1. Introduction

Sexual harassment is not a new phenomenon and neither is it specific to any culture, country or society. Conduct which constitutes sexual harassment exists and has existed for as long as anyone can remember. However, even though harassing behaviour which has sexual connotations attached to it has been prevalent throughout the ages, the term ‘sexual harassment’ to describe such behaviour was coined in the West in the late 1970s. In Bangladesh, the knowledge of such type of behaviour being illegal and the need to deal with it in reality as being socially unacceptable have only very recently been acknowledged though several laws do exist that deal with offences akin to sexual harassment.

The fact that incidents of harassment occur in the workplace, as well as outside and inside the home, is beginning to be admitted in Bangladesh. However what it connotes is still unclear and what sort of behaviour is unacceptable and thereby will fall within the purview of harassment continues to create confusion. Some consider only violent sexual behaviour like rape to constitute harassment, and anything less to be harmless. The confusion as to what sexual harassment is exists not only amongst the general people but also victims and perpetrators.

2. Harassment of Professional Women

In the last several years, the debate and research on issues of sexual harassment have been confined mainly to working women or women engaged in low paid labour such as garment workers. These women are
victims not only of sexual harassment but also of social stigmatization. Women working in factories or the construction business, as day labourers and so forth continue to be looked down upon, or elicit disapproval, or endure what they themselves term as ‘social harassment’. This in turn encourages sexual and other forms of harassment. Many studies have indicated that while harassment within the factory space has decreased, outside dangers for working women continue to escalate and take on new dimensions.

The culture of political hooliganism and the direct or indirect patronization of anti-social elements by major political parties add a sinister and dangerous dimension to the concept of sexual harassment. The sexual harassment of garment workers and domestic servants and its various dimensions has so far been quite well documented, or at least has been talked about.

As a result of this, one may assume that women who are professionals or those who occupy higher levels of employment do not face harassment. The word ‘professional’, for the purpose of this paper, is defined as pertaining to a profession or engaged in a profession or employment which is not manual or mechanical, and which requires some degree of learning or education. The term ‘working women’ is used to refer to those who are employed in lower paid jobs or, as the dictionary defines, as those engaged or employed in more manual and mechanical labour.

The question is whether professional women who are economically better off, have higher standards of living, better jobs, and who do not have to face many of the acute deprivations which poorer women in lower paid jobs have to, are immune from being sexually harassed. It is true that the majority of such women do not have to contend with many of the practical problems which poorer women have to contend with as regards travelling, housing and so forth. But can it, in all cases, be equated with protection from harassment?

Undeniably women who occupy the most vulnerable and powerless positions, such as young garment workers and domestic servants, bear the brunt of harassment at almost every stage of their daily lives. However, I believe that even professional women face problems regarding how men

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1 Huda, Shahnaz (2001), Study on Sexual Harassment in Bangladesh, working paper for the ILO (unpublished), Dhaka at p.15.