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NEXT STEP

OPENING UP ABOUT SEXUAL HARASSMENT

How to prevent it in the workplace

Every year on Women's Day, companies all around the country celebrate their female employees. There are flowers and chocolates sent out to every girl in the office, they are admired for being valuable, efficient employees. The important question here is, is this just a facade? Are the women in the company only being celebrated for one day, while they are being discriminated against for the rest of the year?



ILLUSTRATION: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

In the corporate sector, all employees have to fulfill certain criteria before they can join the company, and this includes educational degrees. One would think that well-educated people would know better than to harass their co-workers, but sadly sexual harassment continues to occur in offices around the world. In a survey conducted in India among over 6000 participants in 2016, it was found that 38% of the women had been sexually harassed by their coworkers. 70% of the victims did not report the incidents, and of those who had reported it, 65% saw that the company didn't follow the legal procedure of dealing with the complaints. It goes without saying that the scenario is not much different, if not worse, in Bangladesh. There is little to no data available on sexual harassment in the country's corporate sector, which is alarming. It's highly likely that Bangladeshi women do not feel safe about complaining about these incidents, and so none of us know what the scenario is really like.

DEFINING SEXUAL HARASSMENT

1. Unwelcome physical touch/contact
If your coworker touches any part of your body inappropriately, or gropes you, it is a very obvious form of harassment.

2. Verbal derogatory remarks
There are a lot of blurred lines when it comes to defining verbal harassment, because it may not always be direct. In one case that I have heard about a woman who went for

an interview at a bank, she said that, "On my first day at work, I noticed one of the male employees checking me out, and soon afterwards another guy joined him. They were very obviously talking about me and making comments about my appearance. This made me very uncomfortable, and I chose not to work at that place then and there." Any sort of comments on your appearance, and inappropriate sexual humour is considered harassment, regardless of whether it was direct or indirect. If someone persistently pursues you in the office for romantic relationships, or teases you, that is also sexual harassment.

3. Non-verbal gestures

If a coworker sends you inappropriate messages/e-mails, or even sends unwarranted gifts just to get your attention, it qualifies as harassment.

Often times, the victim does not realise that she is being harassed, or the harasser does not know that he is being inappropriate. Addressing female colleagues with pet names like "honey" or "baby" or treating them any differently than how one would treat their male colleagues is absolutely prohibited. As we all saw recently as more women spoke up about sexual misconduct in Hollywood, men in positions of power often force their female subordinates to engage in unethical sexual conduct. Your boss cannot withhold promotions or work opportunities from you on

immoral grounds.

WHAT COMPANIES SHOULD DO TO PREVENT THIS

I talked to an HR professional working in a multinational company in Bangladesh, and she mentioned that her organisation has a strict compliance code in place. "The company has educated every single one of its employees on what sort of behaviour is considered harassment, and what punishment is in place if anyone is found guilty of such behaviour. Usually, whenever a sexual harassment complaint is filed, the HR and compliance departments conduct a thorough investigation. The victim is given full anonymity if she desires. If an employee is found guilty, he can be put in probation, or even be suspended, given the severity of the crime. For example, indirect verbal harassment may result in temporary probation, but groping or direct sexual harassment will definitely get the harasser suspended." Every company, regardless of its size, is required by law to have a mechanism in place that prevents sexual harassment in the workplace.

If your company does not have an HR department, you should directly take it up to the boss. If your boss does not cooperate, or if he is the one that you want to complain against, seek legal help. Contact Bangladesh Mahila Parishad or Ain o Salish Kendra, and they will provide you necessary legal counsel. You can sue for invasion

to dignitary interest, and for loss of reputation. Sexual harassment causes severe physical and mental damages for the victims, and creates an unsafe work environment. This is reason enough for your employer to face tortious liabilities in a court of law.

In British American Tobacco Bangladesh (BATB) Company Ltd v. Begum Shamsun Nahar (66 DLR (AD) 80), the court found that the victim had been sexually harassed, and the company had not taken any initiative to help her once they received her complaints. Rather they had fired her. Thus the court ruled in the plaintiff's favour. Since this incident, BATB has made notable reforms in their employee code of conduct, and today it is one of the most gender-balanced companies in the country.

Let this case be a lesson to all corporate offices in the country, because they cannot get away with discrimination against their female employees. As for the women working in the corporate sector, do not feel hesitant to file complaints against anyone who has harassed you or someone you know. Do not be afraid to raise your voice against predators, because Bangladeshi law is on your side.

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THE BOSSMAN

BY E. RAZA RONNY



5 THINGS THAT WORKING WOMEN ARE TIRED OF HEARING



1. So nice of your family to allow you to work!

Women possess the power to make their own decisions, they don't have to wait for their family's approval to earn a living.

2. How do you take care of your family after working such late hours!?

Independent women have independent family members that don't expect their mother/sister/wife to take care of them at all times.

3. Ooh, you must have gone the extra mile to impress your boss! How did you get a promotion so early?

Women are just as good at their work as men. Fair bosses don't discriminate, and so shouldn't you.

4. You're too ambitious.

This is never a bad thing. While you sit there judging ambitious women, those women will have accomplished far more than you can imagine.

5. Surely you'll stop working once you have children.

Surely one can balance both work and family, and surely it's fine to not want children. It's best if you don't interfere in people's personal lives.

WORDS AND DESIGN: AANIKA KISHWAR TARANNUM

Making a DIFFERENCE

3 more tips on getting good recommendation letters

BE PICKY

If you don't ask your chaa-wala to recommend nail-artists, don't ask a professor of linguistics to recommend a potential Aeronautical Engineer. This is just for the sake of credibility. To relate your insights over a non-credit course to the degree you aim for is a hassle for both the student and the faculty in question. It's recommended to go to well-referenced faculty members of your preferred major.

MAKE NOTES

Equip your teacher with context

so that he/she is well aware of your target. They may choose to start on your letter a week after you asked, so he/she might forget which schools you plan to apply to or which of your qualities you would want highlighted. Make a document with your "Preferred Universities" list, list of deadlines, a personal statement and CV, and send it to them with your request.

LEAVE THEM ALONE

A week to write a recommendation letter on a student they possibly taught 2 semesters ago is

not enough. Don't give them a week and expect something better than essays written off of a template on the internet. If they give you half a semester to write a paper without plagiarising, you can give them a few weeks to write something that could make your career. During that period, do not rush them. Only gentle reminders are okay.

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Bangladesh is rapidly moving towards middle income status by 2021. Our businesses definitely offer immense opportunities for the growing economy and this diversity needs a stage for the stories untold. See Bangladesh make its mark on the global map as Making a Difference brings you our proudest success stories from across the country.