

THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS (NGOs) IN SUPPORTING SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVORS

by

MBAKIRE IMMACULATE

GITAM UNIVERSITY

BBA. LL.B (Hons.)

ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment is one of the serious violations of human rights and dignity across workplaces, educational institutions, and public places, yet it remains rarely reported. Sexual harassment cases continue to prevail despite the existence of legal frameworks aimed at preventing such misconduct. Sexual harassment survivors often face social and psychological challenges that prevent them from reporting and seeking justice. To solve such challenges, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have come up to offer support to survivors of sexual harassment.

This paper explains sexual harassment, analyzes why NGOs are important, describes their role in supporting survivors of sexual harassment, and discusses the challenges they face in supporting sexual harassment survivors in India. It also explains the legal framework addressing sexual harassment in India.

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Introduction

Sexual harassment happens to both males and females, regardless of their professions and academic status. Sexual harassment does not only violate someone's rights but also affects their dignity, safety, and mental health. Even though sexual harassment is common in many settings, such as educational institutions, workplaces, and other public places, it is one of those atrocities that are rarely reported. This is because the victims and survivors find it hard to report their

experiences or even to seek help. Many sexual harassment survivors don't report or seek help due to fear of rejection, loss of employment, reputational damage, and judgement from other people. Others don't trust responsible institutions such as police, politicians, etc., whereas some are not aware of their legal rights. Additionally, legal procedures can be difficult for the survivors to understand and slow, which can be exhausting for them. As a result, many survivors are left with no option other than to stay silent instead of seeking relief. In such a context, NGOs have become a great source of support for sexual harassment survivors. This is because NGOs work separately from the government and focus on human welfare and social justice. NGOs offer services that go beyond legal remedies by making support easily accessible and survivor-friendly.

Empirical evidence bears out this reluctance to come forward. A 2022 industry survey found that among women who reported experiencing unwelcome physical contact or advances at their workplace, more than half chose not to file a formal complaint, citing fear of retaliation and scepticism that their organisation's internal mechanism would act on it.¹ Such findings confirm that formal grievance redressal structures alone are insufficient without the kind of accessible, trust based support that NGOs are positioned to provide.

Meaning of NGOs

It is an independent and nonprofit organization formed by individuals or groups at the local, national, and international level to address humanitarian, social, environmental, or community issues rather than making profit.

NGOs are not run by or controlled by the government; their main goal is to serve rather than make profit. They work for the benefit of the community and are focused on voluntary work.

NGOs work in areas such as health care, education, legal aid, human rights, disaster relief, environmental protection, etc.

Examples of NGOs in India that support sexual harassment survivors

¹ R Radhika, 'Over 50% Women Face Sexual Harassment in Formal Workplace: Study' (Careers360, 11 May 2022) <<https://news.careers360.com/sexual-harassment-women-workplace-act-posh-complaint-job-study>> accessed 17 September 2026.

- Sakshi Delhi
- Jagori, Delhi
- Majlis Legal Centre Mumbai

Beyond these organisations, groups such as Breakthrough and Apne Aap Women Worldwide have extended survivor focused work into schools, colleges, and vulnerable communities across several states, reaching people who rarely encounter formal legal aid.² Jagori, listed above, was established in Delhi in 1984 and has since operated a round the clock helpline staffed by counsellors trained in both psycho-social support and legal referral.³ The variety among these organisations illustrates that NGO intervention in India spans prevention, immediate crisis response, and long-term rehabilitation rather than a single fixed model of support.

Understanding sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment refers to any behavior of a sexual nature that's offensive, humiliating, or intimidating. It can be verbal, written, gestural, or physical contact. It can occur between both male and female and in any kind of relationship.

There are generally two forms of sexual harassment. i.e.

Quid pro quo. This is a situation where a person asks for sexual favors in exchange for benefits such as good grades, promotion, job security, etc. It is often the superiors who are capable of offering such benefits that demand those who need the benefits. In most cases, in case the person demanded doesn't give in, they face fatal consequences such as bad grades, which often lead to failure, loss of employment, etc.

Hostile environment harassment. This involves repeated sexual behavior that creates an uncomfortable environment for a person to do their daily work.

² 'NGOs in India Working for the Prevention of Crimes Against Women' (Local Samosa, 16 August 2024) <<https://www.localsamosa.com/people-culture/ngos-in-india-working-for-the-prevention-of-crimes-against-women-6859909>> accessed 17 September 2026.

³ 'About Us' (Jagori) <<https://www.jagori.org/about-us>> accessed 17 September 2026.

Sexual harassment is not only about physical contact; it also involves inappropriate jokes, gestures, uncomfortable messages, gestures, etc. Due to the emergence of digital means of communication, sexual harassment frequently occurs through social media and other electronic platforms.

Impact of sexual harassment on survivors

Sexual harassment can have psychological, emotional and social impact on survivors.

- **Mental and emotional health.** Many survivors of sexual harassment suffer from stress, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which can develop immediately after the incident or gradually over time.
- **Professional and academic life.** Survivors may decline in performance due to stress or fear of the harasser. There will be less productivity and motivation, absenteeism, or withdrawal from school or work. Survivors are forced to leave their academic environments or workplaces and look for opportunities in favorable environments.
- **Social growth.** Sexual harassment can disrupt the way a survivor interacts with others. Survivors may fail to fit in the society, which may prevent them from socializing, and may also be reluctant to share their experiences due to fear of being judged by others.

The scale of these harms is illustrated by a survey of five thousand respondents conducted across Delhi, which found that eighty-one per cent of women had experienced verbal sexual harassment and nearly a third had faced physical harassment in public spaces.⁴ Such figures suggest that the psychological, professional, and social consequences described above are not isolated occurrences but a widespread feature of daily life for many women in urban India.

Why NGOs are important

Much as there are laws to address sexual harassment, it cannot only be solved by these laws. NGOs have played an important role in filling this gap created by the laws by providing emotional support, guidance, and assistance, which may not be fully given by legal authorities. Unlike formal

⁴ Kalpana Viswanath quoted in 'NGO Surveys Test Official Data on Crime against Women' (Jagori, 9 September 2013) <<http://www.jagori.org/ngo-surveys-test-official-data-crime-against-women>> accessed 17 September 2026.

institutions, NGOs offer an environment that is healing, morale boosting, and less intimidating, which makes survivors feel comfortable approaching an NGO since they always focus on support and healing. NGOs also combine legal and social support, which is not the case with legal institutions, which only offer legal support.

This institutional gap is not merely theoretical. The same 2022 industry survey found that a majority of the organisations surveyed had failed to comply with the decisions of their own Internal Complaints Committees constituted under the workplace sexual harassment law, leaving survivors without effective redress even where a formal mechanism existed on paper.⁵ It is precisely this shortfall between statutory design and everyday enforcement that has allowed NGOs to become a more dependable point of contact for many survivors.

Legal frameworks in India addressing sexual harassment.

Article 14. This article guarantees equality. Sexual harassment violates this article by creating unequal and hostile environments, especially for women, because it undermines equal participation in schools, workplaces, and public spaces.

Article 15. This article prohibits discrimination based on sex, religion, race, or date of birth. Sexual harassment is considered a form of discrimination based on sex because it targets an individual due to their gender.

Article 19(1)(g). This article guarantees the freedom to practice any profession, trade, or business without restrictions. Sexual harassment violates this right because victims may be forced to resign from their jobs or avoid certain jobs.

Article 21. This guarantees the right to life and personal liberty. The supreme court has broadly interpreted this article to include the right to dignity and good mental health. Sexual harassment violates the right to dignity and affects the mental health of survivors.

Vishaka Guidelines (1997)

⁵ Radhika (n 1).

These guidelines were brought into force by the Supreme Court in the landmark case *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan* (1997), in which the Supreme Court held that sexual harassment violates articles 14, 15, 19, and 21 of the Indian Constitution. This case defined sexual harassment, and the Supreme Court instructed employers to form internal complaints committees. The guidelines were just directions given by the court but later became the basis for the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (the POSH Act).

Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012.

This law comes into force especially when the victim is a minor who experiences sexual harassment in schools, colleges, or online. It provides procedures for reporting, investigation, and trial to enable victims to get justice.

Criminal law provisions

The Indian Penal Code (IPC) categorizes sexual harassment as a criminal offense, and below are the relevant provisions.

Section 354A of the IPC (now Section 75 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023). This section criminalized sexual harassment, with the punishment being imprisonment up to 3 years or a fine or both for acts and imprisonment up to 1 year or a fine or both for sexually colored remarks.

Section 354 of the IPC (now Section 74 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023). This section applies when the intention is to outrage the modesty of a woman, with the punishment being 1 to 5 years imprisonment plus a fine.

Section 509 of the IPC (now Section 79 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023). This section applies to verbal, gesture-based, or symbolic harassment, such as sexually offensive comments, with the punishments being imprisonment up to 3 years together with a fine.

Section 376 of the IPC. This applies in severe cases where the harassment is sexually interspersed. The punishment is a minimum of 10 years imprisonment with the possibility of being sentenced to life imprisonment.

These provisions of the Indian Penal Code were replaced with effect from 1 July 2024 by the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, alongside parallel replacements of the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Indian Evidence Act.⁶ Offences committed before that date continue to be tried under the Indian Penal Code, while conduct occurring afterward falls to be charged under the corresponding provisions of the new code, so both sets of section numbers remain in everyday use before Indian courts.

ROLES PLAYED BY NGOs IN SUPPORTING SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVORS

Awareness. NGOs conduct educative programs to spread awareness about sexual harassment. They organized workshops, training camps, campaigns, etc., to teach people, including children and the elderly, on how to treat both genders respectfully. They also teach people what constitutes sexual harassment and also offer advice on what to do in case a person is sexually harassed. These programs are often conducted in schools, workplaces, and other popular community spaces. Such awareness sessions enable individuals to recognize sexual harassment and give them the courage to report any misconduct of the kind.

The scale of such awareness work can be considerable. Breakthrough, an NGO working on the prevention of gender based violence, reports engaging close to one and a half million adolescents across schools and communities through programmes that challenge discriminatory social norms.⁷ Reaching young people at this scale matters because attitudes formed during adolescence often shape how a person later recognises, reports, or excuses sexual harassment.

Advocacy. NGOs also play an important role in advocating for stronger laws against sexual harassment and also better implementation of existing laws. They do this through conducting research, publishing reports, filing public interest litigation, and raising public awareness. Such efforts influence legal reforms about sexual harassment.

⁶ 'India Post-Colonial Criminal Codes Come into Force' (JURIST, 2 July 2024) <<https://www.jurist.org/news/2024/07/india-post-colonial-criminal-codes-come-into-force/>> accessed 17 September 2026.

⁷ 'NGOs in India Working for the Prevention of Crimes Against Women' (n 2).

Psychological and emotional healing. NGOs offer rehabilitation, guidance, and counseling services to survivors of sexual harassment through referring therapists and support groups. NGOs often provide a calm environment where survivors feel a sense of belonging and validation. Such support helps these survivors to deal with stress, trauma, and fear and also helps them to rebuild their confidence and self-esteem.

Legal support. Many survivors lack awareness about their legal rights and legal remedies available in case their rights are violated. NGOs help these survivors to use legal means to gain relief by offering legal advice on how to file complaints and sometimes offer representation. Such legal support from NGOs gives the survivors confidence to fight for their rights.

Government data illustrate the scale of demand for such assistance. The National Commission for Women recorded 28,811 complaints of crimes against women in 2023 alone, with harassment and dignity related complaints forming the largest single category.⁸ NGOs offering legal aid help translate this volume of grievances into individual complaints that survivors can actually pursue, particularly where they cannot afford private legal representation.

Immediate support. NGOs offer immediate support to survivors by providing helplines and emergency services to guarantee safety and medical attention for survivors.

Safe spaces. NGOs also offer safe spaces such as shelters for vulnerable survivors who need protection. These safe spaces provide immediate protection and support by helping survivors to rebuild their lives and regain independence.

CHALLENGES FACED BY NGOs IN SUPPORTING SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVORS

NGOs face numerous challenges while trying to support sexual harassment survivors.

⁸ '28,811 Complaints of Crimes against Women Received in 2023, over 50% from Uttar Pradesh: NCW Data' (Deccan Herald, 2024) <<https://www.deccanherald.com/amp/story/india%2F28811-complaints-of-crimes-against-women-received-in-2023-over-50-from-uttar-pradesh-new-data-2831387>> accessed 17 September 2026.

Shortage of funds. NGOs face a lot of financial constraints due to stable and sufficient funding. This is because most NGOs rely on donations, grants, and membership subscriptions for funding. This affects their ability to help survivors by hiring qualified professionals like psychologists, lawyers, and counselors; building construction infrastructure like shelters; conducting awareness programs; and other projects aimed at supporting survivors of sexual harassment. Shortage of funds forces NGOs to limit their support services, which is dangerous since survivors always require constant legal and psychological support.

This funding constraint has intensified in recent years due to tightening regulation of foreign contributions. Official data cited by Amnesty International India show that more than twenty-one thousand organisations had lost their registration under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act by March 2026, often resulting in the closure or severe curtailment of their activities.⁹ Because many organisations supporting sexual harassment survivors have historically relied on international grants, this regulatory tightening compounds the resource shortages already described above.

Legal barriers. NGOs operate in environments with strict rules and regulations. In such environments, it may take a long time for NGOs to offer support to survivors due to many legal procedures that have to be followed. Compliance requirements such as registration, reporting, etc., may impose financial and administrative burdens on the NGOs. Sometimes procedures may involve complex documents, restrictions on foreign funding, and delays in approvals of some requests and policies. Such legal hurdles discourage smaller NGOs from engaging in sexual harassment.

Limited resources. Many NGOs work with limited resources such as staff and infrastructure, yet the few staff available are not even experts. This limits the capacity of NGOs to support survivors because survivors often require experts to assist them legally, psychologically, and socially. As a result, NGOs don't offer timely responses to the needs of survivors, the quality of services delivered is always poor, and their ability to advocate for the well-being of survivors and against sexual harassment is also limited.

⁹ 'India: Parliament Must Reject Proposal to Extend Restrictions on Overseas Funding for NGOs' (Amnesty International, 27 March 2026) <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/03/india-parliament-must-reject-proposal-to-extend-restrictions-on-overseas-funding-for-ngos/>> accessed 17 September 2026.

Reliance on state institutions. NGOs heavily rely on state institutions to promote and advocate for sexual harassment survivors. For example, NGOs do not have the power to independently prosecute offenders or enforce judgments. Their effectiveness only depends on the enforcement and functioning of legal and administrative systems. This dependence makes it hard for NGOs to enforce laws and give justice to sexual harassment survivors.

Limited cooperation from institutions. NGOs always rely on cooperation from other institutions such as police authorities, Black authorities, employers, educational institutions, etc., to do their work effectively. NGOs sometimes struggle to get timely responses, assistance, and information aimed at helping survivors. Without cooperation from these bodies, NGOs may find it difficult to help survivors get the assistance they need, which at times discourages them from getting involved with sexual harassment victims.

Societal and cultural barriers. NGOs find it hard to confront some society and cultural norms. For example, patriarchal societies, societies where the victims are always blamed, discourage sexual harassment survivors from seeking help since they will face social rejection. In some communities, conversations about sexual harassment are sensitive or taboo and cannot be entertained at all. Therefore, NGOs must deal with the fear of survivors of being rejected by society, community resistance, lack of awareness, and gender stereotypes. Such barriers limit the efforts of NGOs to reach and offer assistance to many survivors.

National survey data corroborate the scale of this cultural barrier. While National Crime Records Bureau figures for 2022 recorded 4.45 lakh cases of crime against women nationwide, the National Family Health Survey-5 found that nearly one in three women had experienced spousal violence, a gap that researchers attribute to stigma, fear of reprisal, and reliance on police reporting rather than community based surveys.¹⁰ This broader pattern of silence suggests that the societal resistance NGOs encounter is not confined to sexual harassment alone but is symptomatic of a wider reluctance to treat gendered violence as a matter for public redress.

¹⁰ 'Crimes Against Women in India: Trends, Challenges, and Policy Responses' (SPRF) <<https://sprf.in/crimes-against-women-in-india-trends-challenges-and-policy-responses/>> accessed 17 September 2026.

CONCLUSION

Sexual harassment continues to be a serious problem affecting both male and female genders in workplaces, educational institutions, and public places. In India, many legal frameworks have been put in place to prevent sexual harassment. These include the Vishaka Guidelines (1997), the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act), Article 14, 15, 19(1)(g), and 21 of the Indian Constitution, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO), 2012, etc. However, much as these laws exist, survivors face very many hardships while seeking justice. This paper has explained how NGOs support sexual harassment survivors by offering services that are far beyond legal remedies. However, in their journey to support sexual harassment survivors, NGOs face a lot of challenges that limit their ability and effectiveness in ensuring that all survivors get the support they need as discussed by this paper. NGOs take up a vital position in supporting survivors as their work addresses the social and emotional aspects of sexual harassment that legal authorities cannot solve.

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