



Metoo Movement: An Awareness Campaign

Dr Rituparna Bhattacharyya, Independent Researcher and Editor-in-Chief, Journal Space and Culture, India

Email: rituparna.bhattacharyya@accb.org.uk

The aftermath of the strings of sexual allegations faced by Harvey Weinstein, one of the most powerful faces of Hollywood, the #metoo movement went viral in social media. This innovative and creative movement was initially launched in 2006 by Tarana Burke aimed at helping survivors of sexual harassment. Taking examples from different countries, this commentary attempts to analyse the #metoo movement and answer the question as to why most victims of sexual harassment chose to remain silent.

Keywords: #metoo movement, sexual assault, women, men



Introduction

On 29 April 2012, an NRI sexually assaulted a young Indian woman when she went to meet him (because of personal links gained from close friendship with her father) in a hotel room in Mumbai. Devastated by the assault and traumatized by the fact that her trust has been shattered, she lodged a complaint almost one and a half year (on 20 December 2013) after the incident and that too, not with the Mumbai police, but to the Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service of General Medical Council, UK , under whom the accused was registered (Bhattacharyya, 2016b).¹ While the tribunal found the accused guilty of sexual misconduct and placed him under suspension, unsurprisingly, the community leaders and patriarchs of Indian diaspora condoned the accused imputing blame on the victim as being ‘characterless’ and a ‘bad’ woman (Bhattacharyya 2015; 2016a,b). Sadly, this is not a unique story of one victim. It was also saddening to witness that S.P.S. Rathore, an Inspector-General of Police and founding president of Haryana Lawn Tennis Association (HLTA), who had molested in August 1990, the then 14-year-old teenage, Miss Ruchira Girhotra, by misusing the power of his position was invited as a VIP guest to attend the 69th Republic Day at Panchkula, Haryana (Gupta, 2018). Ruchira was molested at HLTA, where she was taking tennis lessons. Although Ruchira’s parents had reported the incident to the police, the then toothless Indian justice system simply window dressed the reality rather than addressing the diabolical reality; whereby, Ruchira failed to seek justice. Dismayed by the miscarriages of justice and vicious tongues surrounding her life, Ruchira committed suicide at the age of 17 (Gupta, 2018). Evidence, further reinforced by the recent #me too movement, demonstrates that women’s sexual assault is a pan-cultural phenomenon (Butcher, 2017; Calder-Dawe and Gavey, 2016; Herriot, 2015; Leach, 2006; Madan and Nalla, 2016; Park et al., 2013; Neupane and Chesney-Lind, 2014; also, Bhattacharyya, 2009; 2013b; 2015; 2016). In the wake of the strings of allegations of malicious sexual abuse by Harvey Weinstein, one of the most powerful men in Hollywood, the #metoo movement went viral in the social media. Indeed, the #metoo movement was created more than a decade ago by Tarana Burke in 2006 to help victims of sexual violence/abuse. This movement helps us to gain a sense of the problem, and make people aware of the scale of the sexual harassment that remains pervasive in the public

¹ Record of Determinations- Medical Practitioners Tribunal, retrieved on 14 November 2017 from, https://www.mpts-uk.org/static/documents/content/Satish_MAHANTA_27_January_2017.pdf



space/workplace (Gonzalez, 2017; Gonzalez and France, 2017). This commentary is an attempt to highlight and analyse the innovative and creative #metoo movement teasing out why most victims of sexual assaults chose to remain silent instead of accusing the perpetrator. The analysis of the commentary is built on examples from across the globe (including India). It is reckoned that this analysis would trigger effective awareness of the pandemic problem of sexual harassment all over the place (including the workplace). The commentary begins with the definition of sexual harassment, which follows a discussion of #metoo movement. Following this, it discusses examples from India and why victims of sexual harassment fail to accuse the perpetrator.

Sexual Harassment

According to the UK Equality Act 2010, [h]arassment is “unwanted conduct [or unwelcome behavior] related to a relevant protected characteristic [here, sexual advances], which has the purpose or effect of violating an individual’s dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that individual”.² However, the term unwelcome behavior is problematic because “[i]t does not mean "involuntary." A victim may consent or agree to certain conduct and actively participate in it even though it is offensive and objectionable. Therefore, sexual conduct is unwelcome whenever the person subjected to it considers it unwelcome. Whether the person in fact welcomed a request for a date, sex-oriented comment, or joke depends on all the circumstances.”³ In short, sexual harassment can be defined as a form of harm inflicted upon a person via physical, verbal or even psychological acts bearing a sexual tone. It is often an act of power domination mediated via spatial and social control, buttressing subordination. Therefore, experiencing any form of sexual harassment anywhere could be humiliating, demeaning, traumatizing, and degrading.

#Metoo movement

(Un)surprisingly, for the first time in history, the #metoo movement has emerged as a powerful whistleblower hitting the highest offices of the world—the European Parliament, the Westminster, and much more, from where the narratives of accusations of inappropriate

² The Equality Act 2010 –guidance for employers, ACAS, retrieved 30 January 2018 from, <http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/8/a/Equality-Act-2010-guide-for-employers.pdf>

³ What is Sexual Harassment ,retrieved 30 January 2018 from, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/pdf/whatish.pdf>



behavior or sexual allegations continue to surface similar to ants coming out from their habitats. The Time magazine of 18 December 2017 has featured few celebrities— Ashley Judd, Susan Fowler, Adama Iwn, Taylor Swift, and Isabel Pascual labelling them as silence breakers.⁴ At the same time, it is sad to note that when feminism has reached its heights in the occidental world, why these women chose to remain silent for years. Nonetheless, millions of common women too have joined this movement. This markedly signals that women (even after decades) continue to hit the iron as the recently heated hammer continues to remain too hot. For instance, in January 2018 Judge Rosemarie Aquilina sentenced 175 years in jail to the predator, USA gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar, who sexually abused a large number of young women gymnasts. This was a historic judgment and perhaps, one of the most powerful judgments in the world where more than 150 women confronted the predator face-to-face in the court.⁵

Notwithstanding, as many as 40 Conservative Members of Parliament and four Labour MPs at Westminster faced allegations of sexual misconduct (Payne, 2017). Accordingly, actions had been taken, albeit hurriedly, to redress the conventional balance of power and privilege enjoyed by these powerful men. In doing so, there had been incidents when Carl Sargeant, a Welsh government minister committed suicide after he was sacked for allegations of sexual harassment.⁶ Arguably, there should have been some fair process for the accused giving him a chance to defend. Nevertheless, in some parts of the world, this #metoo movement has moved beyond the social media and are being taken to the streets, where women are rallying to protest against sexual harassment demanding the implementation ‘zero tolerance policy’ against sexual harassment at the workplace.

Although, sexual harassment is tantamount to women but #me too movement is not restricted to women facing sexual harassment alone, it is also about those powerful women preying on their subordinate men or a homosexual man /woman preying on another man/woman in his/her office or elsewhere under the shields of their power. There is very little or robust statistics of sexual advances at the workplace. According to a report of the United Nations Secretary-

⁴ The Silence Breakers, 2017 Person of the Year (18 December, 2017). *Time*, 16-44

⁵ Larry Nassar case: Who is Judge Rosemarie Aquilina? (2018, 24 January). *BBC News*, US & Canada, retrieved 30 January 2018 from, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-4280691>

⁶ Carl Sargeant: hundreds turn out for former Welsh minister's funeral, *The Guardian*, retrieved 30 January 2018 from, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/dec/01/carl-sargeant-hundreds-turn-out-former-welsh-labour-ministers-funeral>



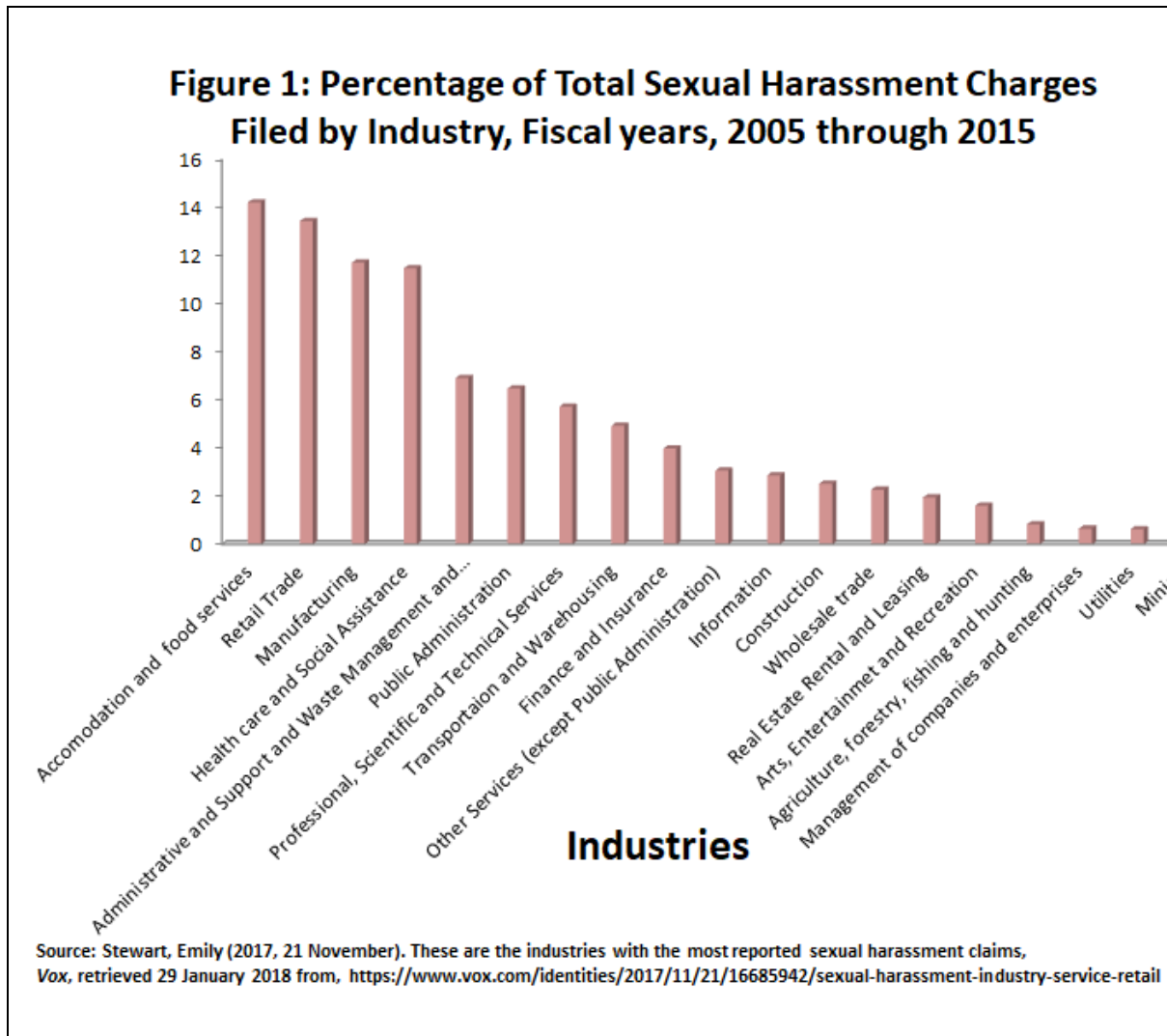
General's Campaign to End Violence Against Women unravels that in the USA, 83 percent of girls within the age-group 12 to 16 years faced some form of sexual assaults in their schools.⁷ The same report further unveils that within the countries of the European Union; approximately 40-50 percent women experienced some form of sexual assaults like inappropriate touching or unwanted physical contacts, while 30-40 percent women of Asia-Pacific countries reported different forms of harassment—verbal, physical, and sexual. Appalling rape statistics (2016-2017) from Rape Crisis Centres across England and Wales unfolds that every year, about 85,000 women and 12,000 men become victims of rape demonstrating that while both women and men can become victims of despicable sexual assaults, women are far more likely to become victims of sexual exploitations.⁸ Similarly, in her article in *Vox*, entitled *These are the industries with the most reported sexual harassment*, Emily Stewart (2017) draws a detailed account of the industries where women mostly face harassment in the USA (see, Figure1). For this, she used 10-year data of the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Her nuanced analysis unravelled that in accommodation and food service industry, dominated by female workers in lowly paid jobs, are most vulnerable to sexual assaults. Stewart (2017) found that in this industry, 14.23 percent women became victims of sexual harassment followed by retail trade, where 13.44 percent women reported facing sexual abuse. Seemingly, in the Peninsula Beverly Hills hotel, “where Harvey Weinstein often stayed, female employees said they often felt helpless next to Hollywood titans whom the hotel went to extreme lengths to please” (Mueller, 2017). While the hotel divulged its no tolerance of sexual harassment both by its employees and guests, there is also no evidence to suggest that Mr Weinstein assaulted the hotel workers/housekeepers (Mueller, 2017). However, following Harvey Weinstein allegations, in Chicago, the housekeepers were successful to pass a City Council bill that makes it mandatory for the hotels to provide panic buttons for the housekeepers summoning for help should unwanted incidents occur (Mueller, 2017).

⁷ Violence Against Women, United Nations Secretary-General's Campaign, retrieved 23 December 2017 from, http://www.un.org/en/women/endviolence/pdf/pressmaterials/unite_the_situation_en.pdf

⁸ Rape Crisis England & Wales headline statistics 2016-17, retrieved 12 December 2017 from, <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/statistics.php>

Indian Scenario

In India too, the reported cases of women facing sexual harassment at the workplace have been increasing—there was an increase of 35 percent from 2013 to 2014—the number of cases rose from 249 to 336. However, a study conducted by Indian Bar Association (2017)



amongst 6,047 participants found that 70 percent of women failed to report their instances of sexual harassment because they feared the consequences. This is despite the promulgation of the stringent legislation— Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention,



Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013,⁹ which was implemented following the *Nirbhaya*¹⁰ gang rape case of December 2012 (Bhattacharyya 2015; 2016). One of the clauses of this Act was that any establishment (irrespective of whether it is private or public) with 10 or more employees must have an internal complaints committee (ICC). The findings of the 2015 research titled *Fostering Safe Workplaces* conducted by Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) divulges that 36 percent of Indian companies and 25 percent of multinational companies operating in India have failed to constitute an ICC.¹¹

Why most women remain silent?

It can be easily argued that sexual harassment does not decline even though women's empowerment becomes normative. While some critics are questioning as to whether #metoo movement has gone too far; few others question whether it is a witch-hunt and why most victims chose to remain silent as some of the allegations made by the most empowered women of Hollywood and others are more than 25 years old. The answer is simple. Most people (including women) bear a patriarchal mindset and misogyny is rooted deeply across cultures (Bhattacharyya, 2015; 2016a; 2016b; Zeilinger, 2018). At the same time, it is interesting to note that a large number of women from both the developed and the developing world justify wife beating/domestic abuse (Bhattacharyya, 2015, 2016). However, the percentage of women from the developing world is far more when compared to their counterparts of the developed world (see, Figure 2). An example from India further reinforces this observation. Chapter 7 of the latest Economic Survey 2017-2018, India shows that in 2006, 50.4 percent women did not support wife beating. Almost after a decade, this figure has changed only by 3.5 percentage points; that is, still, a staggering 46 percent of Indian women justify wife-beating.¹²

⁹ Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (No.14 of 2013), The Gazette of India, retrieved 30 January 2018 from, <http://indiacode.nic.in/acts-in-pdf/142013.pdf>

¹⁰ *Nirbhaya* was a 23-year old woman who was gang-raped and left in a vegetative state in a moving bus in New Delhi on 16 December 2012 when she was returning home from Cinema with her boyfriend. She later died in the hospital (Bhattacharyya, 2013a, 2015; 2016).

¹¹ *Fostering safe workplaces: Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013*, Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), retrieved 12 December from, <http://ficci.in/spdocument/20672/Fostering-safe.pdf>

¹² Chapter 7: Gender and Son Meta-Preference: Is Development Itself an Antidote?, *Economic Survey 2017-18, Volume I*, Ministry of Finance, Government of India, retrieved 31 January 2018 from, http://mofapp.nic.in:8080/economicsurvey/pdf/102-118_Chapter_07_ENGLISH_Vol_01_2017-18.pdf

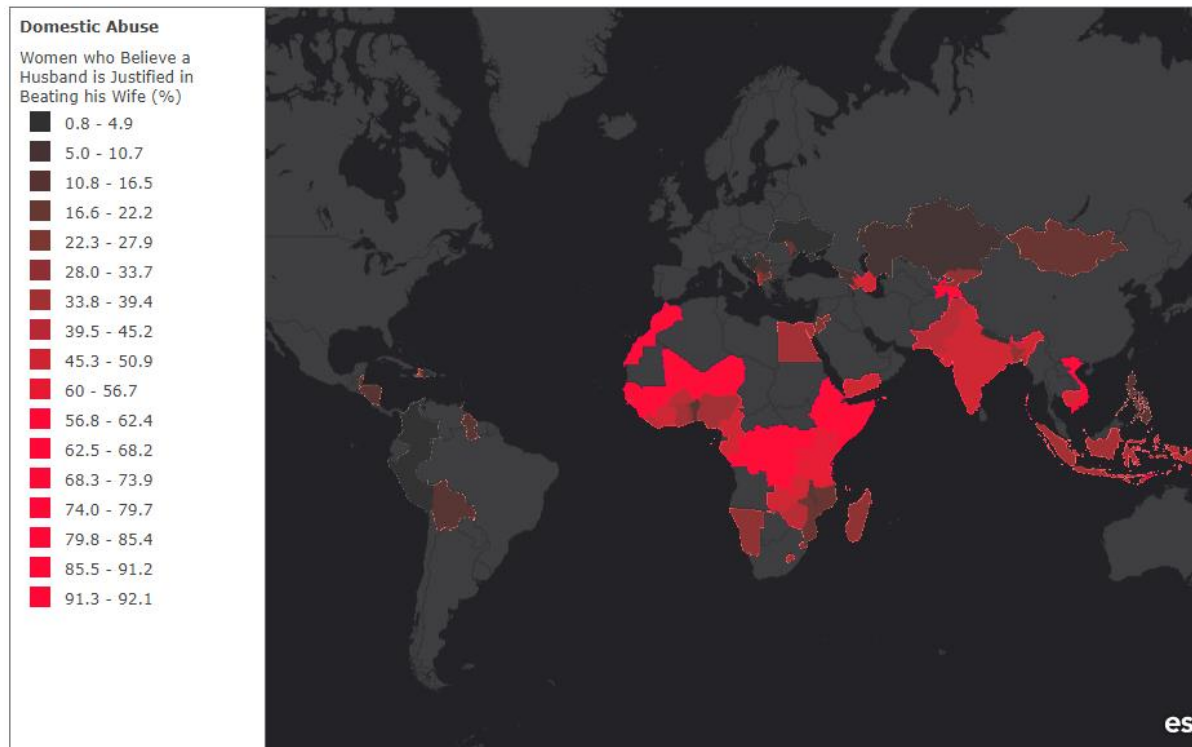


Figure 2: The percentage of women who believe a husband is justified in beating his wife.

Source: ArcGIS, retrieved 30 January 2018 from,

<https://www.arcgis.com/home/webmap/viewer.html?webmap=a18d30257fc64adc8e3245ec215c0362>

It is not easy for a woman to speak against the sexual misconduct of the perpetrator, for reasons such as sheer embarrassment of being labelled as ‘characterless’ or ‘bad woman’ (as shown in the narratives of my introduction), accusations of lying,¹³ fear of ruining their career, the threat from the perpetrator(s), etc. All these signal that the practice of ‘victim blaming’ remains the key in most societies across the world as the onus of being harassed lies on the victim rather than the perpetrator. When the most empowered women of Hollywood, Westminster and elsewhere have taken years/decades to speak out against incidents sexual harassment, one can easily imagine why ordinary/common women fear to speak against the perpetrators. Arguably, because of the common practice of ‘victim blaming’, most women choose to remain silent,

¹³ Although false accusations are very rare, however, there could be fake case(s) where women take advantage of the #metoo movement (please read, S, 2016).



thereby, helping the perpetrators to find a safe haven within the communities, organizations, etc.

Affect of #metoo on Young People

In response to the #metoo movement, in December 2017 MTV surveyed 1800 young people aged 18-25 years to probe the affect of #metoo on them (Zeilinger, 2018). Almost 40 percent of young men responded that the movement had changed the way they interact with potential romantic relationships. While 25 percent of the young women respondents reported that since the launch of #metoo movement, the behaviour of young men have changed towards women (Zeilinger, 2018), however, far more rigorous research is required to witness the actual effect of the movement. Perhaps, to reduce sexual assaults, the media and the advertising agencies must stop any form of ‘objectification’ of women. Currently, with an aim to enhance women’s safety, many companies have developed and installed panic buttons/safety alert apps on the smartphones/tablets. While these smart technologies are welcomed, I urge that, if possible, women facing assaults should ‘scream loud’ to seek attention from the public for help.

Conclusion

The # metoo movement is yet to roll out too far. However, this movement is an opportunity for women to speak out and expose the predators. The institutions/ organizations might ignore the complaint of a single woman, but they are less likely to ignore collective voices. While men too are very much part of this movement, perhaps, more men must be engaged, and awareness programs must be held as to how men should behave with their women counterparts in different spatial contexts. Currently, the movement is very much hegemonic and Anglo-American centric. It is surprising to witness that the movement is yet to hit Bollywood and other entertaining industries of the oriental world. It is an open secret that the sexual predators are all over the place —within educational institutions, public /private organizations, and communities. Now the question is will these high profile incidents of Hollywood, Westminster, European Parliament sensitize our institutions and communities. Perhaps, time will speak. Either the perpetrators would be exposed or might continue to find sanctuary condoned by organizations/ communities or the movement might face a backlash.



References

- Bhattacharyya, Rituparna (2016a). Street Violence against Indian Women in India: Mapping Prevention Strategies, *Asian Social Work and Policy Review*, 10 (3), 311-325, DOI:10.1111/aswp.12099
- Bhattacharyya, Rituparna (2016b). Gender Discriminatory Attitude-An Example from the UK, *Souvenir Fourth Convention of Gauhati University Alumni Association*, retrieved 27 December 2017 from, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306379991_Gender_Discriminatory_Attitude_-_An_Example_from_the_UK
- Bhattacharyya, R. (2015). Understanding the spatialities of sexual assault against Indian women in India, *Gender, Place and Culture*, 22 (9), 1340–1356, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2014.969684>
- Bhattacharyya, R. (2013a). Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013: Will it ensure women's safety in public spaces? *Journal Space and Culture, India*, 1 (1), 13-27, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20896/saci.v1i1.11>
- Bhattacharyya, R. (2013b). *Are we empowered? Stories of young Indian working women*. Saarbrücken. Germany: Lap Lambert Academic Publishing.
- Bhattacharyya, R. (2009). *Examining the Changing Status and Role of Middle Class Assamese Women: Lessons from the Lives of University Students*, PhD thesis. Newcastle University, UK.
- Butcher, Melissa (2017). Defying Delhi's enclosures: strategies for managing a difficult city, *Journal Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 1-16, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1395823>
- [Calder-Dawe, Octavia, and Nicola Gavey \(2016\). Making sense of everyday sexism: Young people and the gendered contours of sexism, *Women's Studies International Forum*, 55, 1-9, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2015.11.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2015.11.004)
- Fostering safe workplaces: Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, *Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI)*, retrieved 12 December from, <http://ficci.in/spdocument/20672/Fostering-safe.pdf>
- Gonzalez, Sandra (2017, 27 October). Ashley Judd: Aftermath of speaking out against Weinstein has been 'moving', *CNN entertainment*, retrieved on 17 November 2017 from, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/10/26/entertainment/weinstein-ashley-judd-interview-gma/index.htmlhttps://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/oct/16/me-too-social-media-trend-highlights-sexual-harassment-of-women>



- Gonzalez, Sandra and Lisa Respers France (2017, 27 October). Rachel McAdams, Selma Blair accuse James Toback of sexual harassment, *CNN entertainment*, retrieved on 17 November 2017 from, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/10/26/entertainment/rachel-mcadams-selma-blair-james-toback-allegations/index.html>
- Gupta, Shekhar (2018, 29 January). In the age of hashtag feminism, we honoured a cop who molested a child, ruined her family, *The Print*, retrieved 31 January 2018 from, <https://theprint.in/2018/01/29/ruchika-girhotra-alive-molested-rathore/>
- Herriot, Lindsay (2015). SlutWalk: Contextualizing the movement, *Women's Studies International Forum*, 53, 22-30, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2015.08.001>
- Leach, Fiona (2006). Researching gender violence in schools: Methodological and ethical considerations, *World Development*, 34 (6), 1129-1147, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2005.11.008>
- Madan, M. & Nalla, M.K. (2016). Sexual Harassment in Public Spaces: Examining Gender Differences in Perceived Seriousness and Victimization, *International Criminal Justice Review*, 1-18, DOI: 10.1177/1057567716639093
- Mueller, Benjamin (17 December 2017). For Hotel Workers, Weinstein Allegations Put a Spotlight on Harassment, *The New York Times*, retrieved 27 December 2017 from, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/17/us/harvey-weinstein-hotel-sexual-harassment.html>
- Neupane, Gita & Meda Chesney-Lind (2014). Violence against women on public transport in Nepal: sexual harassment and the spatial expression of male privilege, *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 38(1), 23-38, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01924036.2013.794556>
- Park, Cheong Yi, Hyun Soon Park, Sun Young Lee & Seung-jun Moon (2013). Sexual harassment in Korean college classrooms: how self-construal and gender affect students' reporting behavior, *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 20 (4), 432-450, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2012.731380>
- Parikh, Aparna (2017). Politics of presence: women's safety and respectability at night in Mumbai, India, *Journal Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 1-16, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1400951>
- Payne, Adam (2017, 30 October). Theresa May under pressure to explain what she knows about nearly 40 Conservative MPs accused in sexual harassment scandal, *Business Under UK*, retrieved 30 January 2018 from, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/nearly-forty-mps-accused-in-westminster-sexual-harassment-scandal-2017-10>



Stewart, Emily (2017, 21 November). These are the industries with the most reported sexual harassment claims, *Vox*, retrieved 29 January 2018 from, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/11/21/16685942/sexual-harassment-industry-service-retail>

Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (No.14 of 2013), *The Gazette of India*, retrieved 30 January 2018 from, <http://indiacode.nic.in/acts-in-pdf/142013.pdf>

Record of Determinations- Medical Practitioners Tribunal, retrieved on 14 November 2017 from, https://www.mpts-uk.org/static/documents/content/Satish_MAHANTA_27_January_2017.pdf

S, Rukmini (2016b, 15 June). The many shades of rape cases in Delhi, *The Hindu*, retrieved on 10 July 2017 from, <http://www.thehindu.com/data/the-many-shades-of-rape-cases-in-delhi/article6261042.ece>