

COMMENT

The power of numbers



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Collecting data about sexual violence is a crucial step towards breaking the culture of silence

Time magazine dedicated its person of the year (2017) cover to women who broke the silence surrounding the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and violence, especially in the workplace. It took a string of allegations by women with public images they could leverage and were willing to put at stake, to give heightened visibility to the widespread nature of violence against women by men in prominent positions.

The #MeToo movement

If the emergence of the #MeToo movement, inspired by these public allegations, has revealed anything, it is the power of numbers. The subsequent solidarity around experiences of sexual violence, globally, has taken root in India too. However, given the genesis of the movement, we must ask ourselves: Is it not disconcerting that building this

We live in a world awash in statistics. We know what proportion of India's population owns mobile phones and what proportion is overweight. We even know how many people defecate in the open. Yet when it comes to our knowledge about how many women experience sexual harassment and violence, we are at a loss. If we don't know the contours of violence, how can we address it?

It is easy, however, to say we need data on sexual harassment, but data collection in this area is extremely challenging. It is difficult to define sexual harassment; it is even more difficult to collect information about painful and stigmatising experiences. Results from India's National Family Health Survey (NFHS) – IV provide testament to this challenge. NFHS asked questions about women's experiences of sexual violence. About 5.5% of the women surveyed say they have experienced sexual violence; over 80% of these instances of violence are perpetrated by husbands.

These results direct our attention to the home as the primary site for violence, away from public spaces and workplaces. This, no doubt, is misleading and largely reflects problems in survey design and execution. To paraphrase Ludwig Wittgenstein, an entire mythology is stored within our statistics or lack thereof.

Importance of phraseology

Let us look at what and how NFHS asks about sexual violence. The phraseology of NFHS-IV is: "Has anyone ever forced you in any way to have sexual intercourse or perform any other sexual acts when you did not want to?" It then goes on to ask the identity of the perpetrator. Unsurprisingly, this bald question, most likely asked in semi-public settings, in the absence of lead-up and sensitivity, elicits largely negative responses. It, moreover, asks about non-consensual sexual acts; it does not account for sexual coercion tactics of the kind instigated by Harvey Weinstein. Such acts are forbidden under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition And Redressal) Act, 2013 which defines harassment as unwelcome physical advances, remarks and demands for sexual favours. The kinds of experiences examined by NFHS form only a part of this definition.

There is also an important difference between reporting coercive overtures and 'successful' coercion since the latter brands and often stigmatises survivors of sexual misconduct. Some suggest, for instance, that it might have been easier for Angelina Jolie to come forward about Weinstein's attempted coercion because she did not have to confess to actual violation. But distinctions of this kind are sensitive to definitions, question wording and settings in which interviews take place.

We see, for instance, that men and women differ in their perceptions about the prevalence of sexual harassment. When the India Human Development Survey (IHDS), organised by the University of Maryland and the National Council of Applied Economic Research, asked men and women in over 40,000 households about how often young women in their neighbourhoods were harassed, 20% of women and 14% of men said this occurred 'at least sometimes' in 2005. In 2012, when the same households were interviewed again, 31% of women and 21% of men reported that harassment was prevalent in the same neighbourhoods. This suggests that women are far more likely to feel harassment is pervasive in their neighbourhoods than men; moreover, for both men and women, perceptions of sexual harassment increased by almost 10 percentage points between 2005 and 2012 in the same neighbourhoods.

Lok surveys, designed by the Lok Foundation and administered by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy Pvt. Ltd. (CMIE), go one step further and ask women about their actual experiences of sexual harassment to nearly 78,000 women. When asked, how often have you experienced unwanted groping/touching by men, nearly 10% said often and an additional 7.5% said very often.

Since we fully expect personal experiences of this nature to be underreported, over 17% women claiming they experience unwanted groping often or very often is striking. Of the 15.67% of women who reported experiencing groping/touching only 'rarely,' a fair number might have been under-reporting. Even more disturbing is the acceptance of sexual harassment. When both men and women were asked whether "women should tolerate eve-teasing as a normal part of life" only about 50% disagreed with this statement; others either agreed to some extent or had no opinion. Notably, of those who disagreed, 17.5% disagreed only 'somewhat.'

These experiences have an insidious effect on women's lives and ability to participate in educational, work and/or social activities. IDFC Institutes' survey of over 20,000 households in four cities asked households when they start worrying about the safety of men and women within their families who may be outside the home and unaccompanied. In Delhi, the city where perhaps fear is most prevalent, almost no household worries that a male member is outside at 7 p.m., but about 20% of the households start worrying about a female member. By 9 p.m., the proportion of households worrying increases to 40% for men and a whopping 90% for women.

What do we find missing in these statistics? There is no mention of sexual harassment and violence against women in the workplace. To the best of our knowledge, there is minimal data on workplace harassment in India. Here, silence speaks louder than statistics. The challenges associated with collecting data on sexual harassment are multiple. Not only must we find the right words to ask about these difficult experiences; we must find privacy and safety and guard against further stigmatising survivors of sexual harassment and violence. Data must be collected and interpreted with sensitivity in order to do justice to the struggles women encounter in the face of gendered and sexual violence. However, collecting and disseminating data about sexual violence is the first step towards breaking the culture of silence and finding ways of combating violence against women.

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