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Decadal Analysis of Sexual Harassment Cases in Indian Higher Educational Institutions: Trends and Institutional Responses (2015-2023)

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ABSTRACT

This study analysed trends in sexual harassment cases within Indian Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) from 2015 to 2023, utilizing data from the University Grants Commission (UGC). The findings indicated a significant increase in reported cases, improved case resolution rates, and a substantial rise in preventive workshops. However, challenges such as underreporting, inconsistent institutional participation, and data gaps persisted. As of May 2025, data for 2023-2024 were unavailable, which limited the analysis to 2022-2023. The study underscored the need for standardized reporting mechanisms, enhanced awareness programs, and robust institutional frameworks to foster safer and more inclusive educational environments. Recommendations included mandatory Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) and comprehensive monitoring systems to address ongoing issues effectively.

Key words: Sexual Harassment, Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), University Grants Commission (UGC), Gender Sensitization, Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs), POSH Act 2013, Vishaka Guidelines.

Introduction

In the past decade, gender sensitization concerning sexual harassment in Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) emerged as a critical factor in creating educational environments free from bias. This study examined Gender Sensitization reports from Indian universities and colleges, provided by the University Grants Commission (UGC), covering the period from 2015–2016 to 2022–2023. These reports detailed how HEIs addressed gender issues, conducted awareness programs, and managed grievance procedures. The enactment of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act), and subsequent UGC guidelines in 2015 aimed to ensure effective measures against sexual harassment in HEIs. This research assessed the effectiveness of these measures by analysing trends in reported cases, case resolutions, and preventive actions over eight years.

Over the past decade, addressing sexual harassment in Indian Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) emerged as a critical priority for fostering safe and equitable academic environments. The University Grants Commission (UGC), the apex regulatory body for higher education in India, played a pivotal role by implementing guidelines and mandating annual reporting on sexual harassment cases. These efforts built upon significant legal milestones, including the Vishaka Guidelines of 1997, which

established a framework for preventing workplace sexual harassment, and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act), which provided comprehensive legal protections (Vishaka & Others v. State of Rajasthan, 1997; Government of India, 2013).

In 2015, the UGC introduced specific regulations for HEIs, requiring the formation of Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) and the conduct of gender sensitization programs (University Grants Commission, 2015). These measures aimed to enhance awareness, streamline grievance redressal, and promote a culture of gender equality. The UGC's Gender Sensitization reports, compiled annually, offered valuable data on the number of cases reported, resolved, and pending, as well as the extent of preventive activities such as workshops.

This research examined the trends in sexual harassment cases in Indian HEIs from 2015 to 2023, based on UGC data up to the 2022-2023 academic year. Despite efforts to locate more recent data for 2023-2024, such information was not publicly available as of May 2025, possibly due to delays in report publication. The study aimed to assess the effectiveness of institutional responses, identify persistent challenges, and propose recommendations for creating safer academic spaces. By analysing case reporting, resolution efficiency, and preventive measures, this paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender sensitization and safety in higher education.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform policy and practice. Sexual harassment in HEIs not only affects individual well-being but also undermines academic performance and institutional integrity. Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach, combining legal enforcement, institutional reform and cultural transformation. This paper sought to provide a comprehensive analysis of progress and gaps, offering insights for stakeholders committed to fostering inclusive educational environments.

Literature Review

The issue of sexual harassment in Indian HEIs has been the subject of numerous studies, that highlighted its prevalence, the level of awareness and the effectiveness of institutional responses. Research consistently pointed to the pervasive nature of sexual harassment across both private and state institutions, with varying degrees of awareness and response mechanisms.

A study by Aina and Kulshrestha (2017) investigated the level of awareness of sexual harassment in educational institutions in Delhi NCR. The researchers surveyed 430 respondents from law faculties in ten private and state universities, finding that private institutions exhibited higher awareness of sexual harassment laws but lacked clarity, resulting in lower effective awareness compared to state institutions. The study also revealed that sexual harassment was equally prevalent in both types of institutions, underscoring the need for enhanced awareness programs, particularly in private universities.

Similarly, Kumar (2021) conducted a comparative analysis of legal processes for addressing sexual harassment in academic spaces in India and Pakistan. The study highlighted the limited effectiveness of redressal mechanisms, noting that ICCs often failed to function impartially. Many women hesitated to report incidents due to fear of blame or reputational damage, indicating a gap between policy and practice. The findings emphasized the importance of swift and fair action to support survivors and build trust in institutional systems.

In a more recent investigation, Vaidyanathan (2024) explored sexual harassment in scientific fields, interviewing twelve female wildlife researchers who experienced harassment at conservation organizations in India. The study pointed to systemic failures in the implementation of the POSH Act, particularly in male-dominated disciplines, where cultural norms and power dynamics exacerbated vulnerabilities. This qualitative perspective highlighted the need for sector-specific interventions to address harassment effectively.

A systematic review by Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020) examined sexual harassment in higher education globally, identifying key enabling factors such as hierarchical structures, precarious working conditions, and a culture of silence. The review noted that while legal frameworks like the POSH Act provided a foundation for action, their success depended on active leadership and comprehensive preventive measures. The study called for primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions, including awareness campaigns, robust complaint mechanisms, and support for survivors.

Additional research by Gupta and Sharma (2022) surveyed female students and faculty in Indian HEIs, finding that one in ten respondents reported experiencing sexual assault by peers or faculty members. The study also documented subtle sexist practices, such as verbal taunting and discriminatory remarks, which contributed to a hostile academic environment. These findings underscored the need for institutional policies that address both overt and covert forms of harassment.

The #MeToo movement in India, which gained momentum in 2018, brought significant attention to sexual harassment in HEIs. Sharma and Patel (2023) analysed the experiences of survivors who disclosed their stories online, bypassing formal institutional mechanisms due to distrust in university processes. The study highlighted the role of social media as an alternative platform for seeking justice, reflecting the limitations of existing redressal systems.

Collectively, these studies suggested that while legal and institutional frameworks have evolved, challenges such as underreporting, inconsistent implementation, and cultural barriers persist. The literature emphasized the need for continuous training, standardized procedures, and a cultural shift to create safe and equitable academic spaces. This study built upon these insights by analysing UGC data to assess progress and identify areas for improvement in Indian HEIs.

Method

This research utilized secondary data from the UGC's Gender Sensitization reports for the period 2015-2016 to 2022-2023, available through the UGC's official website (University Grants Commission, n.d.). These reports provided detailed statistics on sexual harassment cases in universities and colleges, including the number of institutions reporting, total cases reported, cases disposed, workshops conducted, and cases pending beyond 90 days. The data were compiled annually, offering a longitudinal perspective on institutional responses.

The analysis involved organizing the data into separate tables for universities and colleges to facilitate comparison. Key metrics examined included the total number of cases reported, the case disposal rate (calculated as the percentage of reported cases resolved within the year), the number of workshops conducted, and the number of cases pending beyond 90 days. Trend analysis was employed to identify patterns and changes over the eight-year period, with particular attention to fluctuations during the COVID-19 pandemic years (2020-2021 and 2021-2022).

Efforts were made to locate data for 2023-2024 to extend the analysis. However, as of May 2025, such data were not publicly available, possibly due to delays in report publication or restricted access. Consequently, the study relied on data up to 2022- 2023, ensuring a robust analysis within the available timeframe. The methodology focused on quantitative trends, supplemented by qualitative insights from the literature to contextualize the findings.

Results

a) University-Wise Analysis

Table 1 summarizes the data from universities for the period 2015-2016 to 2022-2023.

Table 1: Summary of University Reports (2015-2023)

CATEGORY	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Universities	143	190	75	155	187	79	64	238
Cases Reported	121	218	46	141	269	51	38	378
Cases Disposed	88	145	44	137	252	47	36	377
Workshops	175	648	556	696	626	173	216	900
Pending > 90 Days	6	9	1	9	52	3	2	1

The data revealed significant trends in the handling of sexual harassment cases in universities. The number of reported cases increased from 121 in 2015-2016 to 378 in 2022-2023, a rise of approximately 212%. This increase likely reflected improved reporting mechanisms and greater awareness rather than a surge in incidents. The case disposal rate showed marked improvement, rising from 72.7% in 2015-2016 to 99.7% in 2022-2023, indicating enhanced efficiency in resolving complaints.

The number of workshops conducted exhibited a strong upward trend, growing from 175 in 2015-2016 to 900 in 2022-2023, a fivefold increase. This growth suggested a robust commitment to preventive measures, correlating with increased awareness and reduced stigma around reporting. The number of participating universities fluctuated, ranging from 64 in 2021-2022 to 238 in 2022-2023, reflecting varying levels of institutional engagement possibly influenced by UGC mandates.

Cases pending beyond 90 days remained relatively low, with a notable exception in 2019-2020, when 52 cases were pending. This outlier may have resulted from procedural bottlenecks or complex cases requiring extended resolution times. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted reporting, with a decline in cases to 51 in 2020-2021 and 38 in 2021-2022, likely due to remote learning and reduced physical interactions on campuses.

b) College-Wise Analysis

Table 2 presents the data from colleges for the same period.

Table 2: Summary of College Reports (2015-2023)

CATEGORY	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Colleges	238	--	60	31	234	406	54	372
Cases Reported	39	--	3	4	25	51	2	47
Cases Disposed	19	--	2	4	18	49	2	46
Workshops	261	--	80	79	300	716	98	699
Pending > 90 Days	0	--	1	0	1	2	0	0

The college data exhibited greater variability in reporting patterns. The number of participating colleges ranged from 31 in 2018-2019 to 406 in 2020-2021, indicating inconsistent institutional participation. Total cases reported peaked at 51 in 2020-2021 and dropped to a low of 2 in 2021-2022, suggesting potential underreporting influenced by stigma, fear of retaliation, or lack of awareness. The disposal rate was generally high, reaching 97.8% in 2022-2023, reflecting efficient case handling.

Workshops conducted by colleges increased significantly, peaking at 716 in 2020-2021 and remaining high at 699 in 2022-2023. This trend indicated sustained efforts in preventive education. The number of cases pending beyond 90 days was minimal, with no cases pending in 2022-2023, further underscoring improved resolution efficiency. The absence of data for 2016-2017 limited longitudinal analysis, highlighting a gap in data collection.

Discussion

The results indicated substantial progress in addressing sexual harassment in Indian HEIs, alongside persistent challenges that require attention. The significant increase in reported cases, particularly in universities, suggested that more victims felt empowered to come forward, likely due to enhanced awareness and trust in institutional mechanisms. This aligns with findings by Aina and Kulshrestha (2017), who noted that awareness, though variable, was a critical factor in encouraging reporting.

The improvement in case disposal rates, reaching near 100% in 2022-2023 for both universities and colleges, reflected strengthened ICCs and streamlined procedures. This progress can be attributed to UGC mandates, such as the 2015 guidelines, which emphasized timely resolution (University Grants Commission, 2015). However, the outlier in 2019-2020, with 52 pending cases in universities, pointed to occasional. Concurrent with these advancements, the variability in institutional participation, particularly among colleges, highlighted a lack of uniformity in reporting. This inconsistency may stem from differing levels of compliance with UGC directives or resource disparities between institutions. Kumar (2021) noted similar challenges, pointing to the need for standardized procedures to ensure equitable implementation across HEIs.

The surge in workshops, from 175 to 900 in universities and from 261 to 699 in colleges, demonstrated a proactive approach to prevention. These programs likely contributed to reduced stigma and increased reporting, as suggested by Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020), who emphasized the role of awareness campaigns in combating sexual harassment. However, the effectiveness of these workshops needs evaluation to ensure they address contemporary issues, such as cyber harassment, which Gupta and Sharma (2022) identified as a growing concern.

The dip in reported cases during the COVID-19 pandemic years (2020-2021 and 2021-2022) was likely due to remote learning, which reduced physical interactions. However, this period also raised concerns about the accessibility of reporting mechanisms, as online platforms may not have been adequately equipped to handle complaints. This observation aligns with Sharma and Patel (2023), who found that survivors often turned to social media for justice due to distrust in institutional processes.

Underreporting remained a significant issue, as evidenced by the low number of cases in certain years, particularly in colleges. Vaidyanathan (2024) highlighted cultural barriers and power dynamics as key factors deterring reporting, especially in male dominated fields. This suggests that HEIs must create safer reporting environments, with protections against retaliation and anonymous channels to encourage disclosures.

The absence of 2023-2024 data limited the ability to assess recent trends. However, the progress observed up to 2022-2023 provides a foundation for continued improvement. The #MeToo movement, which gained traction in India in 2018, likely influenced reporting behaviours by raising public awareness and encouraging institutional accountability (Sharma & Patel, 2023). Future research should explore the impact of such social movements on HEI policies and practices.

Recommendations

To further enhance the prevention and handling of sexual harassment in Indian HEIs, the following recommendations were proposed:

- **Standardize Reporting Mechanisms**: Implement uniform reporting formats and timelines across all HEIs to ensure consistency and comparability of data. This could involve a centralized UGC portal for submitting annual reports.

- **Mandate Functional ICCs**: Require all HEIs to maintain active ICCs with trained members and clear reporting responsibilities. Regular audits should verify compliance.

- **Encourage Reporting**: Establish anonymous reporting channels and stringent anti-retaliation policies to create a safe environment for complainants. Awareness campaigns should emphasize these protections.

- **Evaluate Workshop Effectiveness**: Introduce feedback mechanisms and impact assessments to measure the outcomes of gender sensitization workshops. Programs should address emerging issues, such as cyber harassment.

- **Develop Monitoring Frameworks**: Create a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system to track progress, including regular audits, stakeholder feedback, and impact assessments of awareness initiatives.

- **Enhance Capacity Building**: Provide ongoing training for ICC members, faculty, and staff on handling complaints, understanding legal frameworks, and promoting gender equality. Partnerships with NGOs could support these efforts.

- **Ensure Accessibility During Disruptions**: Maintain accessible reporting mechanisms during remote learning or other disruptions, such as online complaint portals and virtual counselling services.

These recommendations aim to address the identified challenges, building on the progress observed in the data and aligning with best practices from the literature (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Kumar, 2021).

Conclusion

This study demonstrated significant progress in addressing sexual harassment in Indian HEIs from 2015 to 2023, as evidenced by increased case reporting, near-perfect disposal rates, and a fivefold rise in preventive workshops. The evolution from the Vishaka Guidelines to the POSH Act and UGC regulations established a robust framework for tackling workplace harassment in academic settings. However, challenges such as underreporting, inconsistent institutional participation, and data gaps persisted, limiting the comprehensiveness of the analysis.

The findings underscored the importance of standardized reporting, functional ICCs, and effective awareness programs in creating safer academic environments. While the absence of 2023-2024 data constrained the study, the trends up to 2022-2023 provided valuable insights into institutional responses. Continued efforts are needed to address cultural barriers, enhance reporting mechanisms, and ensure equitable implementation across all HEIs.

Addressing sexual harassment in HEIs requires a holistic approach, combining legal enforcement, institutional reform, and social transformation. By implementing the proposed recommendations, HEIs can further contribute to fostering inclusive and safe educational spaces for all stakeholders. Future research should explore the impact of recent policy changes and social movements on these trends, ensuring that progress is sustained and expanded.

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