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Sexual Harassment of Women in Universities and Sustainable Development

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Abstract: The United Nations (UN) adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a collection of 17 objectives intended to change the world over the next 15 years, on September 25, 2015. These objectives are meant to wipe out environmental degradation, end poverty, stop injustice to women and bring about a period of progress for everyone, everywhere. Goal-4 of the sustainable development says about education which play an important role to achieve other Sustainable Development Goals. The SDG-5 is solely focused on strengthening women and girls and attaining gender equality. To promote inclusive and peaceful societies for sustainable development, the SDG-16 seeks to eradicate child abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all other forms of harassment and torture. Sexual Harassment against women at institutions are in news, and this SDG goals aims to reduce this harassment and related repercussion on women. To achieve sustainable development goals fully sexual harassment of women at universities must be prevented. This Harassment includes both physical and psychological harassment. Treating women with respect is also a precondition for eradicating sexual harassment. Any behaviour that controls and upholds traditional patriarchy norms is considered as a type of harassment. Sexual harassment directly affects women development. The widespread and deeply ingrained problem of harassment against women in the workplace continues to jeopardize women's development addition to violating their constitutional rights. The Vishakha Guidelines and the sexual harassment of women at workplace (prevention, prohibition and redressal) Act 2013 are example of positive legal advance. Sustainable development cannot be achieved without the full participation of women in the field of education. Whereas in other words we can say that sustainable development goals cannot be achieved until sexual harassment against women is stopped at universities.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, Sexual Harassment, Women, University and equality.

INTRODUCTION:

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."¹ As a part of the 2030 Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) seek to address global issues such as injustice, poverty, and inequality. Among these, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), 5 (Gender Equality) and Goal 16 (Peace,

¹ United Nations, *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future* (1987)

Justice and Strong Institutions) are closely related, especially when it comes to women's education. SDG 4, SDG 5 and SDG 16 are particularly important in influencing the conversation around women's education. These goals are different, but they are inextricably connected. Access to education and providing justice is still unequal and incomplete in the absence of gender equality. Campus environment, treating discriminately and sexual harassment are just a few of the institutional and cultural obstacles that frequently prevent women from pursuing education. Women's educational experiences are still impeded by problems like sexual harassment and dangerous campus environments, despite notable advancements in female enrolment. This article attempts to look into how sexual harassment in universities impacts Sustainable Development Goal 4, 5 and Goal 16 with a focus on women's access to education and the role of institutional frameworks in ensuring justice, safety and equality.

A study of Leach and Sitaram, finds that sexual harassment created harsh environment that discourage women from pursuing their education, and for others, it increased their fear of withdrawal if their parents learned about any incidents.² This finding is supported by a research work of Aguilar and Baek, who reveal that a major reason that leads to students' underreporting of sexual harassment is institutional and departmental barriers caused by power imbalances.³ Elaine Unterhalter in its study highlights the transforming power of education in attaining gender equality.⁴

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS:

In September 2015, Member States accepted the new 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which outlines 17 objectives that must be met by 2030. One of Sustainable Development Goal 5's key objectives is to end all forms of violence against women and girls. The global community will not only fail to achieve SDG 5 if progress of women is not prioritized, but it will also miss out on the expected transformative impact that gender equality can have on the broader achievement of the 2030 Agenda. Achieving educational equality (SDG 4) will increase women's employment and empowerment and promote their economic growth. Providing justice (SDG 16) to all the women will encourage them to come to the educational institution without fear from any type of harassment. In addition, poor grievance procedures in universities undermine institutional accountability, which runs opposite to Sustainable Development Goal 16. If universities and colleges don't prevent and address the sexual harassment, they run the risk of fostering a situation where victims lose faith in institutional justice. Everywhere in the institution, women must be move freely, without discrimination and violence, as well as enjoy equal rights and opportunities. In order to achieve the goals by 2030, immediate effort is needed to eradicate the numerous underlying causes of discrimination that continue to restrict women's education in both public and private institution. Sexual harassment of women at universities is one of them that discriminate women must be prevented, by implying UGC regulation in all the institution which actively encourages women to take part in the education without fear.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND EDUCATION:

No matter how it is defined, Sexual harassment is likely the one experience that occurs in practically every society. Additionally, it is a practice that is prevalent in both organized and unstructured sectors. Naturally, the degree of severity and acceptance may different. Therefore, we can broadly define sexual harassment as any sexually suggestive behaviour that could jeopardize the victim's employment or education, have a detrimental impact on the victim's performance at work and career, or compromise the victim's self-respect. It can be used to suggest sexual favours, inappropriate emotional gestures, verbal hints, and dating proposals in its lighter or indirect forms.

Women's education can be viewed as one of the criteria of a country's educational progress and as an essential precondition for national growth. Also, education improves human civilization by eradicating poverty, harassment, inequality, and other issues. Women are one of the most significant parts

² Fiona Leach and S Sitaram, 'Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Adolescent Schoolgirls in South India' (2007) 2(3) *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 257.

³ SJ Aguilar and C Baek, 'Sexual Harassment in Academe is Underreported, Especially by Students in the Life and Physical Sciences' (2020) 15(3) *PLoS ONE* e0230312 <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0230312> accessed 6 May 2026.

⁴ Elaine Unterhalter, Helen Longlands and Rosalind Peppin Vaughan, 'Gender and Intersecting Inequalities in Education: Reflections on a Framework for Measurement' (2022) 23(4) *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 509 <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2022.2090523> accessed 6 May 2026.

of our society. Although the government's numerous programmes significantly help in the education of women but a stringent implementation of them on elimination of sexual harassment in universities is still required to advance women's education. Women are the image of their countries. They play a vital role in our society. However, it is regrettable that women do not enjoy the same status as males in the educational field due to the issue of sexual harassment. Women's education is crucial for both social and national development because we know that social development cannot occur without boosting women's education. Education is thought to be a key tool for women's growth. Education is a method that helps women to become self-aware and reveal the women hidden skills to the society. Besides, a basic need, education is an essential tool for social and personal growth. However, establishing a safe learning environment in universities is severely hampered by sexual harassment. It hinders female involvement and has an impact on educational continuity. Women's dignity is violated by sexual harassment. Sexual harassment may take place in both offline and online form of education among classmates, teachers and students, or administrative staff in the universities. In educational institutions, sexual harassment fosters a hostile and frightening environment. This behaviour disrespect women and prevent them from freely taking part in the institutions. Women Students feel insecure on campuses, and in classrooms. Fear becomes a persistent obstacle to going to and from university and learning environments become less welcoming. Repeated harassment causes many female students to drop out of universities and this trend is exacerbated much in conservative and rural area. Families value and safety are above education. Sexual harassment limits women's ability to continue their education by acting as a structural barrier. Women students' attendance is impacted even if they do not drop out. They started avoiding specific classes, faculty, or places and less involvement in regular academic activities. Sexual harassment has significant psychological repercussions that impact participation in institution. Attendance in classes is decreased by anxiety, fear, and trauma. Emotional stress causes women students to lose interest in their studies and works. The situation gets worse when there are no support networks in the universities. Young women entering university are affected emotionally and behaviourally by sexual harassment. The ability to select educational opportunities and career in this field is restricted by harassment. Many female Students stay away from choosing colleges and universities that is far away from home. Limitations on attending evening classes or living in hostel. Sexual harassment in educational institution indirectly limits access to quality education. Educational establishments cannot overlook the necessity of establishing a secure atmosphere through preparation, awareness-raising, and prevention, as well as discourage sexual harassment. As a result, universities cannot solve the harassment issue on their own; students, faculty and staffs must actively collaborate to foster an environment that promotes education. According to research it reflects that in focus group conversations, harassed women are frequently absent-minded in the classroom, do not pay attention to the courses or remain mute when asked questions, all of which are indicators of a lack of focus.⁵ A study reflects that one in ten women reported sexual assault within institutions by at least one member from there educational institution.⁶

INTERNATIONAL SAFEGUARDS

The purpose of educational institution is to foster intellectual development and empowerment. However, sexual harassment has tarnished these places for many women. Women's experiences various types of sexual harassment, including verbal, physical, and psychological abuse, which creates hostile learning and working environments that deter women from pursuing education. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has stated that sexual harassment "has been addressed as both an aspect of gender discrimination and as a form of violence of human rights"⁷ globally, despite the difficulty in defining precisely what constitutes sexual harassment in the workplace. The International Labour Organization claims that sexual harassment creates an insecure working environment, a threat to safety and health, a violation of women's fundamental rights, and a form of violence that usually targets female employees. The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) said in its General Recommendations No. 19 (January 1992), "Violence against Women," that sexual harassment is a kind of gender-based violence.

⁵Mishra Lokanath, (2021) "Effects of Violence against Women on Higher Education in Mizoram, India", journal of international women studies, vol-22 (1) 465-472. Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss1/27>

⁶ Mukherjee, A., & Dasgupta, S. (2022). "He Says, She Says": Sexism and Sexual Harassment in Higher Educational Institutions of India. Journal of Economic Issues, 56(2), 408–415. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00213624.2022.2057169>

⁷ International Labour Organization, Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No 190) adopted 21 June 2019, entered into force 25 June 2021 available at <https://www.ilo.org/resource/ilc/108/violence-and-harassment-convention-2019-no-190>

The Beijing declaration and Platform for Action calls on various entities, including the government, employers, unions, and civil society, to ensure that governments enact and enforce laws on sexual harassment and that employers develop anti-harassment policies and prevention strategies. It acknowledges sexual harassment as a form of violence against women and as a form of discrimination. According to the Beijing Platform for Action, efforts to create more wealthy, peaceful communities and a sustainable world must start with equally treating women. Without the support of women, who make up half of humanity, we will not succeed. This implies that without respecting and upholding the rights of women, we can never achieve our goals of eradicating inequality treatment, give quality education and provide them justice regarding sexual harassment.

NATIONAL SAFEGUARDS

Prior to the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act of 2013, sexual harassment was dealt with in accordance with the Vishaka case guideline. While deciding the Vishaka⁸ case the Supreme Court observed that the international treaty should be interpreted as regards to fundamental rights. In order to safeguard women's safety and dignity at work, it interpreted the CEDAW requirements found in articles 14.15, 19, and 21 of the constitution and created legally binding standards that all employers, whether in the public or private sector, must follow. The Supreme Court pronounced that in order to protect women in the workplace, all institutions, employers, and other responsible parties must follow certain rules. The Sexual harassment of women at workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013 says that any of the following unlawful behaviours or activities (whether directly or indirectly) constitute sexual harassment: physical contact and advancement; sexual favours or requests, sexually suggestive comments, pornographic displays, and any other unwanted physical, verbal, or nonverbal behaviour.⁹ Sexual harassment may include, among other things, the following circumstances when sexual harassment takes place or is present in relation to any act or behaviour of sexual harassment, such as an implicit or explicit promise of special treatment at work, an implicit or explicit threat of unfavourable treatment at work, or an implicit or explicit threat to her career, either now or in the future.¹⁰ According to the act a committee called the "Internal Complaints Committee" (ICC) must be established by employers in their organisation. Within three months of the date of the occurrence, or the date of the most recent incidence in the case of a series of incidents, any aggrieved woman may file a written complaint of sexual harassment at workplace (include educational institution) with the Local Committee if it is not constituted, or the Internal Committee if it is. Employers who violate the Sexual Harassment of women at workplace Act or neglect to set up an ICC face a fine of up to INR 50,000.

The UGC Regulation was passed in 2015 focussing on the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and redressal) Act, which aimed to protect female employees and students from sexual harassment in colleges and universities. Victim women, trainers, employees, teachers, students, supervisors, scholars, and executive authorities are all covered by the regulation. The rule applies to every area of the university's campus. The campus also includes the location of transportation traffic when a female employee leaves to teach or if a student from outside comes to the university or college for educational work. The UGC Regulation covers complaints of sexual persecution in great detail. The UGC (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal of Sexual Harassment of women employees and students in higher education institutions), 2015 regulation are mandatory for universities and institutions under these laws, as applicable, in addition to pertinent provisions of the POSH Act, 2013. The Higher Education Institution first and foremost, as required by UGC Regulations, Internal Complaints Committees have to be established. Second, to schedule frequent training sessions for Committee Members to better prepare them to deal with the complaints. In addition, to set up awareness-raising classes for staff, teachers, and students, sexual harassment must be treated by the universities as a legal offense, and such misconduct should be punished.

CASES

The Indian Constitution's guarantees of gender equality and women's fundamental right to life and personal liberty (Article 21) were violated in every instance of sexual harassment, according to the Supreme Court's ruling in the Apparel Export Promotion Council v. A.K. Chopra¹¹ case. In Medha Kotwal Lele and others

⁸ Vishaka v State of Rajasthan (1997)6 SCC 341.

⁹ Section (n) of PoSH Act 2013

¹⁰ Section 3(2) of PoSH Act 2013

¹¹ Apparel Export Promotion Council v. A.K. Chopra, AIR 1999 SC 625.

v. Union of India,¹² the court ordered public and private sector entities to establish process for carrying out the Supreme Court's orders in the Vishaka case. In "Municipal Corporation of Delhi v. Female workers and anr"¹³ the court decided that regardless of whether they are regular employees or are on muster rolls, all workers, including female employees, are treated equally by the law. The principles stated in article 11 of the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women were determined to be read in addition to the contract of employment between the Municipal Corporation of Delhi and female employees (muster rolls). Female employees were entitled to maternity benefits under the 1961 Maternity Benefits Act. The implementation of maternity legislation safeguards the basic rights of female employees, and their denial will be considered a violation. The Posh Act of 2013, and the UGC regulation of 2015 have not been adequately enforced in educational institutions, and also the malfunction Internal Complaint Committee, violating the basic protection of students especially women in educational institution.¹⁴ A research scholar's PhD registration has been revoked by the university due to allegations of sexual harassment.¹⁵ The order states that his PhD registration is cancelled immediately and that he is not permitted to apply for admission to any of this university courses. The university's internal committee investigated the allegation of sexual harassment against the PhD student at the Faculty of Education in compliance with the 2013 Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act. In relation to the alleged sexual abuse accusation at the university, police detained two assistant professors. In the sexual abuse case, the victim made the decision to drop out of university and return to her home state.¹⁶

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION:

Women's safety has been given priority in our country educational system through institutional systems, legal frameworks, and awareness campaigns. Yet there are still issues with cultural transformation and execution. Institutions must take preventive measures to ensure secure environments, encourage women to report instances, and promote a culture of respect and fairness if they are to make real progress. Sustainable development is restricted by sexual harassment in educational institutions. It damages health, undermines institutional ethics, hinders overall education, and promotes unfairness. To achieve the sustainable development sexual harassment of women in university should be address through effective policy enforcement, and efficient Internal Complaints Committee operation. Thus, preventing sexual harassment in universities is crucial for ensuring sustainable development and not just the following of law. Equal access to education, women's empowerment, and the development of a more sustainable and just society are all promoted by safe and welcoming learning environments. Access to and safety in education, justice, and institutional accountability are all directly related to sustainable development. By restricting safe, justice and equitable access to education, problems like sexual harassment in universities significantly hinder Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 (education), SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions).

¹² Medha Kotwal Lele and Others v. Union of India, (2013) 1 SCC 297.

¹³ AIR 2000 SC 1274; (2000) 3 SCC 224

¹⁴ "OHRC lens on lapses in implementation of POSH Act in edu institutes"; THE TIMES OF INDIA (sept 3, 2025) available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhubaneswar/ohrc-lens-on-lapses-in-implementation-of-posh-act-in-edu-institutes/articleshow/123663322.cms?> Accessed on 23/04/2026

¹⁵ BHU cancels phd regn of student over sexual harassment charges, Times of India (February 8, 2026) available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/varanasi/bhu-cancels-phd-regn-of-student-over-sexual-harassment-charges/articleshow/128045954.cms?> Accessed on 27th May 2026

¹⁶ Sandeep Raghav, "Sexual abuse case: 2 asst-professors of Tirupati Sanskrit varsity arrested," The Times of India (Dec 10, 2025) <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/vijayawada/sexual-abuse-case-2-asst-professors-of-tirupati-sanskrit-varsity-arrested/articleshow/125874275.cms?> Accessed on 28th May 2026.

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