
WORKPLACE AND PUBLIC SPACE HARASSMENT OF WOMEN IN BANGLADESH: LEGAL CHALLENGES AND REMEDIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the widespread problem of harassment targeting women in workplaces and public areas in Bangladesh, emphasizing the legal barriers as well as remedies accessible. Though women are now more involved in education, corporate and different professions and social activities, harassment is still an immense issue that hinders them from being more active in society and the economy. Harassment may occur in form of verbal, physical, non-verbal, and hostile circumstances, which put women's safety and dignity at risk. This research used a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative interviews with victims, police officers, NGO workers and institutional officials alongside quantitative analysis to identify discrepancies between statutory frameworks and enforcement actions. Bangladesh's constitutional protections and statutory provisions, bolstered by significant judicial rulings like *BNWLA v. Government of Bangladesh* (2009), create a robust legal framework to address harassment. However, enforcement is difficult since people are unaware about it, there is a social stigma and institutional processes are inadequate and procedural delays. The results show that the law has to be revised in a significant manner. This includes clear laws against harassment and required gender-sensitivity training for police and other staff. The researchers recommend that secure reporting methods for harassment cases should be established, fast-track courts established, anti-harassment courses introduced into school curriculums, and that centralized support facilities for victims are established. These measures are designed to allow women to report harassment without reluctance, to ensure that courts handle cases promptly, and to render the workplace and public areas a bit safer for everyone. This study provides vital empirical and legal insights essential for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars committed to the advancement of women's rights and protection in Bangladesh. Therefore, confronting these difficulties is

crucial not just for gender equality but also for the nation's social advancement and sustainable development.

Keywords: Harassment, Workplace, Public space, BNWLA, High Court guidelines.

1. Introduction

It is only in recent decades that women have improved their access to education, work and social life in Bangladesh. All professions are now available to women too, for example offices, factories, banks universities and schools. They have also become more active in public spaces, such as streets, markets, public transportation systems and leisure areas. This change of posture represents a beneficial trends in society: women are no longer limited to domestic duties, but actively engaged in the country's social and economic development.¹ This progress has been dimmed by a pervasive and persistent problem: women being harassed at work or in public places. Harassment comes in all shapes and forms. It can be unwarranted comments, improper gestures, actual physical contact, stalking or violent attack.² These occurrences not only present their immediate harm with numerous difficulties. They also leave behind a persistent fear and insecurity; for many women, that fear of sexual harassment can affect everyday choices such as taking a job or not traveling alone pursuing further advance education.³ Harassment functions as a covert impediment to women's equality and societal participation.

The issue extends beyond mere individual conduct. It is fundamentally entrenched in patriarchal attitudes that condone or justify harassment, a deficiency in awareness of women's rights, and inadequate enforcement of current legislation.⁴ Despite constitutional assurances of equality and various legal safeguards in Bangladesh, the enforcement of these laws is notably constrained. Entities designated to address harassment, such as workplace grievance committees or police support units, frequently fail to operate effectively. Victims endure significant social stigma, as reporting harassment may result in victim-blaming, employment instability, or harm to their personal reputation.⁵ This study integrates legal research with field

¹ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Gender Statistics of Bangladesh 2022 (BBS 2022), <https://bbs.gov.bd/>

² Human Rights Watch, Bangladesh: Sexual Harassment in Public Spaces (HRW 2021)

³ UN Women, Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls (UN Women 2020) <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/creating-safe-public-spaces>

⁴ P Nahar, 'Patriarchal Norms and Women's Mobility in Bangladesh' (2019) Dhaka University Journal <https://www.du.ac.bd/>

⁵ Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA), Implementation of High Court Guidelines on Sexual Harassment (BNWLA 2021) <https://www.bnwla.org/>

experiences to comprehend the issue in practical terms. Interviews were conducted with five women who experienced harassment, two police officers from Dhaka and Rajshahi, two NGO workers engaged in women's rights, and a university administrator tasked with implementing anti-harassment guidelines. Their voices underscore the disparity between legislation and implementation, illustrating the persistence of harassment despite established protective measures.

This article seeks to deliver a thorough analysis of harassment against women in both workplace and public settings in Bangladesh. It commences by illustrating lived experiences to anchor the discourse in reality. It subsequently analyzes the current legal framework, encompassing constitutional safeguards, criminal statutes, and significant judicial rulings. The document examines enforcement challenges, including insufficient awareness, institutional frailty, and underreporting. Ultimately, it advocates for legal and policy reforms, encompassing a comprehensive anti-harassment statute, expedited tribunals, and centralized response centers. The study aims to enhance ongoing discussions regarding women's rights, safety, and equality in Bangladesh by integrating legal and social perspectives.

2. Forms of Harassment

Harassment against women refers to unwelcome conduct that targets women because of their gender, with the intent or effect of violating their dignity, safety, or psychological well-being. It can be verbal, non-verbal, physical, or digital, and often occurs in unequal power dynamics.

The Bangladesh High Court in *BNWLA v. Government of Bangladesh* (2009) provided a legal definition of sexual harassment against women, stating: Any unwelcome sexually determined behavior (whether directly or by implication) such as physical contact and advances, demand or request for sexual favors, sexually coloured remarks, showing pornography, and other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature.⁶

Therefore, harassment does not occur in a single way; it can take different forms, each affecting victims in unique ways. The most common manifestations include:

Quid Pro Quo Harassment – This happens when a person in a position of authority pressures or demands sexual favors in exchange for job-related benefits such as promotions, favorable

⁶ *BNWLA v. Government of Bangladesh*, 29 BLD (HCD) 415 (2009).

assignments, or even job security. It is a direct abuse of power and a clear violation of professional ethics.

Verbal Harassment – This refers to unwanted remarks of a sexual nature, inappropriate jokes, repeated propositions, or the use of offensive language. Such harassment may take place face-to-face, over the phone, or through online platforms.

Non-Verbal Harassment – This includes behaviours such as prolonged staring, suggestive gestures, whistling, or displaying sexually explicit images. These actions often create an uncomfortable and hostile environment for women.

Physical Harassment – This involves any form of unwelcome physical contact, such as touching, groping, brushing against someone intentionally, or unnecessary hugging. It crosses personal boundaries and violates the victim's sense of safety.

Hostile Work Environment – Sexual behaviour or misconduct that makes the workplace intimidating, offensive, or unwelcoming, thereby negatively affecting the victim's ability to perform their job effectively.

3. Methodology

This study used a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques, to explore harassment faced by women in workplaces and public spaces in Bangladesh. In 2025, I conducted fieldwork mainly in Dhaka and Rajshahi, and also gathered insights from Chattogram, Sylhet, Khulna, Rangpur, Barisal, and Mymensingh. Participants were chosen purposively based on their direct experiences or roles in responding to harassment, including five women who faced harassment, two police officers, two NGO representatives, and one university administrator. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, case studies, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and informal conversations. The interview schedule was pre-tested with a few participants to improve clarity. Quantitative information was analyzed using descriptive statistics, and qualitative data were examined thematically to identify patterns such as fear of reporting, social stigma, and weak institutional responses. Ethical standards were strictly followed, with informed consent, confidentiality, and careful handling of sensitive testimonies.

4. National Legal Framework and Policy Background

Bangladesh has implemented various laws and regulations designed to safeguard women from harassment in public areas and workplaces. Nevertheless, despite the existence of these legal provisions, numerous women continue to be vulnerable due to deficiencies in awareness, implementation, and enforcement. The legal provisions and guidelines for protection of women are discussed below:-

4.1 Bangladesh Constitutional

The Constitution of Bangladesh ensures equality and prohibits discrimination against all citizens. Essential provisions encompass: Article 27, which guarantees equality before the law; Article 28(2), which forbids discrimination based on sex; and Article 29(1), which assures equal opportunity in public employment⁷. These constitutional provisions establish the basis for women's rights in public and professional spheres, acting as a fundamental safeguard against harassment.

4.2 The Penal Code, 1860

The Penal Code of 1860 includes provisions that specifically pertain to harassment and assault. Section 354 criminalizes the assault or application of criminal force against a woman with the intent to violate her modesty, whereas Section 509 forbids words, gestures, or actions aimed at insulting a woman's modesty⁸. Despite inconsistent enforcement, these provisions are often applied in instances of verbal abuse, street harassment, and workplace harassment.

4.3 The Nari O Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain, 2000 (revised in 2003)

The Nari o Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain 2000 (Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000), as amended in 2003, sets out specific penalties for physical assault, stalking, and sexual harassment. Notably, Section 10 criminalizes sexual harassment and molestation, providing punishment for any form of unwelcome sexual contact or assault. Section 14 addresses abduction or kidnapping of a woman or child for purposes of sexual exploitation, forced marriage, or prostitution, while Section 15 specifically prohibits trafficking of women and children. In addition, Section 30 extends liability to attempts, abetment, and conspiracy to

⁷ Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 1972, arts 27, 28(2), 29(1).

⁸ Penal Code 1860 (Bangladesh), ss 354, 509.

commit offences under the Act.⁹ These provisions collectively strengthen protection for women against persistent harassment in both public and private settings.

4.4 The High Court Guidelines (Government of Bangladesh v. BNWLA, 2009)

In the pivotal case *Government of Bangladesh v Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA)* (2009),¹⁰ the High Court adjudicated that sexual harassment constitutes a breach of fundamental rights. The Court directed that:

- All educational institutions and workplaces are required to implement anti-harassment policies.
- Complaint committees must be instituted to address allegations.
- Awareness campaigns ought to be implemented for students, employees, and the general public.

Despite their binding nature, these directives have not been fully executed by numerous institutions.

4.5 Others Relevant Laws and Policies

Several supplementary laws and policies enhance the legal framework: the Labour Act 2006 (as amended), mandating employers to guarantee a safe working environment; the National Women Development Policy 2011, which emphasizes the prevention of harassment in public and professional spheres while promoting safe mobility for women; and the Cyber Security Ordinance, 2025 which offers protections against online harassment, including cyber stalking, threats, and abuse.

These constitutional provisions, statutory measures and judicial directives collectively establish a comprehensive framework for safeguarding women against harassment. Nonetheless, their efficacy is frequently compromised by insufficient awareness, inadequate training, and feeble enforcement mechanisms.

⁹ . Nari o Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain, 2000 (Bangladesh), ss 10, 14, 15, 30 (as amended 2003).

¹⁰Government of Bangladesh v Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA) (2009) 14 BLC 694 (HCD).

5. Findings of the Study

Code	Role / Sector	City	Themes Appearing
P01	Garment worker	Dhaka	Theme A
P02	Student	Rajshahi	Theme B
P03	Bank employee	Chattogram	Theme C
P04	Taxi driver	Dhaka	Theme B
P05	Nurse	Barishal	Theme E
P06	Hostel resident (student)	Dhaka	Theme F
P07	Street vendor	Khulna	Theme D
P08	School teacher	Sylhet	Theme C
P09	Factory worker	Gazipur	Theme A
P10	NGO intern	Dhaka	Theme G
KI1	Officer-in-Charge, Women Support Desk	Dhaka	Police
KI2	Sub-Inspector	Rajshahi	Police
KI3	NGO officer, BNWLA	Dhaka	NGO
KI4	Programme manager, BRAC	Dhaka	NGO
KI5	Registrar, University	Rangpur	Institutional view

Table1. Participants and Key Informants (Overview)

(Color- coded by theme/category).

Many women in Bangladesh still deal with harassment on a regular basis, which affects their ability to move around, go to school, and find work. To protect people's identities and make the analysis clearer, participants are given anonymous codes like P–Role City (for example, P01–Garment–Dhaka), where "P" stands for Participant 01–10. Quotations are arranged by analytical themes instead of the order in which participants were numbered. A participant may be listed under more than one theme if it makes sense. The Researcher mention the legal hooks that were used when they were needed (for example, Penal Code s.509 on words/gestures that insult modesty; s.354 on assault or criminal force with the intent to outrage modesty) to connect lived experience to doctrine.

5.1 Stories of Women (Thematic Synthesis)

Theme A: Revenge and Minimizing Institutions (in the Workplace)

When organizations don't do anything or punish people for reporting, they often send the message that they don't want people to report.

P01–Garment–Dhaka: *"My boss always said bad things about how I looked." I told HR, but*

they told me to deal with it. After that, I was given harder shifts, and my coworkers stayed away from me. It seemed like I was being punished for saying something.

P09–Factory–Gazipur: *"Supervisors touch us or make sexual jokes." When we complain, we are told to deal with it or risk losing our jobs. A lot of women have quit.*

Legal hook: The High Court Guidelines (BNWLA, 2009) on workplace committees are not being followed because internal redress mechanisms are not working. Harassment may be against Penal Code ss.354 and 509.

Theme B: Public Transportation as a Daily Risk

Women endure unwanted touching and intimidation during every day commutes, exacerbated by bystander apathy.

P02–Student–Rajshahi: *"A man kept touching me on the bus. I told him to stop, but the conductor told me to change seats. I felt small and powerless."*

P04—Taxi Driver—Dhaka: *"While I was driving, some passengers said rude things and tried to touch me. I ignored it so I wouldn't lose customers or get attacked."*

Legal hook: Act in a way that makes sense under sections 509 (words/gestures) and 354 (assault/force). The responses of transport operators show that there are weak norms for third-party intervention.

Theme C: Stigma, Risk to Career, and Not Reporting Enough (White-Collar and Education)

Fear of damage to one's reputation and career prospects deters formal complaints.

P03–Bank–Chittagong: *"A high-ranking officer came up to me. I didn't report it because I was afraid for my job and my reputation."*

P08–Teacher–Sylhet: *"Some of my coworkers always make fun of my clothes and body. When I asked them to stop, they laughed. I don't pay attention to it anymore to avoid trouble."*

Analytic note: The culture of the organization normalizes harassment and makes people less

likely to trust remedies, which goes against the anti-retaliation principles in the Guidelines.

Theme D: Vendors in public spaces and groups that prey on them

People who work on the street are more likely to be harassed and stalked by groups, and they don't get as much help from institutions.

P07–Street Vendor–Khulna: *"When selling fruit, men often say sexual things. A group once followed me home. I was too scared to tell anyone."*

Legal hook: Possible crimes under sections 509 and 354 of Penal Code; barriers include fear of things getting worse and not enough ways to report them.

Theme E: Healthcare Settings and "Inevitable" Wrongdoing

Patients' relatives and administrative minimization of harassment make people less safe and less trusting.

P05–Nurse–Barishal: *"Sometimes, patients' family members touch us or use bad language." When we complain, the administration tells us that these things "happen" and that we shouldn't do anything. "I felt like I wasn't getting any help."*

Analytic note: In sensitive service settings, the institutional duty of care and the functionality of committees seem weak.

Theme F—Campus and Hostel Safety Issues

Weak gatekeeping and poor responses to complaints put students at risk of harassment in spaces that are supposed to be safe.

P06–Hostel Resident–Dhaka: *"Sometimes men come to the hostel and say or do things." The warden told us that nothing could be done when we complained. "It's scary."*

Implication: Institutional actors do not put preventative obligations and grievance mechanisms into action.

Theme G: Vulnerability in Fieldwork and Project Pressures (NGO/Internship)

Power imbalances in community settings and managerial priorities can stifle complainants.

P10–NGO Intern–Dhaka: *"Some community leaders made moves during field visits." My boss told me to ignore it when I told them about it because it could hurt the project.*

Analytic note: Program imperatives can take precedence over safety, and a lack of clear rules makes reporting less likely.

5.2 Police Views (Insights from Key Informants)

KI-1: Officer-in-Charge of the Women Support Desk in Dhaka says,

"We get a lot of complaints over the phone, but most women back out when we ask them to file FIRs." Families put pressure on them to drop cases because court cases can take a long time and people are ashamed of them.

KI-2–SubInspector of Rajshahi's says, *"Section 509 can deal with verbal harassment, but many officers don't know how to use it properly." Police who judge victims make people less likely to report.*

Synthesis: The interaction between law enforcement and the public is affected by (i) procedural burdens (FIR threshold, case duration), (ii) insufficient training on ss.509/354 and gender-sensitive interviewing, and (iii) social stigma, all of which lead to a decrease in complaints and cases.

5.3 Views from Non-Governmental Organizations

KI-3–NGO–BNWLA: *"The High Court's 2009 guidelines are strong, but most employers don't know about them." "Many workplaces have complaint committees that only exist on paper."*

KI-4–NGO–BRAC: *"Women often have to go from the police station to the hospital and then to court without a lawyer. The process is tiring, and a lot of people give up halfway through."*

Synthesis: People who work for NGOs see two systemic gaps: (i) employers don't know about or follow the BNWLA Guidelines, and (ii) the complaint process is broken up and takes a lot of resources, which makes it harder for people to keep going and get justice.

Legal hook: These observations emphasize the need to formalize the 2009 Guidelines as laws enforceable through certain penalties. At the same time, we should set up a number of central service stations in order to assist in providing medico-legal and legal aid for people who need it.

5.4 The View of the Educational Institution

KI-5–Registrar–Rangpur University: *"We set up an anti-harassment cell after the High Court's 2009 decision. Complaints are very few; instead students worry more about facing social backlash. "*

Putting it all together: If people setting up a cell do not trust or respect one another, then the cell will not be very effective, often underused and sometimes not at all.

What this means for institutions is that (i) they should make their rules known to the public, (ii) they need a private setting for intake which follows survivor- centered protocols (iii) train the committee members (iv) publish annual reports without names; this builds trust

6. Recommendations for Preventing Harassment

6.1 Promulgate an Exhaustive Anti-Harassment Law

Bangladesh High Court's guidelines in BNWLA v. Government of Bangladesh (2009) should be codified into comprehensive law. The laws should clearly spell out imperatives for institutions, how to protect victims, what to do with offenders, and how the law will be implemented so that it is equally applied in all workplaces and public spaces.

6.2 Compulsory Gender Sensitivity Training

Police officers, employers, human resource workers, court officials, and members of institutional grievance committees should all go through training programs. To improve institutional responses, these programs need to focus on understanding how harassment works, helping victims, and using gender-sensitive interviews and investigation methods.

6.3 Confidential and Anonymous Reporting Systems

Adopt frameworks that enable victims to report harassment confidentially or with anonymity,

including online complaint portals or third-party reporting mechanisms. These mechanisms would help women feel less fearful, which would encourage more of them to come forward.

6.4 Establish Fast-Track Tribunals for Cases of Harassment

Establish special courts or tribunals with less streamlined procedures to speed up harassment cases. Faster legal processes will keep victims from losing hope because of long trials and help bring justice more quickly.

6.5 One-stop Support Centers

In major cities, set up integrated centers that offer services including police help, legal aid, counseling, and medical care all in one place. These facilities would give victims complete, easy-to-get care and avoid fragmentation of services.

6.6 Integrating Curriculum to Stop Harassment in Educational Institutions

Young people learn from school and college how to respect people, how to treat others fairly regardless of their gender, and how not to sexually harass anyone. Education can change people's thinking and reduce the chance of harassment by undermining these standards derived from the patriarchy.

6.7 Campaigns to Raise Public Awareness

It is imperative that government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and civil society organizations make an effort—which can only be accomplished by persistent campaigns—to inform women about their rights, legal recourse options, and available forms of assistance. Increased knowledge enhances the likelihood of reporting harassment or compelling the perpetrators accountable to assume responsibility.

6.8 Institutional Accountability and Transparency

For the sake of credibility, schools, workplaces, and societal organizations must establish effective complaint committees that keep their victims' names private; deny any possibility of reprisals to victims or their colleagues; and report, annually, how many complaints it has received.

6.9 Initiatives for Social and Cultural Change

Encourage community discussions and activities involved in opposing traditional patriarchal norms which grant immunity or endure sexual harassment. It is possible that men who are active in these areas will treat women more respectfully with their benefits rising accordingly. This article makes recommendations based on real-life situations, court cases, expert interviews and legal research. These initiatives will fill the gaps of law enforcement, increase reporting, and make Bangladesh's public spaces and workplaces safer for women.

7. Conclusion

The research has shown that harassment of women is not simply a matter of beginning in the street and ending at home; rather, it follows an individual's entire course life. Despite constitutional guarantees, legal provisions, and landmark court decisions, women still suffer verbal, physical, and emotional abuse on a daily basis. The personal stories illustrate how the plight of many is silenced through job pressures, the fear being associated with unemployment and lack staff support within institutions. As the accounts of victims reveal, the side-effects of lousy working conditions- fear of job loss, social stigma, no adequate institutional backing- are silencing some people's voices. Meanwhile, law enforcement agencies, NGO representatives, and bureaucrats mention hesitantly that it's not so much that there isn't enough legislation in place as it is being tough about enforcement and raising levels of awareness among men. The judicial precedents, especially the BNWLA case of 2009, have laid some important guidelines by acknowledging sexual harassment as a violation of fundamental rights. However, without further vigorous enforcement, effective contact points for complaints and a change in mindset these regulatory provisions are likely to lie down on the job. Measures to be taken include a comprehensive anti-sexual harassment law, sex-sensitive training for officials, quick tribunals, and one-stop support facilities. In conclusion, addressing harassment involves more than just reform. Government agencies, employers, schools, NGOs, the police, and local communities should work together to create an environment in which women can move about freely and work without fear. Then Bangladesh will truly live up to its constitutionally enshrined guarantee of equal rights, human dignity and social justice for all.