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## **CORPORATE TRENDS**

### **Women reporting sexual harassment branded troublemakers, face job problems**



Reema Sood (name changed) is being haunted by a complaint of sexual harassment that she had filed against her supervisor for taking her pictures surreptitiously. Sood, a manager at an IT services company when she was harassed, is branded a troublemaker. Companies she approaches now for employment reject her when a background check reveals her past sexual harassment complaint.

Shikha Verma (name changed), a CA and a former employee in one of big four accounting firms, who is fighting a sexual harassment case against two senior colleagues at the firm, never hears back from head hunters. "You have a case, why don't you first bring it to a close, they tell me," she says. "I wish someone had counselled me before I got embroiled in the case. I may not have taken it up had I known the repercussions." Her former senior male colleagues against whom criminal cases are pending have found gainful employment, she adds. A spokesperson from the company refused to comment saying the case was sub judice.

A new law on prevention of Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace, enacted this April, is beginning to help curb such harassment. Still, many women who have been bold enough to come out and file charges are branded as "high risk" by majority of employers.

#### **'Shadow on Career'**

"Companies are extremely uncomfortable with women who have filed sexual harassment complaints," says Saundarya Rajesh, Founder-President, AVTAR Career Creators and FLEXI Careers India. "It definitely casts a shadow on their career." Though a large number of women suffer such harassment, a small minority have wrongfully used it to their advantage creating suspicion in the minds of organisations, she adds. Companies try to sort out harassment complaints internally, but when a woman goes to court, her future employment prospects turn bleak.

"Such people definitely stand disadvantaged in finding a job. They are put under a lot more scrutiny and companies are usually cagey about them," says Jyorden T Misra, founder and managing director of executive search firm Spearhead InterSearch. No employer will reject a woman candidate citing this reason, but will disqualify her on other grounds.

Poonam Barua, founder Chairman, Forum for Women in Leadership (WILL Forum), witnessed the proceedings of a sexual harassment case as an independent member on the committee of a large Indian manufacturing company. A senior woman executive

had alleged harassment by her CEO. "The case was closed even before all the hearings were completed. Just about everyone on the committee was in favour of clearing the CEO. The woman was hardly given a chance to make her case or keep her job," Barua recalls. When another vice-president in a large MNC hospitality firm was harassed by her chief operating officer, a senior mentor advised her that raising the issue would damage her career. She was advised to handle the issue smartly rather than run the risk of losing her current job and future employability.

"They (women who have filed harassment charges) are subtly rejected by companies without going into any further scrutiny," says Kamal Karanth, MD of Kelly Services India.

*(Some names have been changed)*