COMMENTARY

Gender and Sexual Harassment in Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine: A New Report

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Science, Scientists, and Society

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This is not intended to be a book review. Instead, it is a comment apropos of the June 2018 publication of a study report titled 'Sexual Harassment of Women: Climate, Culture, and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine' released by the National Academies Press, USA (2018). Soon, some so-called 'elite' science journals took note of the report and gave it a good amount of publicity. While there was some discussion internationally about the contents, context and relevance of the subject matter of the report, there was hardly any coverage in India, either in the general press or in the science journals. Around the same time, Tole and Shashidhara (2018) wrote an article, published in Current Science, reporting the proceedings of a meeting, which primarily focused on sexual harassment [SH] in academia and its many shapes and guises. Both reports highlight the critical issue of SH in the workplace.

The 310-page report from the USA is an outcome of intense work from a team of women covering many disciplines. They base their observations and recommendations not only on already available data but also on data from surveys they commissioned. It is a well-researched document and a well-organised one. The report has seven chapters that cover different aspects regarding sexual harassment at workplace. The final chapter comprehensively summarises the findings, provides conclusions and makes recommendation. What lessons can be drawn from this report, on the more specific backdrop of the article from Tole and Shashidhara (2018)?

Women in STEM, Perceptions about SH: The Indian Picture

First, let us take a look at the deeper Indian background; what kind of data, background information and legal framework are available in India? The Indian Women Scientists' Association (IWSA), founded in 1973, is one of the oldest associations of women scientists. While the association still exists, not only is it unclear what its current level of activity is, it is uncertain how much IWSA has ever considered the rights and equality of its members among the science community as its core mandate. Women physicists and mathematicians from India have been a severe minority. Even before women biologists or physicians started worrying about any discrimination, women physicists had started coming together, in most instances to seek entry for more women in the field and once there, for treating them as professional equals. There does not appear to have been a specific focus on gender-based workplace harassment, particularly SH. Whether it was intended or not, the lack of focus on SH is easy to understand, since talking about harassment at the same time as fighting for entry to the field was likely to backfire. Also, part of the 'normal' upbringing in all patriarchal societies is that women are expected to tolerate and ignore, as far as possible, all discriminatory behaviour from men. This cultural imprinting of victims can quite conceivably lead to women themselves not treating SH as a major problem. Also, opening up career opportunities after entering the educational system, at last, would quite understandably seem more important than complaining against SH, especially when men dominate the fields in key positions of power. Thus, in many places in the world, including in India, women have pushed for career advancement quite strongly over the past many decades but have not spoken out strongly against the injustice, subtle and overt, they face in the form of sexual or gender violence.

Some efforts have been made to collect data to evaluate the status of women in STEM in India. However, these are mostly sporadic cross-sectional data collection efforts of modest scale. For example, the Indian National Science Academy (INSA), New Delhi, had constituted a panel of scientists to look at the status of science careers for women in 2004. The Indian Academy of Sciences (IASc) had established a committee on Women in Science in 2003 which still continues to function. Both these academies have published information in the form of specially commissioned surveys, reports, a compilation of autobiographies and the like and have made recommendations to improve the professional status of women in science. There was also a taskforce on 'women in science', set up directly by the Government of India (GoI) and operationalised *via* the Department of Science and Technology (DST). These and similar efforts have been focussed on encouraging women to stay in the scientific profession where they have spent years in acquiring skills, be it as physicians, engineers or scientists. Unlike in the US or some other countries, public sector salaries are not negotiated in India and hence one clear point of discrimination observed by many women scientists in some countries, that of getting lower salaries than male colleagues, has never been a focus in Indian recommendations. Instead, the recommendations call for options to work from home, better creche facilities, better toilets, proper maternity leave, and the like. The various impacts of the numerically overwhelming presence of men in the workplace, especially in positions of power, are hardly ever mentioned. It remains a common experience that most women scientists are

reluctant to bring up SH at the workplace as a problem that exists and needs redressal. The reasons could be, as mentioned above, that they do not think of it as a serious problem; or that they do not want to rock the boat by bringing it up; or that they are worried about the emotional, social and professional consequences. Whatever be the reasons, the fact remains that we, men or women, have generally not acknowledged that for a healthy pursuit of scientific professions, good productivity and best possible utilisation of the competence of women in the professions, it is necessary that the environment they work in should be conducive to work, should be non-threatening and non-discriminatory.

Women's movements in India, on the other hand, have consistently highlighted sexual violence, which includes rape and domestic violence as well as workplace SH, as a major discriminatory factor in women's lives. It was primarily due to the movement that the Supreme Court of India provided a set of procedural guidelines under what is commonly known as the 'Vishakha Judgement' in 1997 for cases of workplace SH. While these guidelines provided the basic framework for investigating cases of SH, a law was introduced more recently [The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013]. Any case of workplace SH, in academic institutions, universities, public hospitals or anywhere else, now comes under this law.

How does the US National Academy Report Contribute to Change?

Both the Vishakha Judgement and the subsequent law are limited in their effects in the absence of a change of mindset in the community, including the scientific community. Therefore, a lot needs to change for the recognition of SH in the workplace, for men to realise that their behaviour can be construed as threatening and harassing. This, of course, is true for any change to become a societal norm. What lessons does the US National Academy report hold for us in India?

The US report provides a great deal of data regarding the contours of SH in the workplace. Such data are useful in the long run for measuring progress. Sadly, progress in this situation will likely be slow in any case. There is, however, a lot to learn from the report in terms of what constitutes workplace SH and what measures would be useful in dealing with it. The report talks about the most common form of sexual harassment as 'gender harassment', defined as,

'...verbal and nonverbal behaviours that convey hostility, objectification, exclusion, or second-class status about members of one gender' [p.28]

'*behaviors that communicate that women do not belong or do not merit respect*' [p.49].

The report also says coercive sexual attention is not experienced by women without simultaneously experiencing other gender harassment. Essentially the report makes a major point here by showing the connection between the individual problem and the systemic problem in workplace SH. This is important because it is a common notion that women who experience SH are themselves to blame because they wear certain kinds of clothes or behave in a certain fashion thereby attracting men's attention. While these kinds of arguments can be used as excuses in the blame-game even more acceptable in a strongly patriarchal society, the US and India are not really qualitatively different from each other. However, the possibly greater strength of patriarchal notions in India may well be a contributing factor for not adequate attention being paid to the prevailing atmosphere of gender harassment in the workplace.

What are the changes that this report sees? It points to the 'MeToo' movement which has gained momentum from 2016 onwards and brought many women to acknowledge the workplace SH and violence they faced. Women celebrities, as well as non-celebrities, named the well-known men responsible for the sexual violence. These women had all put up with the sexual assaults for the same reasons mentioned above. Some celebrity men got named, including the current US president. It is interesting that there has been an Indian 'MeToo' movement as well. Many anonymous Indian women named and shamed Indian men who, in their eyes, have been guilty of some form of sexual assault. In these particular lists, which have steadily grown in numbers, very few men from the STEM fields were initially named. However, this movement seems to have given courage to many women in STEM to say 'me too' and to indicate that they had also experienced sexual innuendos or more aggressive forms of sexual assaults from men at their workplaces. Naming and shaming, the strategy of the 'MeToo' movement, has its pluses and its minuses; many people, especially the named men, feel that they do not get a chance to defend themselves. This is a common objection to many laws that are aimed at protecting women, and women's movements all over the world acknowledge and accept the various versions of this so-called problem as a limitation. One wishes that at some point in future these women-centric laws can become redundant.

In the context of SH at the workplace, one point deserves further mention. There are even more vulnerable groups at risk from SH in the workplace than women in general. Women from underprivileged caste, religious and ethnic groups are even more vulnerable to sexual assaults than upper-class, upper-caste, majority-community women are in India. And all available data show that people who live outside of the heteronormative framework of sexual relationships are even more vulnerable to sexual assaults.

It is interesting and instructive that these special vulnerabilities do not find any mention even in the recent article by Tole and Shashidhara (2018). Yet, the Tole and Shashidhara article is unusual in the Indian context. It comes from the Young Investigators' Meeting [YIM], which celebrated its 10th year in 2018. The YIM is remarkable in the sense that YIM meetings, held mostly around 8 March, International Women's day, have always had a session on women in science. However, the article from Tole and Shashidhara suggests that a lot more got said about workplace SH in the 2018 YIM than in any other previous YIM. Being able to discuss gender and sexual harassment at the workplace as a problem so openly in a meeting of

scientists is a distinct step forward. Whether it will provide entry points for further discussions and steps towards prevention of SH and punishment of the guilty still remains a question.

The Way Ahead?

Evidence over the last few decades from all over the world has shown a steady increase in the frequencies and numbers of women entering STEM areas and continuing their careers. It is time to pay attention to the quality of the atmosphere these women work in and the need for action to improve that atmosphere. The atmosphere is created by the people who work in these places and men-in-power still remain in the majority in practically every discipline in STEM. Particularly in the Indian context, the problem of gender and sexual harassment at work, including in STEM workplaces, needs to be acknowledged by men. The US report, too, points out, based on its survey using a detailed questionnaire,

'*…male colleagues were unaware of the pervasiveness and severity of sexual harassment experiences in their workplaces. Women described how their colleagues' gender protected them from experiencing sexual harassment themselves, which made it appear to them as though such harassment did not exist.*' [p256]

More problematic but still possibly useful, the 'naming and shaming' strategy used by 'MeToo' movements is likely to be increasingly used at the workplace. As the US report says,

'*…their peers and other bystanders can play a strong role in preventing sexual harassment and gender discrimination by acknowledging the inappropriate behavior and indicating*

disapproval of it. Because this type of behavior can be dismissed or ignored, simply pointing it out can be empowering and lend support to the target.' [p261-262]

A related insightful comment from one of the respondents in the survey was,

'*The combination of men's overrepresentation in leadership positions and their lack of awareness of sexual harassment had a powerful stymieing effect on prevention or response at many institutions…..If you've never been discriminated against, you don't understand discrimination.*' [p257]

This poignant reality applies not only to gender discrimination but to the equally common Indian situations of discrimination on the basis of caste or religion. As a result, institutional leadership tends to be insensitive to these problems, contributing to the uncomfortable workplace atmosphere that forms part of gender harassment.

The US NAS report makes detailed recommendations for clear broad guidelines that are mostly applicable outside the US as well. However, a circular component of the problem is that these recommendations frequently end up falling on deaf ears in the absence of a gender-sensitive environment. It is to be hoped that men in positions of STEM authority and power will address all these SH-related issues substantively, rather than simply creating the formal illusions of due process.

In March 2016, the Department of Science and Technology of the Government of India notified the constitution of a Standing Committee for Promoting Women in Science. The first term of reference for this standing committee is '*Make endeavours for creating gender-enabling environment in S&T institutions.*' Increasing awareness of gender and sexual harassment in S&T institutions in India is obviously a prerequisite for this mandate. Since this is the only formal committee currently expected to deal with problems of women in science, it is to be earnestly hoped that it will take note of the US NAS report and the Tole and Shashidhara article and will recommend concrete measures to ameliorate gender and sexual harassment in the STEM workplace.

References

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