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Sexual harassment complaints at India Inc rise by 79% in last 5 years

The POSH policy requires companies to disclose the number of sexual harassment complaints filed and resolved during a given year.



Abhishek Sahu, • ETHRWorld

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Complaints alleging sexual harassment in the workplace have increased significantly, rising by 79 percent in India's top 10 private companies by



In FY24, information technology (IT) bellwethers reported one of the highest numbers of complaints as well as pending cases, with TCS registering 110 complaints, of which 17 were pending.

market capitalisation over the last five years (FY20-FY24), according to an analysis of annual reports by ETHRWorld.

India Inc registered 281 complaints in FY20, which almost doubled to 503 in FY24, with ICICI Bank and Tata Consultancy Services

(TCS) leading the chart with the highest number of complaints in terms of absolute numbers in FY24, at 133 and 110, respectively.

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However, it is important to note that complaints of sexual harassment do not necessarily equate to cases being substantiated. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013, or POSH, was introduced to ensure a safe and respectful work environment for women. The policy makes it mandatory for organisations to take steps to prevent sexual harassment and address complaints appropriately if they arise.

The law also requires companies with 10 or more employees to form an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) to address complaints of sexual harassment confidentially and fairly. Additionally, the POSH policy mandates that companies disclose the number of sexual harassment complaints filed and resolved during a given year.

While FY20 saw 6 percent of pending cases being resolved among the overall complaints registered, this number rose to almost 11 percent in FY24.

Rising complaints

In FY24, information technology (IT) bellwethers reported one of the highest numbers of complaints as well as pending cases, with TCS registering 110 complaints, of which 17 were pending. This was followed by HCL Technologies with 87 complaints and 11 pending cases, and Infosys with 64 complaints and 13 pending cases.

It is worth noting that HCL also reported the highest increase of 866 percent in the number of complaints registered, from 9 in FY20 to 87 in FY24.

Sexual Harassment Complaints on Rise | 79% since FY20

COMPANY	FY20			FY21			FY22			FY23			FY24			%
	C	R	P	C	R	P	C	R	P	C	R	P	C	R	P	
RELIANCE INDUSTRIES	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	NIL
TCS	86	77	9	27	19	8	36	20	16	49	41	8	110	93	17	28%
HDFC BANK	52	48	4	47	35	12	51	48	3	68	61	7	77	65	12	48%
BHARTI AIRTEL	10	9	1	10	3	7	9	9	0	17	17	0	17	17	0	70%
ICICI BANK	52	52	0	33	33	0	46	46	0	43	43	0	133	133	0	155%
INFOSYS	60	59	1	16	15	1	11	11	0	31	NA	NA	64	51	13	6%
ITC	9	6	3	2	1	1	2	2	0	1	1	0	5	5	0	-44%
HUL	3	3	0	5	5	0	2	2	0	7	5	2	7	7	0	133%
LARSEN & TOUBRO	0	0	0	3	3	0	2	2	0	2	2	0	3	1	2	+3
HCL TECHNOLOGIES	9	9	0	11	10	1	23	21	2	55	39	16	87	76	11	866%
TOTAL	281	263	18	154	124	30	182	161	21	273	209	33	503	448	55	79%

Source: Annual Reports

Note: (C) Complaints; (R) Resolved; (P) Pending | Includes complaints reported under the POSH Act, 2013

Banking giants also registered a majority of the cases in FY24, with ICICI Bank reporting 133 complaints – all of which were resolved. However, the number of complaints represented a 155 percent increase from 52 in FY20.

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“In addition to our policy and framework for dealing with sexual harassment complaints, we have a strong culture where our employees are encouraged to report all incidents fearlessly, no matter how minor they may appear,” an ICICI Bank spokesperson told ETHRWorld, adding

that 59 complaints were substantiated out of the 133 cases reported in FY24.

Similarly, HDFC Bank saw 77 complaints, of which 12 remain pending. The bank also reported a 48 percent increase in complaints since FY20.

"The Bank continues to invest in efforts to maintain a workplace that is safe, supportive, and conducive for all. We were, and are, determined to enhance our gender diversity, which has resulted in a 250 percent increase over the last four years. While the number of cases reported under POSH shows an increase in absolute terms on a year-on-year basis, the percentage of cases in relation to the total female population in the Bank shows a decrease compared to the previous year....These numbers are a testament to the trust that our women colleagues have placed in the system to tackle and address such issues," an HDFC Bank spokesperson said.

Silver lining

The increasing number of complaints can be attributed to growing awareness, which some companies claim. For instance, TCS attributed a 28 percent jump in complaints in FY24 to this factor.

In terms of resolution, 93.5 percent of all cases were resolved in FY20. This number remained consistent across the years with slight fluctuations: 80 percent in FY21, 88 percent in FY22, 76 percent in FY23 (excluding Infosys' numbers), and 89 percent in FY24.

Furthermore, various companies such as Bharti Airtel, ICICI Bank, ITC, and L&T did not report any pending cases in most of the years.

Among IT majors, Infosys reported the lowest growth in the number of

complaints registered, with just a 6 percent increase between FY20 and FY24.

“Our numbers are lower than those reported pre-pandemic. While across industries, the number of POSH cases significantly decreased during the pandemic, they gradually rose with the resumption of hybrid work. At Infosys, we conduct continuous awareness and education sessions on POSH, which help us maintain our focus on creating a positive and safe work environment for our people,” said an Infosys spokesperson.

Although HUL saw a 133 percent increase in complaints since FY20, the absolute numbers remain very low – from just 3 in FY20 to 7 in FY24.

“Hindustan Unilever has over 20,000 employees. We reported 3 cases for FY 2019-2020 and 7 cases for FY 2023-2024. This reflects the positive strides we have made in fostering a culture of trust and transparency within our organisation. To address and prevent sexual harassment, we have a zero-tolerance policy aligned with local laws and global best practices, inclusive training and awareness programmes, multiple confidential reporting channels, robust Internal Committees for handling complaints, and ensure strong leadership commitment to a respectful workplace,” said an HUL spokesperson.

Smita Bharti, Executive Director of Sakshi, a rights-based NGO, said that workplace sexual harassment has always existed, but the increase in cases being reported is a step forward.

However, she added that the POSH Act should be viewed primarily as a preventive mechanism rather than solely a tool for redress. “Shifting the focus to prevention ensures a proactive approach, with robust compliance driving organisational cultural change. Regular training, awareness programmes, strong internal systems, and skilled, informed

internal/local committees can prevent workplace sexual harassment," she added.

On the other hand, Harpreet Singh Saluja, President of Pune-based IT union Nascent Information Technology Employees Senate (NITES), said the rising number of complaints of sexual harassment is a double-edged sword.

"On one hand, it reflects that more employees are becoming aware of their rights and are now confident enough to raise their voices against inappropriate behavior. This is a positive shift as it shows that the taboo around reporting such incidents is gradually breaking. On the other hand, it also points to the fact that workplace environments still have significant gaps when it comes to ensuring the safety and dignity of employees, especially women. It's crucial for IT companies to view these complaints as an opportunity to strengthen their policies and foster a culture of zero tolerance towards harassment," he added.

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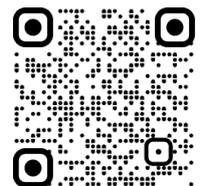
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