

## CREATING A SAFE WORKPLACE FOR WOMEN: A STEP TOWARDS GENDER INCLUSION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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### **Abstract**

*Gender Inclusion at the workplace is a necessary step towards eclectic growth of an organisation, holistic development of society at large and sustainable development at the national and global level. The trajectory towards gender equality and the simultaneous abrogation of gender gap at the macro-level begins with bringing about changes at the micro-level. This article aims to explore the extant condition of the working women, what they feel about the security of women at the workplace, both at present and in the futuristic hybrid model and the possible changes which can make the workplace amenable to their safety and further ameliorate the workplace environment. An effort has also been made to skim through the existing women-centred policies like the Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal of Sexual Harassment at the workplace (POSH) Act, 2013; women's awareness of the existence of such laws and the implementation of the same in praxis. Responses of working women in the corporate sector have been analysed and their expectations about enhancing safety at the workplace have been used for recommending further policy decisions.*

**Keywords:** *gender gap, gender inclusion, hybrid model, POSH Act, safe workplace, sustainable development, women-centred policies*

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## **I. Introduction**

Jalal-ud-din Rumi, the thirteenth century Persian Sufi poet of world renown, eulogises women hence:

“Woman is a ray of God.  
She is not that earthly beloved:  
she is creative, not created,” (Bhalerao, 2019).

Women and their creativity along with intense problem-solving capabilities have gained recognition in recent times. Women play a crucial role in the development of society and economy (Sharma, 2020). Women have the capacity to drive economic growth and their participation in the economy can be a game-changer strategy (Moid & Dixit, 2019). This is the reason that today, the corporate sector expresses openness to recruitment of women in all positions, trying to foster gender inclusion. There is a dual rationale for the incumbent need for promoting gender inclusion. Firstly, that equality between women and men- equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities- is a matter of human rights and social justice. And secondly, that greater equality between women and men is also a precondition for and an effective indicator of sustainable people-centred development (Lohani & Aburaida, 2017). Attainment of gender equality and inclusion is a necessary prelude to sustainable development at socio-economic, political and cultural levels across the globe.

The modus operandi for the attainment of gender inclusion is through the creation and promulgation of safe working conditions for women at the workplace. However, before making policies regarding women safety at the workplace, we need to find out whether women are aware of the existing provisions; and if aware, find them sufficient or need something more. Workplace was generally associated with the office where one goes to work. However, in the extant covid-19 pandemic situation, when work from home with the use of technology and internet is increasingly becoming the predominant mode of work; the workplace is changing from on-site to off-

site location. The internet is important not just in the present scenario, the future too seems to be the hybrid model. There is an imperative need to find out whether the existing provisions and laws for women safety at the workplace are considered sufficient by them. Their suggestions for making the workplace safer can help policy makers in moderating future policies accordingly. This article aims to find out from women employees about the initiatives taken by their employers for fostering women safety at the workplace and what more they would like in order to feel safer in future.

## **2. Literature Review**

A developed society based on inclusive development should have gender equality as a practice (Nanjunda, 2020). Gender inclusion and gender diversity are vital factors because of the implied better performance of a heterogeneous group; better results expected from a large and variegated talent pool; and implicit relationship between the performance of an organisation and diversity of human resource. A healthy work-environment inclusive of the variegated diversity represented in the human resource is momentous for the holistic and eclectic progress of an organisation. The era of uncontested androcentric patriarchal mode of existence has become outmoded in today's progressive socio-economic system where women have proven their worth and efficacy, talent and perceptivity, in the arena beyond the confines of the four walls. According to Biswa (2020), "the economic empowerment of women through their strong participation in the workforce holds utmost significance. Women should not be confined to the responsibilities of family and child care alone, as their presence in the workplace is equally salient".

Women have proven their merits at the workplace. Mainstream workforce is no longer exclusively 'male-stream' (Delmont, 2003, p 115). However, with the growing inflow of women in the professional zone, there is a concomitant escalation of the need for implementation of laws favouring women's safety at the workplace. According to Dhingra (2020), the

increased participation of women in the workforce does not make them safe enough. Women safety at the workplace is determined by strong provisions of judicial and public security through stringent law enforcement. There's an exigent need to protect the female constituency from various facets of implicit and explicit discriminatory practices at the workplace, amounting to hostility and prejudice against women or intimidation and the threat of professional loss (The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013).

Violation of a woman's right to equality and the right to life promised in articles 14, 15 and 21 of the Constitution of India amounts to sexual harassment at the workplace. Mody (2013) in section nine "All in a Day's Work: Sexual Harassment at the Workplace" puts forth the significance of the historical judgement in Vishakha vs. State of Rajasthan (1997) case which resulted in "the first authoritative definition of 'sexual harassment' in India". Since there was no clearly charted definition of sexual harassment prior to this case, the Supreme Court worked in the direction of "Thinking Global, Acting Local" (Mody, 2013, p 190) and decided to rely on CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women held in 1979 by the UN General Assembly) in order to interpret Articles 14, 15, 19 and 21 of the Constitution of India. The Indian Judicial system gave evidence of its effective handling of Vishakha case where the court emphatically held that sexual harassment includes "Physical contact and advances, a demand or request for sexual favours, sexually coloured remarks, showing pornography, and any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of sexual nature" (Mody, 2013, p 193).

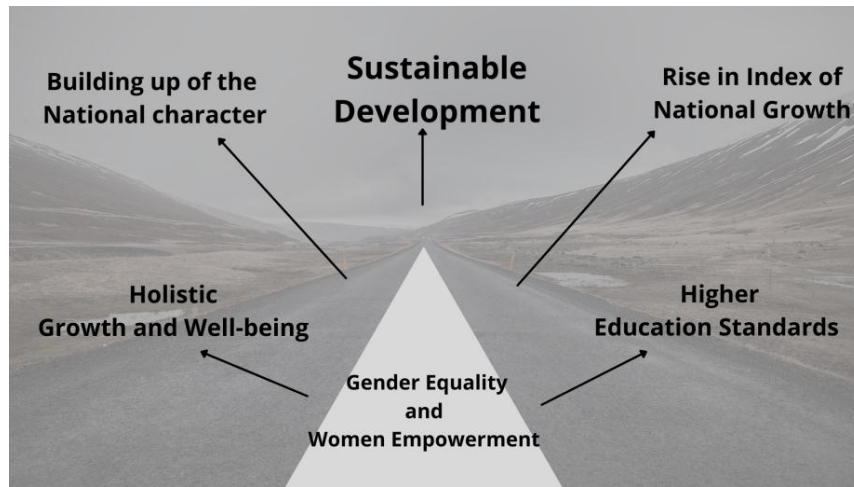
The judgement ruled out that physical contact was essential for considering the case within the purview of sexual harassment. Taking off from Vishakha judgement, The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013. (POSH Act) endorsed that any such act, gesture, sexually suggestive remark or verbal or non-verbal component

violating the dignity of women and amounting to mental harassment would amount to sexual harassment.

At the national and international levels, policies have been framed for securing equitable treatment and safety of women at the work-place. However, in spite of this increasing realisation, there's the concept of the glass ceiling lying in wait, debarring talented women from reaching the upper echelons in the corporate world. "Since 1991, women have been filling managerial positions faster than men... although the data shows us that women still have a long way to go before they equal the number of men in these roles. We have yet to achieve anything close to gender balance in the highest echelons of the business world, in executive roles and in board roles and in boardrooms. In addition, the bigger the company the less likely we are to see women at the helm" (International Labour Organisation, 2020).

Indubitably, gender equality is an indispensable facet of fundamental human rights and, more so, "a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world" (United Nations: Sustainable Development Goals, 2021). The implication is that an empowered and secure woman is well-equipped and strong enough to instil appropriate principles in her children, making them responsible citizens and strengthening her family. Bolstering the family system at the micro-level will inevitably lead to higher education standards and building up of the national character and further lead to holistic growth and well-being, sustainable development and rise in the index of national growth as shown in Figure 1. "Putting women and girls at the centre of economies will fundamentally drive better and more sustainable development outcomes for all, support a more rapid recovery, and place the world back on a footing to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals" (United Nations: Sustainable Development Goals, 2021).

**Figure 1: Gender Equality in the roadmap to Sustainable Development**



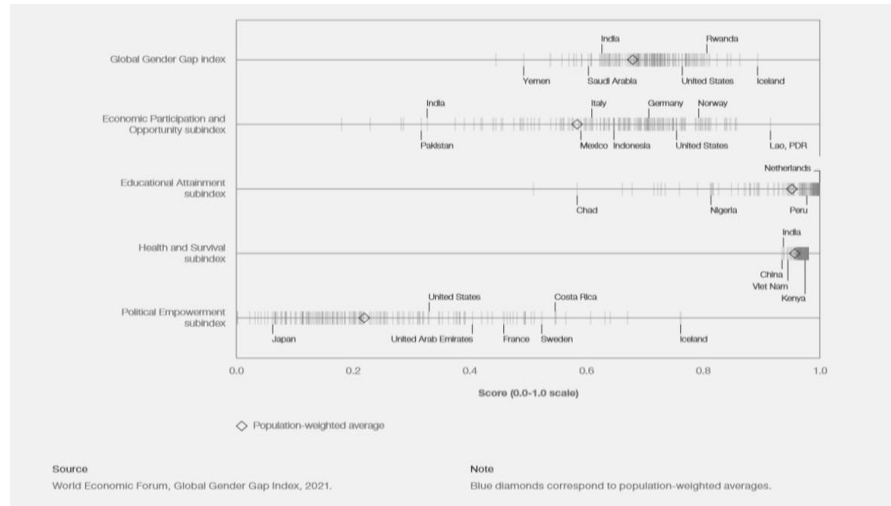
Very appropriately, Aina (2011) comments on the inevitable connection between gender equality and the varied goals of sustainable development like “good governance, human rights, environmental sustainability, and poverty reduction”. In an article titled “A Just Energy Transition”, the authors, Jamshyd N Godrej, the chairperson of the Council on Energy, Environment and Water, and Fatih Birol, the Executive Director of the International Energy Agency, write how replenishment of renewable resources will require “a focus on livelihoods” and “a people centric approach backed by good policy design”. The article expounds the need for gender parity at the workplace in order to make sustainable environmental projects successful. “As a priority, renewable energy companies must produce policies to ensure gender parity at the workplace. These could include investment in suitable facilities for women at project sites, designing guidelines for flexible working arrangements, and creating programmes to prepare more women for leadership roles” (Godrej & Birol, 2021).

Highly commendable policies have been framed for enabling education and security of girls from early childhood. 2001 was declared as the ‘Swashakti year’. The focus was on women empowerment. It has been appropriately noted that gender equality and women empowerment are coterminous and

have a symbiotic relationship. “There is growing interest in the role of policy reforms to promote gender equality and empower women, two key objectives of development policy. From a policy perspective, it would be ideal for reforms undertaken in different policy areas to be consistent, so that they reinforce each other in improving gender equality” (Kumar & Quisumbing, 2012).

Government ventures like ‘Beti Bachhao , Beti Padhao’, Sukanya Samridhi Yojna, OSC (One Stop Centre) Scheme and Ujjawala Scheme have been substantial steps taken by the Government of India in the direction of procuring safety and security of the girl child and empowerment of women (Shettigar & Misra, 2021). Further, there are laws empowering women to articulate and have their say via greater reservation for women in the Gram Panchayats. Clause (3) of Article 243D of the Constitution of India mandates one third of the seats of the Panchayati Raj to be filled by women (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2020). Women reservation in Panchayat has brought a positive change in women and they are slowly joining the mainstream of society for its betterment (V & Kumari, 2018). The pending women Reservation bill proposes 33% reservation for women in the Parliament of India. Despite these developments, underrepresentation of women in the workforce in the practical sense is also a known fact (UN Women, 2020). In spite of herculean efforts by policymakers at empowering women and bridging the gap between men and women, “women continue to be largely underrepresented at all workforce levels globally” (Corporate Wellness Magazine, 2021). Women continue to remain on the margins and silent targets of discriminatory practices. India cuts a sorry figure in the global gender gap index (World Economic Forum, 2021) as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Range of Scores, Global Gender Gap Index and Sub indexes, World Economic Forum (2021)**



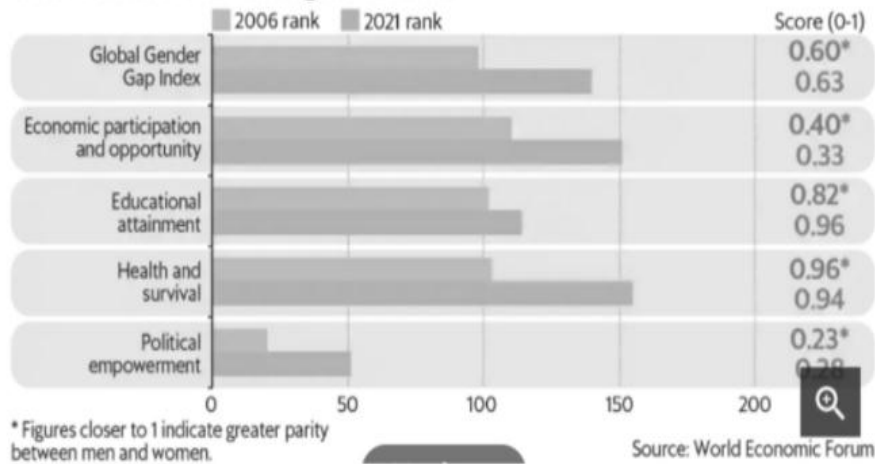
The World Economic Forum report (2021) expatiates the existing gender gap worldwide based on four parameters: “economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment.” The report tells us that keeping in mind the pace at which the 156 countries, scrutinised in 2021, are attempting to ameliorate their statistical position vis-a-vis bridging gender inequality and bolstering women power, it will take 135.6 years to bridge this gap worldwide. Absolute gender equality shall be an apocalyptic dream comes true after consolidated efforts of policy makers, corporates, and change in individual mindsets and equitable treatment of women at home and at work (Connell, 2005). Yet, the World Economic Forum findings explain that countries like Iceland and Finland have covered 85% of the gender gap while the next seven countries, “Lithuania, Namibia, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Rwanda and Ireland have closed at least 80% of their gap.” It is a matter of concern that India, which ranked 112 in 1920 in the Global Gender Gap Index, has currently toppled down to 140th rank amongst 156 countries as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3: Global Gender Gap Report, 2021**

### Mind the gap

India has slipped 28 places in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2021, and is now one of the worst performers in South Asia. It is now ranked 140th among 156 nations.



India granted right to vote to women in the first general election held in Independent India in 1951-52, where the constitution of India, in extension of the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” adopted by the UN in 1948, provides equal rights to women in matter of professional choice (Article 16), freedom of speech and expression (Article 19), and special provisions for the welfare of women and children in article 15(3) and prohibition of discrimination against women. Still, India has its own set of failures in effectively handling gender disparity. The situation calls for self-interrogation and introspection regarding the loopholes and the discrepancies in the implementation of the well-defined women-centred laws and policies.

The newly charted law, novel “The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013” (The POSH Act) is a great step towards creating a safe workplace for women. It aims for respect of women at the workplace and making the work environment

favourable and amenable to women's security that is essential for the unhampered growth of the corporate sector, for society and the socio-economic growth of the nation at large. However, it is a possibility that the women employees may not be aware of such a law or their rights in the same. Traversing the gap between rhetoric and reality is the essential reality-check required to bring about change in the practical sense. The present study aims to identify whether women employees are aware of the laws made for their safety in the workplace like the POSH Act, and know the provisions on how to file a complaint in case of sexual harassment or not. There is also a concern for a changing scenario due to the on-going Covid-19 pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed workplaces in most organisations throughout the world (Verma et al., 2020). Since the early 1970's, employees particularly women sought after telework, that is, working from a place other than the traditional workplaces but faced resistance to the practice due to management apprehensions (Christopher, 2021). However, the pandemic has accelerated working from home through a digital transformation of work. Employees believe that working from home digitally is the future of work (Nagel, 2020). Despite the benefits of working from home using advances in technology, there are risks and limitations attached to it (Matli, 2020). Rapid advances in technology poses several challenges like the issue of rising Technology-Facilitated abuse (TFA) and violence against women. Women are experiencing tracking and monitoring and are thereby vulnerable to TFA (Louie, 2021). Organisations are forced to act with new strategies in response to the pandemic that is considered to be the beginning of a new world order (Kaptangil, 2021). This paper aims to explore the policies adopted by organisations to ensure the security of women employees at present and, further, to discern what women employees expect from organisations for making them feel safer at their workplace in future. What measures and policies they considered were necessary for making the workplace more amenable, vis-a-vis their safety was enquired.

### **3. Methodology**

This is an exploratory case-study research providing insights into the experiences of the participants. It aims to find answers from women employees working in selected companies to questions like “What makes them feel safe in the workplace?” and “How can their safety be enhanced in the coming future?” Fifty-six women employees working in five selected organisations in the corporate sector, Accenture, American Express, Amex, Capgemini, and Genpact participated in the study. The responses and comments from these women employees, their experiences during the pandemic and their expectations for the post-pandemic future were analysed. This qualitative analysis helped to identify desirable policies that organisations can come up with for the safety of their women employees and ensure their true inclusion. We put forth the following questions in the questionnaire prepared on Google Forms for the purpose:

- (i) Do you know about various laws that aim to make the workplace safe for women like the POSH Act? (The question was to be answered in simple yes/no format.)
- (ii) Do you know the procedure for filing a complaint against sexual harassment in your organisation? (The answer was to be tick marked as either yes or no. An affirmative reply would connote their awareness of the laws as well as the organisational initiative in front-footing the importance of women’s safety at the workplace.)
- (iii) What makes you feel safe in your organisation? (This was an open-ended question seeking feedback from women employees regarding the best practices and policies in the organisation.)
- (iv) The workplace has changed after Covid-19 and work from home is the norm. Do you think the existing policies for women’s safety are sufficient in the digital world too? (The question was to be answered with a simple yes/no reply, which itself would be suggestive of their position vis-a-vis the current situation in the extant pandemic situation.)

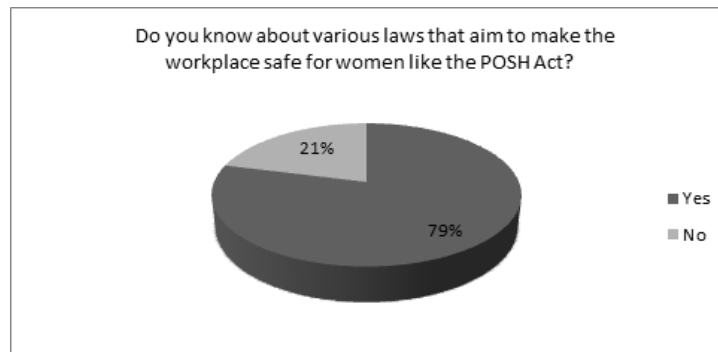
- (v) Hybrid Work Model seems to be the future. What additional steps may be taken to make you feel safer in the hybrid mode? (This was an open-ended question and required the participants to put forth their suggestions for the amelioration and enhancement of the safety of women.)

The identity and personal details of these women employees were kept confidential. However, when there was a need, a few of them were contacted again on telephone, for clarifications via detailed interview. All significant suggestions and recommendations were received around the first thirty five responses and the later ones were just different versions of the earlier responses and could not provide any additional information. When we observed this phenomenon, we decided to close the Google form after the fifty-sixth response was received.

#### 4. Results and Analysis

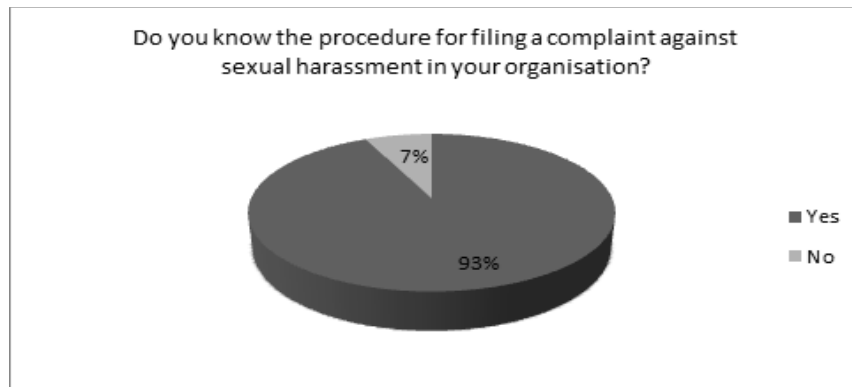
The study found that all the five selected organisations created the much desired awareness among their women employees of the laws regarding their safety. Forty four responses out of the fifty six expressed their acquaintance with the POSH Act for the Prohibition, Prevention and Redressal of Sexual Harassment at the workplace. This indicates that 79 % of the surveyed working women were aware of the very important step taken by the Government for assuring the safety of women at the workplace, as shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4: Acquaintance of Women Employees with the POSH Act**



Further, fifty two out of fifty six women answered Question 2 in the affirmative. This implies, 93% of surveyed working women expressed their awareness about the modalities for filing a complaint against sexual harassment and encroachment of the honour and dignity of women in their organisation, as shown in Figure 5. It is a good sign that working women have the desirable knowledge about their rights and, by extension, it has a positive take on the organisations who have enabled dissemination of knowledge regarding the channels through which women can register their complaint against the infringement of their respect and dignity in the organisation. “Being aware of where to reach in case of any issue” was mentioned in a response to what makes women feel safe in the organisation.

**Figure 5: Awareness of the modalities for filing a complaint**

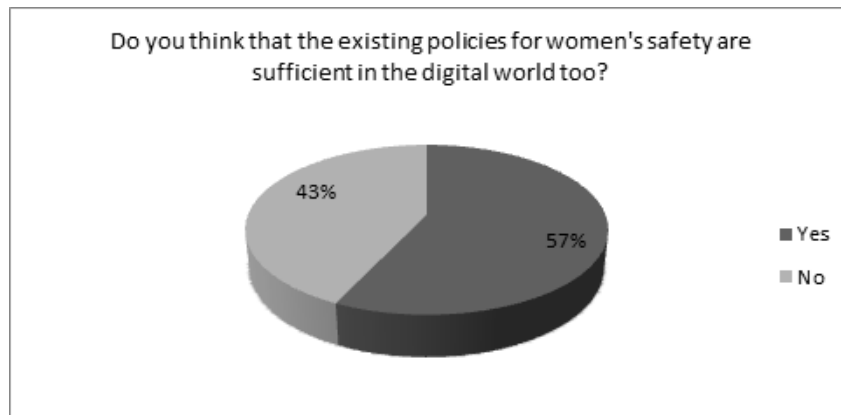


Responses to the open-ended question 3 also suggested in favour of the organisations. Frequent communication in the organisations was among the top that made most women feel safe. Clear communication of well-defined women-centred policies helps in their successful implementation. Organisations achieve gender inclusion “through various communicative practices including lateral and informal communication, generalized and particularized conversations, and creation of alternate spaces for dialogue” (Kulkarni et al., 2021). Frequent communication and feedback creates a healthy environment with an innate sense of safety.

Another recurring mention, the 'Open Door Policy' and 'accessible management', in words of one of the responses - "Regular connections with higher leadership" gave a sense of security to many. Women employees felt safe when they were able to communicate with the Management and knew about all relevant developments in the organisation. Transparency played a major role in ensuring safety, physically and more so, psychologically. Non-tolerance policies in the organisations with severe, punitive consequences against gender-discrimination, was also an important factor ensuring safety for many women. A few mentioned the organisation culture with respect for diversity, made them feel safe in their organisation.

Further, as shown in Figure 6, keeping in mind both the onsite and offsite modality of workplace conditions, it is interesting to note that only 57 % of surveyed women discerned the need to revise the existing policies to provide a safe work environment in the Hybrid model. 43% women felt the existing policies would suffice in the Hybrid model too.

**Figure 6: Sufficiency of existing policies in futuristic Hybrid model**



The responses received from the survey hence conducted tells us that most women feel safe in the workplace regarding the on-site policies of the organisations surveyed but a sense of insecurity prevails in the digital environment under the futuristic Hybrid mode, as reflected in the responses

to Question 5. Subjecting themselves to the screen with the camera switched on makes women feel vulnerable and susceptible to hackers who can misuse their visual images and videos for inappropriate purposes. Keeping in mind the increasing incidents of cybercrime, they also feel that their presence onscreen is under surveillance. There are increasing references to cybercrime (Mittal & Mohan, 2013), "image-based sexual abuse", "Technology-Facilitated violence and Abuse (TFVA)" (Bailey et al., 2021) and "cyberstalking and criminal harassment, online sexual harassment" (Cybercrime Module 12: Key Issues, 2020). The solutions proposed by respondents were "More rigorous IT controls to ensure security of data and calls" or "Engagement, collaboration and technology based solutions and support" or "Stringent tools so that computers cannot be hacked".

Other women felt that while working from home, they felt an infringement on their 'post-working hours' time. Since the work- time schedule has become unlimited and sprawling into late hours, the 'me-time' as well as the 'family-time' is effectively disrupted and it is difficult to maintain work-life balance. Women feel trapped between expectations on all sides. They seek support in managing home and work while working from home, hence, submitted to define the 'maximum working hours' as a policy, "as of now there is no start and stop time".

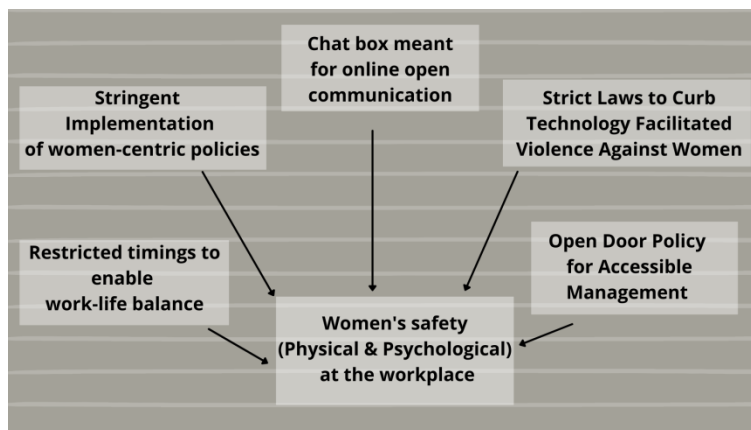
Further, one of the responses expressed the need for "Open HR connects" to ensure safety in the digital environment too. A 'chat feature' to enable a more accessible environment was also recommended. A chat box meant for open communication was felt to have the ability to solve any problem at the incipient stage with immediate effect.

Another response proposed a need for more well-defined policies and laws against non-touch offences or mental harassment of women at work in future. 'Frequent discussions in the organisation around laws against harassment, diversity and inclusion' was also proposed in one of the

responses to create a gender sensitive culture. Periodically, the corporate sector needs to engage in activities like jingle competitions, seminars and cultural events as well as awareness sessions to propagate mutual respect and gender sensitisation. These will act as reminders and constructively impinge upon the mind-set of the employers and employees reminding them of their moral and ethical responsibility towards their female counterparts as well as remind the women constituency of their right to dignity and security at the workplace as well as train them in the possible modalities of registering protest against any attempt at demeaning their worth and dignity at the workplace. This will further generate awareness amongst women not to accept the unacceptable gender discrimination and any attempt at sexual harassment at the workplace.

The recommendations suggested by respondents have been summarised in Figure 7.

**Figure 7: Recommendations Suggested by Respondents**



## 5. Conclusions

Accomplishment of the goal of safety, security and equality of women is not an unattainable target. The task appears insurmountable, yet the target is achievable. Policy makers and governments are taking colossal steps towards the creation of a more equitable and safe work environment,



mitigating gender disparity and enhancing gender inclusion. However, earnest implementation of the same at the micro-level is pertinent for bringing about substantial functional and cognitive change in the ground reality. This study helps to create an understanding of how organisations can enhance the safety of their women employees both physically and psychologically by examining the informal narratives of working women from the five selected organisations.

Although efforts for women safety and gender inclusion are being visibly made in the organisations, the implications of this study include the need for organisations and their HR managers to design their inclusion efforts keeping in mind the safety of working women in the changing scenario where use of technology while working from home is prevalent in the extant Covid-19 and hybrid model is the expected future. Frequent communication, accessible management and open-door policy emerged as pertinent existing practices for women safety in the organisations. However, with increased use of technology while working from home, more rigorous digital controls are required to ensure safety in data transmission and video calls. Open communication by way of a chat box can ensure women employees to readily access management online. Organising frequent online seminars and cultural events around the theme of gender sensitisation would prove helpful in developing a culture of mutual respect. A maximum working hours policy is much called for to define a definite start and stop time while working from home so as to enable work-life balance for women.

At the level of policy-makers, and the legislative and judicial systems, formulating strict laws regarding cyber-crime and policies for preventing mental harassment, implementation of punitive measures against the miscreants, and ensuring stern enforcement can assure women workforce of their safety while working online and help them channel all their energy into their career path.

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