). In both instances, a new Order in Writing should be formally passed to reflect the changes.

III. Contents of the Order in Writing

The order in writing should include several key elements:

1. It should state that the organization has constituted an IC in compliance with Section 4 of the Law.
2. It should specify the names and designations of IC members.
3. It should mention that the IC has a term of three years.

A. Optional Content that Can be Included in Order in Writing: Authorized Persons

The process of passing an Order in Writing for each change in the IC can become cumbersome, especially for larger organizations. In such cases, an organization has the option to pass an Order in Writing appointing an individual (who is not a part of the IC) as the Authorized Person or appoint multiple Authorized People and delegate the authority to issue Order in Writing to them. If this approach is adopted, the next time an IC needs to be constituted, the Order in Writing can be passed directly through the Authorized Persons authority without the need for a separate formal process of the Order in Writing. The Authorized Persons can take care of other Compliance requirements in addition to appointment and removal of IC members as well.

Sample of recommended language that can be included in the Order in Writing to appoint Authorized Persons:

RESOLVED FURTHER THAT [Name] is appointed as the Authorized Person to do and undertake the following activities and actions:

To formulate and disseminate the Policy on Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace for the Company to inform employees about the IC members and the Company's policy. The Policy shall be subject to adoption by the Company and any necessary amendments made to the Policy (other than the amendments that are necessary to carry out any change in the Act) from time to time shall not take effect unless adopted by the Company.

Please be aware that the suggestion to appoint an Authorized Person is a practical recommendation and is not explicitly mandated by the Law.

B. Other Optional Paperwork: Appointment Letters and Exit Letters.

While the law does not explicitly require appointment letters for IC members, they serve as a proactive and practical measure to ensure that the constitution of the IC is well-documented, transparent, and legally compliant. These letters clarify roles, responsibilities, and legal obligations, providing a clear framework for IC members to operate effectively within the boundaries of the law.

Key elements of an appointment letter:

1. **Defining Roles and Responsibilities:** The appointment letter explicitly outlines the role of the individual within the IC, be it as the Presiding Officer, Member, or External Member. This clarification ensures that each IC member understands their specific duties and obligations, including their responsibility to handle complaints of sexual harassment in compliance with the law.
2. **Legal Obligations and Confidentiality:** One of the most critical aspects covered in the appointment letter is the commitment to maintaining confidentiality. It emphasizes that all information related to complaints must be treated as strictly confidential, as mandated by the law. This includes the identities of the complainant, respondent, witnesses, details of the complaint, and all proceedings related to the case.
3. **Access to Necessary Support:** The appointment letter also addresses logistical support. It assures IC members that they will have access to the documents, information, and technical support required to effectively fulfill their duties. This is crucial for IC members to carry out their responsibilities effectively and in compliance with the law.

4. **Travel and Lodging Provisions:** In situations where IC members are required to travel outside their primary location to perform their duties, the appointment letter may include provisions for the organization to cover travel and lodging expenses. This consideration ensures that IC members can fulfill their responsibilities without undue financial burden.
5. **Appointment Duration and Termination:** The appointment letter specifies the duration of an IC member's term, which is usually a maximum of three years as per the law. It also outlines the grounds for termination, such as breaches of confidentiality, legal convictions, disciplinary proceedings, or any misuse of authority that could be detrimental to others.

Similarly, while the law does not explicitly require Exit Letters for IC members, they serve as a courteous and legally prudent means to conclude an IC member's term. These letters ensure that the individual understands their ongoing legal obligations, even after their departure from the IC.

Key elements of an Exit Letter:

1. **Formal Acknowledgment of Conclusion:** The exit letter formally acknowledges the discontinuation of an IC member's term. It provides closure to the individual who has served on the IC and underscores the value of their contributions.
2. **Reference to the Appointment Letter:** The exit letter often references the initial appointment letter or the date of the appointment, reinforcing the continuity and traceability of the IC member's journey within the organization.
3. **Reason for Exit:** The letter may state the reason for the IC member's exit, whether it is due to the completion of their three-year term, resignation, or any other relevant cause. This clarity is important to maintain transparency.
4. **Confirmation of Legal Obligations:** The exit letter reiterates the legal obligations that an IC member has committed to during their tenure. It emphasizes the confidentiality of information, the exclusive ownership of Confidential Information by the organization, and the prohibition on using or disclosing such information for the benefit of any other entity.
5. **Continued Compliance:** The letter reinforces the ongoing obligation to adhere to the law by only disclosing Confidential Information in accordance with Indian laws. It reminds the exiting IC member to promptly inform the organization of any disclosures required by law.
6. **Return of Documents:** The exit letter may also address the return of organization-related documents, files, or electronic data that the exiting IC member may have possessed during their tenure. This step is essential to protect the organization's interests and maintain the confidentiality of IC-related information.
7. **Perpetual Obligation:** The exit letter clearly states that the obligation to maintain the confidentiality of Confidential Information is binding for perpetuity, emphasizing the long-lasting nature of this commitment.
8. **Expression of Gratitude:** Last but not least, the exit letter expresses gratitude for the departing IC member's service and acknowledges the role they played in upholding the organization's commitment to a respectful and compliant work environment.

Appointment letters and exit letters serve a dual purpose, acting as official communication from the Organization to individual IC members regarding their appointment or removal from the IC and detailing their roles and responsibilities. Beyond their legal and informative aspects, these letters also offer practical benefits for organizations.

Lastly, they establish a clear and documented trail of the IC's composition over time, aiding in record-keeping and ensuring that a formal record exists for each individual who has been a part of the IC. This historical record is invaluable for compliance purposes, audits, and maintaining a transparent and accountable approach to management of IC members.

III. Criteria for Composition of IC

The Law outlines specific criteria for IC composition, which include:

1. A Presiding Officer, who is a woman, employed at a senior level within the organization.
2. Not less than two Members from among employees, preferably those committed to the cause of women, with experience in social work or legal knowledge.
3. One member from a non-governmental organization or association committed to the cause of women or a person familiar with issues related to sexual harassment.

IV. Selection of the Presiding Officer

The Law does not explicitly define what constitutes a “senior level” for the presiding officer. Instead, it suggests that the organization must define this based on its structure, culture, and other relevant factors. The key is to ensure the presiding officer is someone respected and has the capacity to fulfil their role effectively, given the organization's specific requirements.

In addition to seniority, other factors, such as availability, workload, and the nature of the proposed presiding officer's work, must also be considered. The presiding officer must be present during inquiries, and their availability is critical in conducting the process efficiently.

In cases where a qualified individual to serve as a Presiding Officer is not available within the workplace, Section 4 (2) (a) of the Law permits the nomination of a Presiding Officer from other offices or administrative units of the Organization. If a qualified individual is still not available, the Law allows the nomination of a Presiding Officer from any other workplace under the same employer or from other departments or organizations as well.

V. Selection of (at Least) Two Other Employees as Members

The law does not prescribe specific criteria for these two members. They can be of any gender, background, and may include employees from any level in the Organization. These members, unlike the Presiding Officer, do not have to hold a ‘senior’ position in an Organization.

The law also states that it is “preferable” for these two IC members to be individuals committed to the cause of women, or those with experience in social work or legal knowledge. This provision seems to acknowledge that not all organizations may have employees with such qualifications. Thus, while it is encouraged to have members with this background on the committee, it is not mandatory.

VI. Selection of External Member

The External Member of the IC must be chosen with care. According to the law, the External member should ideally be someone dedicated to advocating for women's rights or someone well-versed in matters related to sexual harassment. This suggests that the legislators intended for the External member to possess experience in handling cases of sexual harassment or at least be knowledgeable about issues concerning women.

A case in the High Court of Delhi ¹emphasized the importance of the External Member's experience. It noted that, basis the facts of the matter at hand at the time, there was no evidence to demonstrate the concerned External Member's expertise in dealing with cases of sexual harassment or broader women's issues, despite their affiliation with a non-governmental organization.

The rationale behind mandating an External member from non-governmental organizations or associations committed to women's causes, or someone familiar with sexual harassment issues, is to prevent any undue pressure or influence from higher-ranking officials, as established by the Supreme Court in the Vishaka case. The ultimate parliamentary objective in including an NGO member in the Internal Committee is to ensure the presence of an independent and impartial figure capable of commanding respect and compliance, particularly when dealing with influential management.

VII. Minimum and Maximum Number of IC Members

While the Law stipulates a minimum of four IC members, it does not set a maximum limit. Organizations have flexibility in determining the number of members they need to effectively address sexual harassment concerns.

VIII. Essential Qualities for IC Members

Although the Law does not explicitly require certain qualities for IC members, practical considerations suggest that when selecting IC members, organizations can keep in mind the following:

1. Fair, balanced, and unbiased judgment.
2. Willingness to invest time and attention to detail.
3. Comfort in discussing issues related to sexuality and gender.
4. A genuine desire to make a difference in a space such as this and contribute towards creating and sustaining a safe and conducive working environment for everyone.
5. Approachable and assertive demeanor.
6. Understands the vision of the Organization and what its looking to achieve through these initiatives.

1 Ruchika Singh Chhabra vs M/s Air France India, Delhi High Court, LPA 237 of 2018, C.M. APPL.16802-03 of 2018, 30th May 2018.

IX. Considerations for IC Composition

To ensure that the IC provides diverse perspectives and representation, organizations may consider including members from various backgrounds and roles, such as:

1. A senior employee as the presiding officer, respected by both employees and the employer.
2. Employees who are trusted and approachable, making them more likely to receive complaints.
3. Employees with expertise or a passion for addressing sexual harassment.
4. Representation from different branches and major verticals of the organization.
5. Members who can dedicate more time to coordinate meetings and provide administrative support.
6. An External member with the requisite knowledge and experience in the field.

X. Periodic Reconstitution of IC (Every Three Years)

Section 4 (3) of the Law states that every member of the Internal Committee shall not hold office for more than three years from the date of their appointment. This means that after completion of three years from each IC members appointment, the Organization is required to appoint a new IC member in their place.

Practical challenges may arise when there is a scarcity of individuals or qualified candidates suitable for IC membership. Nevertheless, it is imperative for an organization to proactively address these challenges to ensure ongoing compliance with the Law and the continued effectiveness of the IC. The Law itself provides that the Presiding Officer can be borrowed from a different branch, administrative unit, other workplaces, other departments, or even other Organizations (mentioned above). Organizations may also consider actively seeking out qualified candidates or implementing appropriate training and development programs to enhance the pool of potential IC members.

In the rare circumstance where, despite these measures, a legally compliant IC cannot be constituted at the workplace for various reasons, a member may be reappointed for another term. In such cases, a fresh Order in Writing should be passed to formally document this appointment. In such cases, the procedure for appointing the Member or the Presiding Officer, as applicable, would be identical to the process used for fresh appointment of the Members or Presiding Officers (as mentioned in Order in Writing above).

It's crucial to ensure that these procedures are followed in strict adherence to the Law to maintain a compliant and effective IC.

XI. Constitution of IC at All Administrative Units

Section 4 (1) of the Law states that, for organizations with multiple administrative units or offices at different locations, the Law requires the constitution of an IC at each of these units. This approach aims to address issues and complaints at various levels within the organization.

XII. Complaints Against IC Members

Section 4(5) of the Law stipulates a few scenarios in which an IC member may be removed from the Committee. They are reproduced below:

- a. contravenes the provisions of section 16 (that deals with confidentiality); or
- b. has been convicted for an offence or an inquiry into an offence under any law for the time being in force is pending against him; or
- c. has been found guilty in any disciplinary proceedings or a disciplinary proceeding is pending against him; or
- d. has so abused his position as to render his continuance in office prejudicial to the public interest, such Presiding Officer or Member, as the case may be;

Any resulting vacancy, or casual vacancy, should be filled through fresh nomination, as per the provisions outlined in this section. Therefore, it is advisable to check for any ongoing inquiries into offenses or pending disciplinary proceedings before selecting IC members.

Conclusion

In conclusion, establishing an Internal Committee (IC) in accordance with the Law is an essential undertaking for organizations in India. This process necessitates thoughtful consideration of practical elements, including the qualifications and availability of IC members, along with the periodic reconstitution of the committee. Adhering to these Legal requirements not only ensures legal compliance but also promotes a safe and respectful workplace for all employees.

Related Articles:

Obligations of an Employer:

<https://poshatwork.com/obligation-of-the-employer>.

Internal Complaints Committee:

<https://poshatwork.com/internal-complaints-committee>.

External member does not only have to be independent but also must have expertise in issues related to sexual harassment:

<https://poshatwork.com/external-member-does-not-only-have-to-be-independent-but-also-must-have-expertise-in-issues-related-to-sexual-harassment>.

Common Mistakes Made During the Compliance Process

I. Introduction

Meticulous adherence to Compliances as per The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 is a critical aspect of maintaining a safe and equitable work environment. Yet, amid the intricacies of these legal requirements, mistakes are all too common. These errors in the compliance process can have far-reaching consequences, potentially jeopardizing the well-being and rights of employees.

Not only that, but these also lead to penalties for organizations as well. For instance, in Delhi High Court directed Standard Chartered Bank to pay compensation and expenses to the Complainant, in addition to the compensation that the victim was entitled from the Respondent, due to the bank's failure to comply with the Law.² In another case, the High Court of Madhya Pradesh imposed a fine of Rs. 25,00,000 as arrears of salary and an additional Rs. 50,000 as costs to for Global Health Private Limited for not constituting a valid IC and the resultant pain and suffering caused to the Complainant.³ In yet another instance, the Madras High Court directed Isg Novasoft Technologies to pay to the Complainant a compensation of Rs. 1,68,00,000 to the Complainant for not constituting a valid IC and non-compliance with the Law.⁴

In this article, we'll explore some of the most frequently encountered mistakes during the POSH Law compliance process and provide guidance on how to steer clear of them.

II. Inadequacies in Constitution of Internal Committees (ICs)

One of the primary requirements under the POSH Act is the constitution of Internal Committees (ICs) in workplaces. Unfortunately, many organizations make mistakes in this process:

- **Not constituting enough ICs:** The law mandates an IC for every location with more than ten employees. Even if your organization has multiple offices in the same district, separate ICs must be established for each location.
- **Constituting too many ICs:** Conversely, organizations are not required to constitute ICs for locations with less than ten employees.
- **Failing to meet IC composition criteria:** The Act specifies specific criteria for IC composition, including a Presiding Officer, employee members with a commitment to women's issues, and a representative from a women's NGO or someone with expertise in sexual harassment issues. Organizations often err by selecting a male Presiding Officer or appointing 'Employers' instead of 'Employees' as members.
- **Not maintaining the composition of IC as per law:** We have ICs being composed of 3 members compared to the minimum requirement of 4 members, seen men act as presiding officer even though the Law states that it must be a senior 'woman' employee. Similarly, ICs have had employees and consultants as their external member, compromising on the 'independent' role that external members must play. Its, therefore, important that ICs are constituted as per Section 4 of the Law.

2 X vs Internal Committee, 2023 SCC OnLine Dis Crt (Del), 06th July 2023.

3 Global Health Private Limited vs Local Complaints Committee, District Indore and others, WP 22317 of 2017, High Court of Madhya Pradesh, Bench at Indore, 16th September 2019.

4 Mrs. G vs ISG Novasoft Technologies, MANU/TN/2293/2014, 02nd September 2014.

III. Neglecting the ‘Order in Writing’ Requirement

Every IC member’s appointment must be supported by an “Order in Writing.” This is not a one-time formality; it should be carried out every time a new member joins the IC. The exact definition of “an order in writing” may vary depending on the organization’s legal registration and applicable laws. For instance, companies registered under the Companies Act, 1956/2013 may require a board resolution to constitute the IC.

IV. Not Formulating and Disseminating a POSH Policy at the Workplace

As per Rule (13) (a) of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Rules, 2013 (POSH Rules),⁵ every Organization is required to formulate and widely disseminate an internal policy for prohibition, prevention and redressal of sexual harassment at the workplace intended to promote gender sensitive safe spaces and remove underlying factors that contribute towards a hostile work environment against women. This specific policy is otherwise referred to as a POSH policy, and it is designed in accordance with the law to combat sexual harassment targeted at women in the workplace.

Unfortunately, many organizations overlook this requirement, either neglecting to establish a POSH policy altogether or creating one that does not adhere to the legal provisions. Even multinational organizations, despite having a global POSH policy, are obligated to formulate an India-specific policy that aligns with Indian laws.

Organizations have the option to design this policy as gender-neutral. However, it is essential for the policy to explicitly acknowledge that the law is primarily designed for women, and the organization, of its own accord, is extending the policy to encompass individuals of all genders.

Related Article:

Ensuring Employee Safety: The Importance of POSH Policy at Workplace:
<https://poshatwork.com/ensuring-employee-safety-the-importance-of-posh-policy-at-workplace>.

V. Inadequate Training and Awareness Sessions

Ensuring that your workforce is well-versed in the nuances of the POSH Law is pivotal in creating a safe and inclusive work environment. Organizations are mandated to conduct two types of training sessions every calendar year – Employee Awareness Sessions and IC Training Sessions. Employee Awareness Sessions are designed to educate all employees about their rights, responsibilities, and how to recognize and report instances of sexual harassment. IC Training Sessions, on the other hand, are intended for members of the Internal Committee and focus on the legal aspects, procedures, and best practices related to addressing complaints.

⁵ <https://poshatwork.com/sexual-harassment-act-rules>.

However, despite the clear requirement, organizations often make the mistake of not conducting enough of these training sessions or failing to adhere to the mandated frequency. Such lapses can leave employees and committee members ill-equipped to deal with harassment issues and can undermine the effectiveness of the entire compliance process. It's essential to recognize the significance of these training sessions and ensure they are carried out as stipulated by the law.

Related Article:

Importance of POSH Awareness Sessions:
<https://poshatwork.com/importance-of-posh-awareness-sessions>.

VI. Failure to File Annual Reports

Filing Annual Reports is a crucial part of POSH compliance, and mistakes in this regard can have serious consequences:

- Not filing an Annual Report every calendar year: Organizations must submit an Annual Report summarizing their compliance activities from January to December. Failing to do so can result in legal complications.
- Not filing an Annual Report for every IC: As previously mentioned, an IC should be constituted for each location with more than ten employees, and an Annual Report must be filed for each IC.
- Incorrect information in the Annual Report: Rule 14 of the POSH Act mandates specific details in the Annual Report, including the number of harassment complaints received and resolved, the number of pending cases, workshops or awareness programs conducted, and the actions taken by the employer. Errors in reporting can undermine the credibility of an organization's compliance efforts.
- Organizations may sometimes do not submit an annual report if they haven't received any complaints in the previous calendar year. It's important to note that an annual report must be filed every calendar year, even if there have been no complaints. In such instances, the number of complaints and all related complaint disclosures should be marked as either "Nil" or "Not applicable".
- Conversely, Organizations sometimes hesitate to file an Annual Report, often driven by concerns about potential damage to their reputation stemming from the number of complaints they may have received. This is a major misconception. Firstly, the Annual Report is a confidential document and is submitted directly to the District Officer, meaning it is not made available to the general public. Secondly, the Annual Report is merely a disclosure document. If an Organization is compliant with the Law and has received the Complaints formally as an extension of effective Compliance and implementation of the Law, the number of Complaints received will not result in any adverse repercussions against the Organization at any level whatsoever.
- Including Complaints filed by genders other than women in the Annual Report: When it comes to including the details about Complaints in the Annual Report for Organizations that have a gender-neutral policy, it is important to understand the legal framework. Annual Report is a mandatory compliance measure under the POSH Law, which is specifically designed to address issues of sexual harassment that women face at the workplace. While Organizations have the option to voluntarily extend their internal policies to cover all genders, the disclosure made under the POSH Law must strictly adhere to the legal perspective only which is applicable to women only. Therefore, only the details filed by a "woman" complainant as per the Law need to be included in the Annual Report.

Conclusion

The compliance process under the POSH Law can be intricate, but avoiding common mistakes is essential to protect the rights and well-being of employees. Properly constituting ICs, passing appropriate Orders in Writing, conducting regular training, and filing accurate Annual Reports are a few of the key elements for an all-round POSH compliance. By addressing these issues, organizations can foster a safer and more inclusive work environment while steering clear of legal complications.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

Sexual harassment is a significant concern in the workplace, and understanding its various aspects is crucial. This article presents a set of FAQs to help you grasp the fundamentals of sexual harassment, including what it entails, its different forms, and the appropriate actions to take.

Part 1: What is Sexual Harassment?

A. What constitutes Sexual Harassment?⁶

Sexual Harassment is deemed to be a misconduct and includes such unwelcome sexually determined behaviour (whether directly or by implication) such as:⁷

- Physical contact advances (Hugging, Groping, Kissing, Brushing past shoulder),
- Demand or request for sexual favours (I want you. Do you want me?, I just want you, whether you like it or not),
- Making sexually coloured remarks (In the context of documents – Take it Out. Response – Not right now (and wink)!, Statement – Did you see? Response – Show first (and smile)?),
- Showing pornography (Offline (showing pictures in a phone or magazine), Online (sending graphic pictures over mail or message),
- Any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of sexual nature (Whistling, Staring, Coming too close but not touching).

B. Does inappropriate / abusive language at work and conduct fall under Sexual Harassment?

Yes, sexual harassment extends to inappropriate / abusive language⁸ at work and the overall conduct as well as these may fall under sexually colored remarks. Overall conduct also includes sexual gestures, if unwelcome, and may be considered forms of sexual harassment. Abusive language must be understood in the environment in which the person is situated.⁹

⁶ <https://poshatwork.com/microaggressions-sexual-harassment-subtleties-in-the-workplace>.

⁷ <https://poshatwork.com/examples-of-what-may-be-sexual-harassment>.

⁸ <https://poshatwork.com/six-months-jail-for-sexually-harassing-woman-by-using-abusive-language-and-showing-middle-finger>.

⁹ <https://poshatwork.com/abusive-language-must-be-understood-in-the-environment-in-which-that-person-is-situated-apex-court>.

C. Is refusing sexual favors and facing retaliation considered Sexual Harassment?

Absolutely. If one declines sexual advances and experiences retaliation, threats, or negative treatment in response, it falls under the category of sexual harassment.

D. Can one file a complaint for a one-time incident of Sexual Harassment?

Yes, one can file a complaint for any instance of sexual harassment, whether it happens once or repeatedly. There is no requirement for a specific frequency to take action.

E. Is verbal request for sexual favors Sexual Harassment?

If a verbal request for sexual favors is unwelcome to the recipient, it is considered sexual harassment. Sexual harassment can take various forms.

F. Is creating a hostile work environment through online behavior considered Sexual Harassment?

Certainly. Sending explicit content and subsequently subjecting someone to ridicule within the workplace, even through online means, qualifies as creating a hostile work environment and is a form of sexual harassment.

G. Is Sexual Harassment law applicable to LGBTQAI+ individuals?

Yes, under the Law, anyone who identifies as a woman can file a complaint with the IC. This includes trans-women. The law may not be considered applicable to other genders as the law is not gender neutral.

H. Does intention matter in determining Sexual Harassment?

No, the recipient's perception of unwelcome behavior is what defines sexual harassment and the impact of such behaviour on them. It doesn't hinge on the harasser's intention.

I. Can the use of emojis lead to Sexual Harassment?

Yes, emojis with a sexual nature, used to convey sexual messages, can be considered sexual harassment if the recipient finds them unwelcome.

Related Articles:

Microaggressions: Sexual Harassment Subtleties in the Workplace:
<https://poshatwork.com/microaggressions-sexual-harassment-subtleties-in-the-workplace>.

Delhi High Court on compulsory retirement and ‘welcome’ sexual advances:
<https://poshatwork.com/delhi-high-court-on-compulsory-retirement-and-welcome-sexual-advances>.

Examples of what may be Sexual Harassment:
<https://poshatwork.com/examples-of-what-may-be-sexual-harassment>.

Consent in Everyday Life:
<https://poshatwork.com/consent-in-everyday-life>.

Quid Pro Quo Form of Sexual Harassment – What is it?:
<https://poshatwork.com/quid-pro-quo-form-of-sexual-harassment>.

A Clear Case of Quid Pro Quo Sexual Harassment:
<https://poshatwork.com/clear-case-quid-pro-quo-sexual-harassment-high-court-gauhati>.

How does the working environment of an organization affect an employee?:
<https://poshatwork.com/how-does-the-working-environment-of-an-organization-affect-an-employee>.

Sexual Harassment at Workplace: The Contributors and Mute Spectators:
<https://poshatwork.com/sexual-harassment-at-workplace-the-contributors-and-mute-spectators>.

Part 2: What is a Workplace?**A. If an incident occurs between two colleagues while they are on vacation on personal leave and it involves inappropriate behaviour, will it still be considered as a workplace?**

Yes, Workplace incidents are not limited to the office. They can occur on personal leave or during vacations. If such incidents have a ripple effect and affect the workplace’s atmosphere, the Internal Committee (IC) can investigate.

B. Is work from home covered under the Law?

Yes, work from home is considered an extended workplace, and incidents occurring in this setting are subject to the same regulations.

Related Article:

The Concept of ‘Extended Workplace’ given under POSH Law:
<https://poshatwork.com/concept-extended-workplace-given-under-posh-law>.

C. What if harassment occurs post working hours at social gatherings?

Incidents at parties or social gatherings involving colleagues can still be covered if they affect the work environment. This is known as an extended workplace scenario.

D. Are chatting apps not provided by the employer covered under workplace regulations?

Most likely, yes. Chat apps provided by the company can be considered an extension of the workplace, but it may depend on the specific circumstances of the situation.

E. Can Sexual Harassment occur during remote work or virtual meetings?

Yes, sexual harassment can occur during remote work and virtual meetings, and it is subject to the same regulations as in-office incidents.

Related Articles:

Sikkim High Court sets aside earlier observation – States that Executive Authority should decide what is 'Workplace':
<https://poshatwork.com/states-that-executive-authority-should-decide-what-workplace-sikkim-high-court>.

Does definition of Workplace in POSH Law include Virtual Workplace?:
<https://poshatwork.com/workplace-in-posh-law-include-virtual-workplace>.

Part 3: Complaints**A. Can a woman file complaint under both POSH Law and Criminal Law simultaneously?**

Yes, a woman can file complaints under both the POSH Law and Criminal Law simultaneously.

B. Is it mandatory to file complaints in writing?

Yes, sexual harassment complaints must be submitted in writing for the IC to handle them. The IC can assist the complainant in reducing the complaint to writing if needed.

C. What if the alleged harasser is not an employee? Where can a complaint be filed?

If the alleged harasser is not an employee, the complainant should file a complaint with the police, as it falls outside the organization's jurisdiction.

D. Is there a standard format for writing a complaint?

No, there is no specific format for writing a sexual harassment complaint. It can be submitted in any clear and understandable form.

E. Will the position or seniority of the respondent affect the inquiry?

No, the IC will investigate complaints objectively, regardless of the respondent's position or seniority in the organization. The principles of confidentiality, objectivity, neutrality, empathy, and natural justice guide the inquiry.

F. Can an outsider file a complaint against a respondent who is an employee?

Yes, an outsider can file a complaint against an employee if they have experienced sexual harassment in a work-related context.

G. What is the timeframe for filing a complaint?

A complaint must be filed within three months from the date of the incident or the last incident in the case of a series of events.

H. What if the complainant can't file a complaint within 3 months?

The IC can extend the time limit for filing a complaint by an additional three months if they are satisfied that circumstances prevented the Complainant from filing within the initial three-month period.

I. Can someone else file a complaint on behalf of the aggrieved?

If the aggrieved is unable to make a complaint on account of physical incapacity, a complaint may be filed by the following persons (with the written consent of the Complainant):

- Relative or friend; or
- Her co-worker; or
- An officer of the national commission for women or state women's commission; or
- Any person who has knowledge of the incident,

If aggrieved is unable to make a complaint on account of mental incapacity, a complaint may be filed by:

- Relative or friend; or
- A special educator; or
- A qualified psychiatrist or psychologist; or
- The guardian or authority under whose care s/he is receiving treatment or care; or
- Any person who has knowledge of the incident jointly with the aggrieved person's relative or friend or a special educator or qualified psychiatrist or psychologist, or guardian or authority under whose care s/he is receiving treatment or care.

If aggrieved for any other reason is unable to make a complaint, a complaint may be filed by any person who has knowledge of the incident, with his/her written consent.

J. Can a complaint be filed about inappropriate online behavior?

Yes, if a colleague engages in inappropriate online behavior, such as sending unwelcome messages or making advances via messaging apps or social media such as WhatsApp etc., a complaint can be filed with the IC.

K. What if someone faces threats after filing a complaint?

If a Complainant receives threats or faces any problems after filing a complaint, they should immediately report it to the IC for further action.

L. Can a complaint be filed even if the complainant does not have any evidence?

Yes, a complaint can be filed even if the Complainant does not have direct evidence of harassment. The IC will inquire based on the information provided.

Part 4: Inquiry**A. Does the respondent have the right to respond to a complaint against them?**

Yes, once the Respondent receives a copy of the complaint against them, they have the right to respond in writing within ten working days.

B. Can the parties bring a lawyer to the inquiry proceeding?

No, the Parties cannot bring a lawyer to the inquiry.

C. What should be done if the IC asks for documents or cooperation in the inquiry?

If the IC asks for cooperation or documents, it is important to comply. The IC has the authority to enforce cooperation as per provisions of law.

D. Is there a timeframe for completing the inquiry?

Yes, the IC must complete the inquiry within 90 days.

E. What happens if the complainant's training period ends during the inquiry?

The IC will continue the inquiry, even if the complainant's training period ends.

F. Can the complainant control the severity of the penalty through conciliation?

No, the IC will determine the appropriate action based on the inquiry's findings, considering factors such as the severity of the offense and the impact.

G. What is conciliation?

Conciliation is a process where the IC may, at the written request of the Complainant, attempt to settle the matter between the complainant and the respondent before initiating a formal inquiry.

H. Is conciliation mandatory?

No, conciliation is not mandatory.

I. Can conciliation be sought after initiating a complaint?

No, conciliation is only an option after a written complaint is filed but before the formal inquiry begins.

J. What is the difference between a false complaint and an incident that doesn't qualify as Sexual Harassment?

A false complaint is one that is filed with a malicious intent, and the IC's findings establish that the allegations lack validity. On the other hand, an incident that doesn't qualify as sexual harassment implies that the IC's findings determine the allegations are not of a sexual nature, and, as a result, it does not constitute a case of sexual harassment.

K. Can financial compensation be part of a settlement through conciliation?

No, financial compensation is not allowed as part of a conciliation under the law.

L. What should be done if there is a breach of confidentiality?

If there is a breach of confidentiality, it should be reported to the IC immediately. The IC will address the matter and take appropriate action.

Part 5: Appeals

M. What if management takes no action on the recommendations filed by the IC for a complaint?

If management fails to take action on the complaint, the Parties may reach out to the IC or choose to appeal through the legal process.

N. Within what timeframe should an appeal be filed?

An appeal should be filed within 90 days from the date of the IC's recommendations.

O. Can a person challenge the IC's decision?

Yes, after the IC concludes the inquiry, either party can appeal the decision to the appellate authority.

P. Who serves as the appellate authority under the POSH law?

The appellate authority under the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act, 2013, is typically a court or tribunal, depending on the state's jurisdiction and any applicable service rules.

Part 6: Miscellaneous

A. What is the role of an internal committee (IC)?

An internal committee, or IC (previously known as the Internal Complaints Committee or ICC), serves as the inquiring authority for complaints of sexual harassment in the workplace. The IC consists of the following members:

- Presiding Officer, who will be a senior woman employee
- At least two other employees
- One external member. The External member should not be an employee of the Organization and must be an independent member such that they have no other connection with the organization. Additionally, they should have experience of dealing with cases of sexual harassment and gender issues.

B. What are the consequences if any of the parties stop attending inquiry hearings?

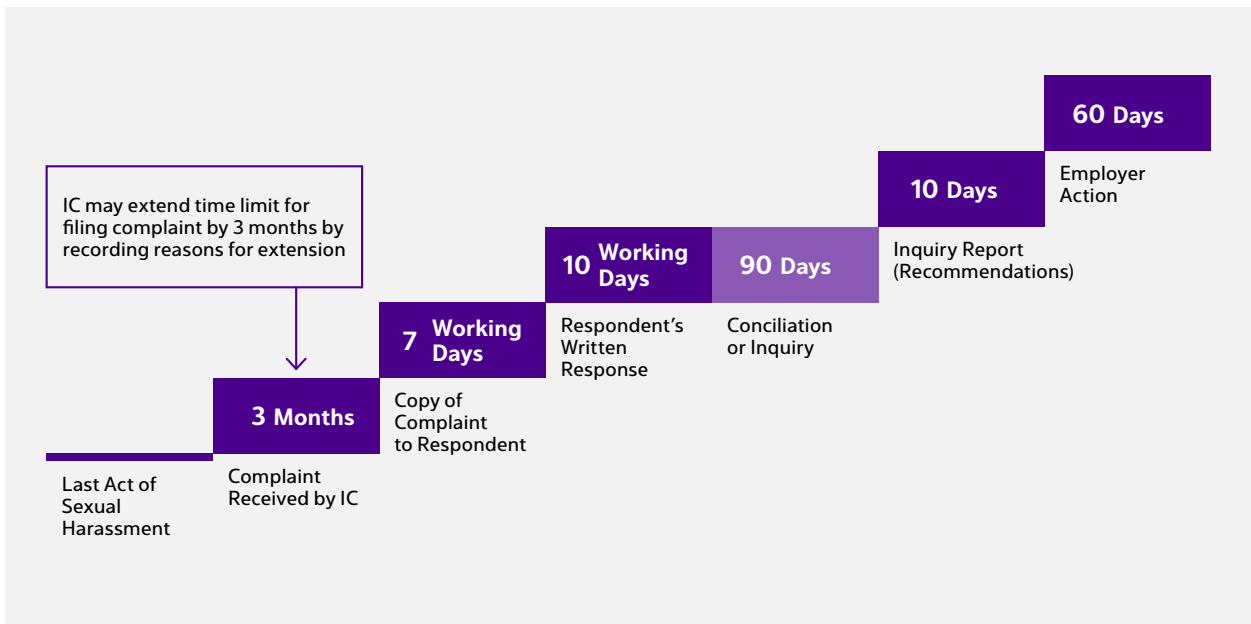
If Parties discontinue attending inquiry hearings, the IC has the authority to make an ex-parte decision after offering three opportunities for participation and providing a 15-day notice.

C. Is complaint handling confidential?

Yes, the handling of complaints is strictly confidential. All details are shared only on a need-to-know basis to maintain the privacy and protection of those involved.

Complaint Handling: Inquiry Timelines

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act and Rules, 2013 outline specific timelines and procedures for addressing workplace complaints. These timelines are crucial to ensure that complaints are addressed promptly and fairly. We have below a quick snapshot of the inquiry timelines which can be used as a guide to the inquiry timelines process.



The Law provide a structured framework with specific timelines and procedures for addressing workplace complaints. These timelines play a vital role in ensuring that complaints are dealt with in a timely and equitable manner. By adhering to these timelines, we can foster a workplace environment that values transparency, accountability, and the well-being of all employees.

Tips for Handling Complaints at Each of the Above Stages

I. When a Complaint is Filed:

Once the complaint has been received by the IC, following points can be ascertained to understand whether IC has jurisdiction to take up the complaint:

1. Whether a written complaint has been submitted to the IC. If not, IC may not be able to look into the complaint as IC can only look into written complaints only as per Law. IC may have to take other measures in case of oral and anonymous complaints.
2. IC to go through the complaint thoroughly and check if the allegations made are that of sexual harassment as IC can only look into complaints of sexual harassment.
3. Check the date of the last incident of sexual harassment mentioned in the complaint, as the IC can look into complaints that have been filed within 3 months from the last incident of sexual harassment. The IC has the discretion to extend that period to 6 months in case there are justifiable reason(s) to not be able to file the complaint within 3 months.
4. Whether the incidents mentioned in the complaint occurred at the workplace (including extended workplace). If not, IC will not have jurisdiction to look into the complaint. The complaint will need to be filed with other relevant authorities.
5. Whether the respondent is an employee of the organisation as IC can look into complaints against current employees.

Once the above has been established, in order to understand the situation further, IC needs to take note of some other points as well:

1. IC to take all necessary updates / information regarding the following from the HR / legal / etc on the below:
 - a. Do the other employees have knowledge of the complaint?
 - b. Has there been any conversation with the parties by anyone other than the IC?
 - c. If yes, who all were spoken to and what was the conversation?
 - d. Have there been any steps / measures taken by any person / department with regards to the complaint. For e.g. taking preventive measure to protect the Complainant or to maintain confidentiality.
2. If it is through a third party, IC to find out the reason for the Aggrieved not filing the complaint on their own and in case the person filing the complaint has written consent of the Aggrieved. In case, the IC does not find the consent of the Aggrieved in the complaint, IC can reach out to the Third Party and confirm the same with them.
3. If the complaint has been filed by the Aggrieved, then the IC can move on to next steps.

The IC can also schedule a meeting to discuss the complaint including the above points and decide next steps. This would also be a good opportunity to delegate responsibilities, that will be taken up by the IC members while handling the complaint.

II. Key Things to Keep in Mind During Conciliation:

It is a process where the IC facilitates a settlement between the parties without going into the details of the allegation(s). Following must be noted:

1. It is a choice that the Complainant has – as per Law, Complainant can opt this before the inquiry begins.
2. The Complainant can share their terms of conciliation with the IC. The IC can then share them with the Respondent.
3. The Respondent has the right to agree, disagree or negotiate on the terms as they deem fit – they cannot be compelled to make any particular choice.
4. The IC facilitates conciliation.
5. Conciliation cannot be based on monetary settlement.
6. IC supports each party fairly and neutrally in clarifying any doubts they may have during the process.
7. This process does not necessarily require the parties to meet face-to-face.
8. It is important to note that the conciliation process does not conclude in holding any party guilty. Hence, the terms of settlement cannot be punitive in nature. For e.g. the terms cannot lead to termination of employment or loss of pay etc.
9. Please note that the Respondent rendering an apology to the Complainant does not mean admission of guilt.
10. Once the terms have been agreed upon, the IC prepares a document and the IC as well as parties sign it. A signed copy is given to both parties.

III. Scenarios in Which Inquiry May Take Place:

The complainant may proceed towards the inquiry process in the following situations:

1. In case the Complainant does not opt for conciliation or
2. In case the Complainant opts for conciliation, but conciliation terms are not agreed upon by the parties.
3. In case the conciliation goes through, but the terms are not complied with at a later stage. In such situations, the Complainant may reach out to the IC. The IC may take up the complaint along with the latest allegation(s) and initiate any inquiry into the matter.

IV. Stages of Inquiry: Things to Keep in Mind

E. Complaint and Written Response:

When a complaint is filed with the IC, a meeting is scheduled with the parties. The IC begins by scheduling a meeting with the Complainant. This meeting is scheduled keeping the following points in mind:

1. To introduce the IC to the Complainant.
2. To understand any details of the complaint that may not have been clear from the written complaint.
3. To inform the Complainant that a copy of the complaint will be shared with the Respondent for them to submit a written response within 10 working days.
4. To inform about interim measures.
5. To inform about the redressal options that they have and understand which one they would like to opt for.
6. To explain and set expectations regarding the timelines and the process.
7. The IC may audio record this and any further meetings with the Complainant, Respondent and / or Witness(es) by taking their consent and explaining the importance of the same.

Note: IC may share the copy of the organization's anti-sexual harassment policy (in case not shared earlier/party does not have access to it).

Following the meeting with the Complainant, a meeting with the Respondent is scheduled. The purpose is similar as above. The following points to be kept in mind:

1. To inform the Respondent about the complaint.
2. To introduce the IC to the Respondent.
3. To listen to what the Respondent may have to say regarding the complaint.
4. To inform the Respondent that a copy of the complaint will be shared with them and that they will be given 10 working days to submit a written response to the IC. To inform in case any interim measures are being put in place during the pendency of the proceedings.
5. To inform about the redressal options Complainant has as per law.
6. To explain and set expectations regarding the timelines and the process.

F. Examination of Parties and Witnesses

1. The IC will schedule a meeting with the parties separately to record their statement.

Note: In case of in-person meeting being scheduled, it is important to keep in mind the sensitivity of the matter while deciding the timing and the location of meeting. IC needs to ensure that the confidentiality of the matter is maintained. In case of online or hybrid meeting being scheduled, it is important to confirm the official channel of communication and if the individual has access to the same. If not, the IC needs to ensure that the individual is given the facility to be able to connect with the IC online whether from a personal space or from office. IC must also check that the individual can have privacy to be able to talk freely with the IC during an online meeting.

2. The IC to make written records of the examination and get the same acknowledged by the parties / witnesses.
3. The IC to inform parties that this will be shared with the other party. Witness statements to be shared too. This is required in case a cross-examination is needed.
4. The IC to also reiterate the importance and relevance of maintaining confidentiality.
5. The IC may ask questions surrounding the allegation(s) mentioned in the complaint.
6. IC should ask open ended questions at this stage so that parties can give more details. For e.g. asking Who, What, When, Where and How questions.
7. The conversations need to be done keeping in mind the sensitivity of the matter wherein the questions do not seem accusatory or biased against or towards either party.
8. *Note: The Complainant may also share new / additional allegation(s) while giving their statement along with documents to support their statement.* These can be noted. New / additional allegation(s) can be dealt with as part of next steps in the inquiry.
9. In case parties feel overwhelmed or break down during the meeting, the IC can offer refreshments and can take such short breaks as may be necessary in the circumstance to help them compose themselves and continue with the meeting.
10. In case the IC feels that the concerned party is not in a state of mind to continue the meeting, the IC can reschedule the meeting to another mutually convenient time.

G. Cross-Examination:

1. Any document(s) that may have been received by the IC from either party need to be shared with the other party along with the acknowledged statement of the prior stage.
2. Any document(s) that may have been received by the IC from the Witness(es) need to be shared with both parties along with the acknowledged statement(s) of the Witness(es) as discussed above.
3. The statements and other documents may be password protected for added layer of protection as and when needed depending on security protocols of the organization.
4. The statements and other documents have to be sent / shared through official channels (platforms and email ids) only.
5. Cross examination can take place orally or in writing.
6. During cross-examination, the role of the IC is to coordinate and facilitate the meeting so that parties resolve any queries etc. they may have without arguments. In *Manjeet Singh vs. Indrapastha Gas Limited*, (24.10.2016, High Court of Delhi), the Court said, for finding truth, orderly conduct of cross-examination is essential. It cannot be reduced to a mutual allegation of charges against each other or a verbal duel of unpleasant and intemperate language. The procedure cannot be reduced to a farce where parties are left at the mercy of each other's articulation of expressions, lung power, domineering or domineering attitude, etc. While it may not always be possible to apply strict rules of procedure, an order in the conduct of cross-examination is essential for it to be lent any credence.
7. The IC to explain the premise of the meeting and inform the individuals that the conversation should remain within the purview of the complaint.

8. The parties can ask questions to each other or the Witness(es). However, the questions should not amount to character assassination, personal remarks or ask irrelevant / personal questions. Parties must also be informed that cannot use abusive / inappropriate language and cannot be physically or verbally intimidating.
9. The communication by the IC needs to be done keeping in mind the sensitivity of the matter wherein the tone and body language does not seem accusatory or biased against or towards either party.
10. In case of written cross examination, IC asks the Complainant and Respondent to send their set of questions for the other party and / or the Witness(es) via email.
11. In case any individual does not have access to or is not privy to use of technology, questions / responses can be shared with the IC via handwritten document as well.
12. Once the IC receives the question, it can go through the same to ensure that the questions are as per the instructions sent to the parties. IC can disallow any question that is not as per the instructions. It can then send it to parties for their response.

H. Findings of IC

1. IC may reach any of the following conclusions based on the facts, statements, evidence or any other aspect of the inquiry that the IC may come across:
 - The allegation(s) is / are substantiated, and the Respondent is found guilty.
 - The allegation(s) is / are not substantiated, and the Respondent is not found guilty.
 - The inquiry remains inconclusive due to lack of evidence.
 - The allegation(s) is / are false, and the Complainant is held responsible for filing a malicious complaint.
2. Are there any determinants to help come to the conclusion? IC can keep in mind the following:
 - Whether the incident(s) mentioned have been proved to have occurred.
 - Whether these incidents were one-time occurrences or repeated.
 - Whether it was intentional.
 - Could the Respondent exercise any form of authority over the Complainant.
 - Was there any documentary evidence that the IC could examine.
 - Whether there were any direct witnesses.
 - Whether there was any circumstantial evidence.

Note: IC is mandated to send the findings report to parties for their final representation. Only when that has been received can the IC make recommendations. This is an important step and often gets missed by IC.

I. Recommendations

As the last step, IC has to prepare the Inquiry Report.¹⁰ The IC had 10 days to prepare the Inquiry Report and submit it to the management.

A copy of the report is also shared with the Complainant and the Respondent.

Points to keep in mind regarding the Inquiry Report:

1. This is a detailed report that consists of all the information of the complaint including the conclusion and the actions that the IC recommends along with its reasons.
2. Some of the details that are included in the Inquiry Report are as follows:
 - a. Date of complaint — whether it was filed with 3 or 6 months from the last incident of sexual harassment
 - b. Names of the parties
 - c. Allegations
 - d. Details of the IC members
 - e. Interim relief provided by the IC (if any)
 - f. Name of Witness(es)
 - g. Documentary evidence relied upon by the IC
 - h. Findings with reasons
 - i. Written representation of the party (if any)
 - j. Reasons of the IC to accept / reject the representation(s)
 - k. Recommendation of action to be taken by the management as per the conclusion of the inquiry
 - l. All relevant annexures, disclaimers and any other aspect that may need mentioning based on facts and circumstances.
3. Some of the factors that may guide the IC in determining the actions to be recommended are as follows:
 - a. The nature and number of the incidents that occurred.
 - b. The severity of the inappropriate conduct
 - c. The position / designation of the Respondent
 - d. The awareness of the Respondent pertaining to their behaviour
 - e. The repercussions of the inappropriate behaviour on the Complainants' state of being, career opportunities and / or reputation etc.

¹⁰ <https://poshatwork.com/inquiry-report-icc-binding-employer-must-provided-parties>.

4. As per the conclusion of the inquiry, IC may recommend any of the below mentioned actions to be taken. It can be one or a combination of any of the below:
 - a. Written apology
 - b. Warning
 - c. Reprimand or censure
 - d. Withholding of promotion
 - e. Withholding of pay rise or increments
 - f. Termination of employment
 - g. Undergoing counselling session
 - h. Carrying out community service
5. In case the Complainant has suffered any expenses or losses, for e.g., medical expenses or loss of career opportunities due to the incidents of sexual harassment, IC can also recommend financial compensation for the Complainant that is deducted from the Respondents' salary which is given to Complainant.
6. In case of malicious complaints, IC recommends action against the Complainant.
7. There is no financial compensation available for the Respondent in case of malicious complaints.
8. This report is shared with the management and both parties.
9. The management has 60 days to implement the recommendations of the IC from the day it receives the Inquiry Report
10. In case the either / both parties have any concerns / grievances regarding the process followed by the IC, the conclusion or any other aspect of the proceedings, they can appeal in the relevant appellate authorities in their city within 90 days of receiving the Inquiry Report.

Related Article:

Inquiry Report of ICC binding on Employer & must be provided to Parties:
<https://poshatwork.com/inquiry-report-icc-binding-employer-must-provided-parties>.

Confidentiality: Challenges and Tips for Effective Management of Complaints

Confidentiality applies to any person handling a complaint of sexual harassment at the workplace. Following points can be kept in mind to ensure confidentiality:

1. Any information regarding the complaint to be disclosed on a need-to-know basis.
2. Any communication done, whether through physical documents or emails, need to be labelled as 'Strictly Confidential'. Emails can have the same on the Subject line.
3. Complainant / Respondent may be counselled sensitively to not make the complaint and / or any related details public.
4. Any documents with confidential information to be removed / put away from physical desks or laptops at the end of any / all inquiry meetings.
5. Any / all discussions pertaining to the complaint / inquiry to be discussed in privacy as such discussion in open spaces may lead to others being privy to sensitive information, thus, leading to breach of confidentiality.
6. Avoid drafting of emails / documents related to the complaint / inquiry in public places.
7. People may not be equipped to deal with / to understand what to do with confidential information. Ensure that appropriate training is done for people to be able to deal with confidential information responsibly and as per organisations' policy.
8. In case of complex complaint / inquiry that has voluminous documents, a separate room / cabin can be allotted for the documents to be filed. Only authorised personnel to be allowed in the room. The same can be done virtually through mediums like OneDrive etc.
9. During exit interviews, employee to return all documents (online / physically), assets to the organisation. They also need to be reminded about their future obligation regarding improper use or disclosure of any confidential information that they may have.
10. The IC should have an NDA (Non-Disclosure Agreement) signed by individual being involved in the proceedings.
11. Have a provision of 'confidentiality' and the consequences if the same is breached in the anti-sexual harassment policy of the organisation that is in line with the POSH law.

Other points to keep in mind while handling confidential information virtually:

1. Always close complaint-related files / documents and logout / lock laptops / systems / phones after interactions or sharing documents. Screen privacy filters can also be applied to block view from different angles.
2. Create complex passwords and the same to be kept private. Passwords to be changed periodically.
3. Ensure public Wi-Fi or unsecure connections are not used for such communication / meetings.
4. Any documents shared online to be encrypted or password protected.
5. Before disposing any old computer / laptop / phone, use software programs to wipe out all data and have the hard drives destroyed.

About The Legal Swan

Harassment, discrimination, and bullying persist as global challenges affecting individuals across various settings. In response to pressing issue, The Legal Swan (www.thelegalswan.com) has emerged as a leading provider of 360° solutions against bullying, harassment & discrimination while promoting 'Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging'. Our team of over 20 professionals is dedicated to addressing these complexities with expertise and sensitivity.

Within The Legal Swan umbrella, we house two distinct brands:

POSH at Work (www.poshatwork.com):

Our specialized brand providing 360° solutions against sexual harassment.

Respekt (www.respekt.in):

Our brand dedicated to offering 360° solutions for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Belonging.

Our mission is to create safer, more inclusive environments. At The Legal Swan, we pride ourselves on going beyond conventional approaches. Our unique solutions redefine how businesses address and mitigate harassment and discrimination issues, emphasizing a holistic and proactive approach to foster healthier workspaces.

Key Statistics:

- Over 500 organizations and educational institutions have benefited from our solutions.
- We have conducted over 1,000 inquiries and conciliations, ensuring fair and just resolutions.
- Our commitment to education is reflected in the 2,000 training and awareness programs we have conducted.
- A thriving community of over 300 members actively participates in our POSH initiatives.
- We take pride in having trained over 3 lakh individuals, empowering them with the knowledge to create safer and more inclusive environments.

In a world where addressing these issues is not just a legal but a strategic imperative, The Legal Swan aims to lead the way toward a corporate future that embraces diversity, equality, and excellence.

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About NDA

At Nishith Desai Associates, we have earned the reputation of being Asia's most Innovative Law Firm — and the go-to specialists for companies around the world, looking to conduct businesses in India and for Indian companies considering business expansion abroad. In fact, we have conceptualized and created a state-of-the-art Blue Sky Thinking and Research Campus, Imaginarium Aligunjan, an international institution dedicated to designing a premeditated future with an embedded strategic foresight capability.

We are a research and strategy driven international firm with offices in Mumbai, Palo Alto (Silicon Valley), Bengaluru, Singapore, New Delhi, Munich, and New York. Our team comprises of specialists who provide strategic advice on legal, regulatory, and tax related matters in an integrated manner basis key insights carefully culled from the allied industries.

As an active participant in shaping India's regulatory environment, we at NDA, have the expertise and more importantly — the VISION — to navigate its complexities. Our ongoing endeavors in conducting and facilitating original research in emerging areas of law has helped us develop unparalleled proficiency to anticipate legal obstacles, mitigate potential risks and identify new opportunities for our clients on a global scale. Simply put, for conglomerates looking to conduct business in the subcontinent, NDA takes the uncertainty out of new frontiers.

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The firm has been consistently ranked as one of the Most Innovative Law Firms, across the globe. In fact, NDA has been the proud recipient of the Financial Times–RSG award 4 times in a row, (2014-2017) as the Most Innovative Indian Law Firm.

We are a trust based, non-hierarchical, democratic organization that leverages research and knowledge to deliver extraordinary value to our clients. Datum, our unique employer proposition has been developed into a global case study, aptly titled 'Management by Trust in a Democratic Enterprise,' published by John Wiley & Sons, USA.

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Research is the DNA of NDA. In early 1980s, our firm emerged from an extensive, and then pioneering, research by Nishith M. Desai on the taxation of cross-border transactions. The research book written by him provided the foundation for our international tax practice. Since then, we have relied upon research to be the cornerstone of our practice development. Today, research is fully ingrained in the firm's culture.

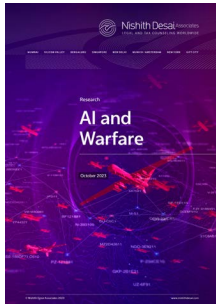
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**Prevention of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace (POSH)
India Legal & HR Considerations**