



Workplace Harassment and Socio-Legal Obstacles of Women Empowerment in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Workplace harassment of women in Bangladesh represents a deep-rooted and multidimensional socio-legal Obstacles that continues to obstruct the achievement of gender equality, decent work conditions, and sustainable women's empowerment. Although Bangladesh has developed constitutional safeguards, labour regulations, and judicial guidelines to protect women in the workplace, harassment in various forms—including sexual harassment, verbal abuse, psychological intimidation, discrimination, wage inequality, and unsafe working environments—remains widely prevalent across both formal and informal sectors, particularly in the ready-made garment industry and other low-wage labour sectors.

This study provides a comprehensive socio-legal analysis of workplace harassment in Bangladesh, focusing on its structural causes, legal and institutional frameworks, and the gap between law and implementation. It critically examines how patriarchal social norms, gender-based power imbalances, weak enforcement mechanisms, lack of effective complaint systems, and limited awareness among workers collectively contribute to the persistence of harassment. The study also explores the role of key institutions such as the judiciary, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and the media in addressing workplace violence and promoting accountability.

Furthermore, the research highlights the broader socio-economic and psychological impacts of workplace harassment on women, including reduced workforce participation, mental health challenges, restricted mobility, and weakened economic independence. By adopting a socio-legal analytical framework, the study emphasizes that legal provisions alone are insufficient unless supported by strong institutional enforcement and cultural transformation.

The paper ultimately argues that eliminating workplace harassment in Bangladesh requires an integrated approach combining legal reform, effective implementation, institutional strengthening, and societal change. Without such comprehensive measures, women's full participation in economic development and social advancement will remain significantly constrained.

Keywords: Workplace; Harassment; Socio-Legal; Women's empowerment; Judiciary; Implementation.

1.0 Introduction

Women's empowerment is widely recognized as a cornerstone of sustainable development, social justice, and inclusive economic growth. In Bangladesh, significant progress has been made in advancing women's access to education, expanding employment opportunities, and increasing participation in political and public life. Despite these positive developments, the persistence of workplace harassment continues to undermine women's overall empowerment and restrict their full participation in the labour market.



Workplace harassment refers to any unwelcome conduct—whether physical, verbal, psychological, or sexual—that creates an unsafe, hostile, humiliating, or intimidating working environment. In Bangladesh, such forms of harassment are widespread across both formal sectors, including offices, industries, and educational institutions, and informal sectors such as the ready-made garment industry, domestic work, and agricultural labour. Women in these sectors often face unequal power relations, poor working conditions, and limited access to protection mechanisms, making them particularly vulnerable.

Although Bangladesh has introduced several legal and policy frameworks, including constitutional protections, labour laws, and High Court directives, effective enforcement remains a major challenge. Institutional weaknesses, lack of awareness, fear of retaliation, and socio-cultural stigma contribute to widespread underreporting of harassment cases. Consequently, many women are forced to endure abusive working environments silently, which not only affects their physical and mental well-being but also limits their economic independence and social mobility. This ongoing gap between legal protection and practical enforcement highlights workplace harassment as a critical socio-legal barrier to women's empowerment in Bangladesh.

2.0 Structure of Key Concepts: Workplace Harassment and Women Empowerment

Workplace Harassment

Workplace harassment is a wide-ranging form of misconduct or abuse that occurs in professional settings and negatively affects an individual's dignity, safety, and performance. It includes any unwelcome behavior, conduct, or communication that creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, or offensive work environment. It is not limited to physical actions only; it also includes verbal abuse, psychological pressure, discrimination, bullying, sexual harassment, and abuse of authority. Harassment may come from supervisors, co-workers, clients, or any person connected to the workplace. In a broader sense, workplace harassment reflects a violation of human rights and professional ethics, where power imbalance and gender inequality often play a significant role.

Women Empowerment

Women empowerment is a comprehensive social, economic, legal, and political process that enables women to gain equal status with men and to participate fully in all aspects of life. It involves ensuring women have: (1) Equal rights and opportunities in education, employment, and leadership, (2) Freedom of choice and decision-making power in personal and public life, (3) Access to justice and legal protection against discrimination and violence, (4) Economic independence and financial control, (5) Social recognition and respect in society. In a broader sense, women empowerment is not only about individual growth but also about transforming society into a more equal, just, and inclusive system where women can fully realize their potential.

Interconnection

Workplace harassment is a systemic obstacle to women empowerment. It:



- Reinforces gender inequality and patriarchal control.
- Restricts women's mobility and career advancement.
- Reduces participation in the workforce and leadership roles.
- Weakens confidence and social independence.

Therefore, eliminating workplace harassment is essential for achieving **true and sustainable women empowerment in society**.

3.0 Forms of Workplace Harassment in Bangladesh

3.1 Sexual Harassment

Includes unwanted physical contact, sexual comments, gestures, and demands for sexual favors. A study reported that 79.3% female and 82% of garment workers had experienced or witnessed sexual violence and harassment at work.¹

3.2 Psychological Harassment

Psychological harassment of women in Bangladeshi workplaces is widespread, affecting over 60% of female garment workers through verbal abuse, intimidation, and isolation, often driven by rigid gender norms and weak enforcement of protective laws. This harassment causes significant mental strain, including anxiety, low self-confidence, and reduced productivity, with many victims reluctant to report incidents due to fear of retaliation or inefficient HR practices.²

3.3 Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination in workplace harassment refers to the unequal, biased, or unfair treatment of women in professional environments based on their sex. In Bangladesh, such discrimination is deeply connected to patriarchal social structures, where men often hold dominant positions of authority and decision-making. This imbalance creates situations where women are more vulnerable to harassment, including sexual harassment, verbal abuse, unequal pay, denial of promotion, and exclusion from leadership roles.

3.4 Digital Harassment

Digital harassment refers to the use of technology, internet platforms, mobile phones, and digital communication tools to harass, threaten, humiliate, or control women. In Bangladesh, this form of harassment is rapidly increasing with the expansion of social media and digital connectivity, affecting women in both personal and professional spaces. Digital harassment can take many forms, including unwanted messages, abusive comments, sexual threats, spreading false information, hacking personal accounts, blackmailing with private photos or videos, cyber stalking, and continuous online surveillance. Women working in offices, media, education, and even students are often targeted through Facebook, Messenger, What's App, Instagram, and other platforms.

¹ The Daily Star reported : Wednesday, April 17, 2026

² <https://www.karmojibinari.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/KN-Policy-brief-of-ND.pdf>



3.5 Institutional Harassment

Institutional harassment occurs when organizations fail to provide safe complaint mechanisms or ignore complaints. Institutional harassment of women in Bangladesh is a systemic issue, with approximately 76% of female students in educational institutions experiencing sexual harassment and high rates of abuse in workplaces, particularly the ready-made garment (RMG) sector. Despite a 2009 High Court directive mandating sexual harassment complaint committees (SHCCs), implementation remains weak, with many victims avoiding reporting due to fear of retaliation, reputational damage, and, according to Research Gate, a lack of trust in, or effectiveness of, these institutions.³

4.0 Causes of Workplace Harassment

4.1 Patriarchal Social Structure

Bangladeshi society is largely patriarchal, where male dominance in workplaces often leads to misuse of power. The patriarchal social structure in Bangladesh is a deeply entrenched system where men hold primary power, dominating political, economic, and familial domains, often leaving women with limited autonomy, fewer rights, and subordinate status. While constitutionally equal, women face systemic discrimination through strict gender roles, including domestic, social, and economic dependence on men.

4.2 Lack of Awareness

Many women are unaware of their legal rights or available remedies. Lack of awareness among women in Bangladesh is a multifaceted, systemic issue rooted in patriarchal social norms, which directly leads to reduced autonomy, economic dependency, and vulnerability to exploitation. It means a significant portion of women—particularly in rural areas—have limited knowledge of their legal rights, health needs, and opportunities for development.

4.3 Weak Enforcement of Laws

Even where laws exist, enforcement is inconsistent and ineffective. Weak enforcement of laws for women in Bangladesh means that despite having comprehensive legal frameworks—including constitutional guarantees, the Nari o Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain, and various labor laws—women frequently remain unprotected, and perpetrators often enjoy impunity. This gap between the law and its implementation contributes directly to high rates of gender-based violence (GBV), workplace discrimination, and digital harassment.

4.4 Fear of Social Stigma

Victims often avoid reporting harassment due to fear of shame and victim-blaming. Fear of social stigma for women in Bangladesh means enduring deep-rooted patriarchal norms that equate a woman's "honour" with silence, leading to the repression of voices, restricted freedom, and the concealment of abuse. It forces women to endure discrimination, including child marriage, restricted education, and lack of agency.

³https://www.researchgate.net/publication/393240105_Sexual_Harassment_as_a_Systemic_Issue_in_Bangladesh_Power_Accountability_and_Institutional_Failures_in_Public_Universities



4.5 Economic Dependency

Women often tolerate harassment due to financial dependence on their jobs. Economic dependency for women in Bangladesh refers to a deeply rooted structural condition where women lack independent financial resources and have limited access to income-generating opportunities, forcing them to rely on male family members (fathers, husbands, or sons) for survival.

5.0 Examples of Workplace Harassment of Women in Bangladesh

5.1. Garment Industry (RMG Sector)

Bangladesh Ready-Made Garment Sector

Example situation:

A female garment worker in Dhaka or Gazipur is:

- a) Pressured by a supervisor for “extra attention” in exchange for better shifts
- b) Touched inappropriately during factory supervision
- c) heartened with job termination if she complains

Reality:

- a) Many workers do not report harassment due to fear of losing their job
- b) Factories often lack effective complaint committees
- c) Economic dependency forces silence

This is one of the most common workplaces for harassment in Bangladesh.

5.2. Office / Corporate Sector

Private Corporate Offices in Bangladesh

Example situation:

A female employee in a private company faces:

- a) Repeated inappropriate comments from a senior male colleague
- b) Pressure to attend late-night meetings alone
- c) Promotion being linked to “personal favors”
- d) Exclusion if she refuses advances

Reality:

- a) Harassment is often subtle (psychological + power-based).
- b) Victims fear retaliation or career damage.
- c) HR departments often fail to act properly.

5.3. Educational Institutions (Workplace for Teachers/Staff)

Universities and Colleges in Bangladesh

Example situation:

A female lecturer or staff member experiences:

- a) Harassment from senior faculty or administrators
- b) Rumor spreading to damage reputation
- c) Pressure for favoritism in exchange for job security
- d) Lack of action by administration committees



Reality:

- a) Victims often face social stigma more than legal resolution
- b) Internal complaints are sometimes ignored or delayed

5.4. Transport and Public Service Jobs

Public Transport Sector Bangladesh

Example situation:

A female worker in transport-related jobs or field services:

- a) Faces harassment from male colleagues or passengers
- b) Experiences verbal abuse or unwanted physical contact
- c) Has no secure reporting system

Reality:

- a) Public-facing jobs expose women to higher risk
- b) Weak enforcement in informal environments

5.5. Domestic Work (Informal Workplace)

Domestic Work Sector Bangladesh

Example situation:

A domestic worker in a household:

- a) Faces verbal abuse and humiliation
- b) Experiences physical harassment
- c) Has no formal contract or legal protection
- d) Cannot easily access justice system

Reality:

- a) This sector is the most unregulated and vulnerable
- b) Legal protection exists but is rarely enforced

6.0 Legal Framework in Bangladesh

6.1 Constitutional Provisions

The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equality before the law and ensures that all citizens are entitled to equal protection of the law, regardless of their status or background. It explicitly prohibits discrimination on the **basis of sex**, meaning that men and women must be treated equally in all spheres of life, including employment, education, and legal rights. Through provisions such as Articles 27 and 28, the Constitution establishes a strong legal foundation for gender equality and women's empowerment, obligating the state to prevent discrimination and promote equal opportunities for all citizens.

6.2 Labour Act 2006 (Last Amended 2013 & 2018)

As of 2026, the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 (Last Amended 2013 & 2018) has not been formally renamed or fully re-enacted as "Amended 2026", but its existing provisions (with earlier amendments) continue to govern women's rights in the workplace. Under this law, women are protected from sexual harassment, discrimination, unsafe working conditions, and denial of maternity benefits; sexual harassment is treated as a serious misconduct



leading to disciplinary actions such as warning, suspension, dismissal, and compensation to the victim, while violations of maternity protection provisions (such as denying maternity leave, benefits, or forcing hazardous work during pregnancy) can result in fines and imprisonment as prescribed under labour offences, along with liability for compensation. The Act also ensures equal treatment in employment and prohibits abuse or exploitation of women workers, with penalties enforced through labour courts and factory inspection authorities.

6.3 Sexual Harassment Law and Judicial Guidelines

The **Sexual Harassment at the Workplace and Educational Institutions Ordinance, 2026** (Sexual Harassment at the Workplace and Educational Institutions Ordinance, 2026) is a newly approved comprehensive law in Bangladesh that was formulated to replace reliance on the High Court Guidelines and create a full statutory framework. It defines sexual harassment in a broad and modern way, covering **physical, verbal, non-verbal, mental, suggestive, and digital/online conduct**, and applies to all workplaces and educational institutions. The Ordinance establishes mandatory complaint mechanisms (including women-led complaint committees), allows complaints in written, verbal, or online form, and requires investigations to be completed within a fixed time (generally up to 90 days). It also provides **disciplinary punishments such as warning, suspension, dismissal from service, or expulsion from educational institutions**, along with possible compensation to victims, while also introducing penalties for false complaints. Overall, the Ordinance aims to ensure a **safe, dignified, and harassment-free environment** in both physical and digital spaces and formally codifies protections that were earlier based mainly on the 2009 High Court Guidelines.

6.4 Penal Code Provisions

Under the Penal Code 1860, several provisions are applicable to workplace harassment, particularly those dealing with assault, insult to modesty, and criminal intimidation. Sections such as Section 351 (assault), Section 354 (assault or criminal force to outrage modesty), Section 509 (word, gesture or act intended to insult the modesty of a woman), and Section 506 (criminal intimidation) are often invoked in harassment cases. These provisions provide legal remedies against physical, verbal, and psychological abuse, thereby offering protection to victims—especially women—by criminalizing acts that threaten dignity, safety, and personal security.

7.0 Gaps in Legal Implementation

Despite strong legal provisions under the Constitution of Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 (Last Amended 2013 & 2018), the Penal Code, and various High Court directives, significant implementation gaps persist in practice. These gaps substantially weaken the effectiveness of legal protections against workplace harassment of women.



7.1 Lack of Effective Internal Complaint Committees (ICCs)

Many workplaces, particularly in the garment sector, fail to establish Internal Complaint Committees as mandated by law. Even where such committees exist, they are often inactive, biased, or dominated by management personnel, which undermines their independence and effectiveness in handling harassment complaints.

7.2 Weak Enforcement of Labour Laws

Although a comprehensive legal framework exists, enforcement remains inconsistent. Regulatory authorities often suffer from shortages of manpower, limited resources, and insufficient authority, which collectively hinder proper implementation of workplace harassment laws.

7.3 Poor Monitoring and Inspection System

Labour inspections are irregular and, in many cases, superficial. As a result, numerous workplaces operate without adequate oversight, leading to weak compliance with anti-harassment policies and occupational safety standards.

7.4 Delayed Justice in Harassment Cases

Legal proceedings involving harassment complaints are frequently delayed due to procedural complexities, case backlogs, and lengthy judicial processes. Such delays discourage victims from pursuing or continuing legal action.

7.5 Lack of Victim Protection Mechanisms

There is a notable absence of strong protection mechanisms for complainants. Victims often face retaliation, termination from employment, or social stigma due to inadequate confidentiality measures and weak institutional safeguards.

7.6 Cultural and Social Stigma

Cultural norms and societal attitudes significantly discourage reporting. Many women hesitate to report incidents of harassment due to fear of social shame, judgment, or family pressure, thereby limiting the effectiveness of legal remedies.

7.7 Weak Role of Trade Unions in Harassment Cases

Trade unions in many sectors primarily focus on wages, benefits, and working conditions, while issues of workplace harassment receive comparatively less attention. This weakens collective support mechanisms for victims.

7.8 Lack of Gender-Sensitive Workplace Environment

A large number of workplaces still fail to establish gender-sensitive and inclusive environments. This increases vulnerability to harassment and discourages women's full participation in the workforce.



8.0 Policy Recommendations

To effectively address workplace harassment of women in Bangladesh and strengthen the existing legal framework, several policy measures should be implemented. These recommendations aim to ensure better enforcement, protection, and prevention mechanisms.

8.1 Strict Enforcement of High Court Guidelines

The directives issued by the High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh must be strictly enforced across all public and private institutions. Regular inspections should be conducted to ensure compliance, and employers who fail to comply should face appropriate legal sanctions.

8.2 Mandatory Anti-Harassment Committees in All Workplaces

Every workplace—including garments, factories, offices, and educational institutions—should be legally required to establish active Internal Complaint Committees (ICCs). These committees must include adequate female representation to ensure fairness, accessibility, and effectiveness in addressing complaints.

8.3 Fast-Track Courts for Harassment Cases

Special fast-track tribunals should be established to handle workplace harassment cases under the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 (Last Amended 2013 & 2018) and related laws. This will help reduce judicial delays and ensure swift and effective justice for victims.

8.4 Awareness Programs in Workplaces and Educational Institutions

Regular awareness campaigns should be introduced to educate employees, students, and employers about sexual harassment laws, reporting mechanisms, and constitutional rights. Such programs will help build a more informed and responsible workplace culture.

8.5 Gender Sensitivity Training for Employers and Employees

Mandatory gender sensitivity training should be implemented in all organizations. These programs should promote respectful workplace behavior, gender equality, and awareness of harassment prevention, particularly in male-dominated sectors.

8.6 Stronger Monitoring by Government Authorities

The Department of Labour and other relevant authorities should intensify workplace inspections, particularly in high-risk sectors such as the garment industry. This will help ensure effective implementation of anti-harassment laws and policies.

8.7 Legal Aid and Counseling Support for Victims

Comprehensive support systems should be established, including free legal aid services and psychological counseling for victims of workplace harassment. These services are essential to assist victims in pursuing justice and recovering from trauma.



9.0 Conclusion

Workplace harassment of women in Bangladesh remains a serious socio-legal challenge that directly undermines women's empowerment and limits their equal participation in the labour force. When women face harassment, discrimination, and unsafe working conditions, their confidence, mobility, and decision-making power are significantly reduced, which ultimately weakens the core objectives of empowerment such as economic independence, dignity, and equal opportunity. Although strong legal frameworks exist, including the Constitution of Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 as amended 2018, and High Court guidelines, their implementation remains weak due to poor enforcement, lack of monitoring, and limited institutional accountability. Moreover, deep-rooted patriarchal norms, social stigma, and lack of awareness discourage victims from reporting harassment, further reinforcing inequality. This situation creates a direct barrier to women empowerment by restricting access to safe employment and leadership opportunities. Therefore, eliminating workplace harassment is essential for achieving genuine women empowerment, which requires strict legal enforcement, effective workplace policies, gender-sensitive training, and strong victim protection mechanisms. At the same time, broader cultural transformation is necessary to challenge discriminatory attitudes and ensure respect for women across all sectors. Only through coordinated legal, institutional, and social efforts can Bangladesh create safe and dignified workplaces that fully support women's empowerment and sustainable national development.

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