

# Encourage, Support and Act: Bystander Intervention, A Solution to Combat Sexual Harassment

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## ABSTRACT

As the #MeToo Movement has propelled the problem of sexual harassment and assault to the media headlines, bystander intervention prevention strategies are often cited as a solution to addressing these problems. Sometimes called a “community of responsibility” approach, bystander intervention strategies create awareness regarding our active role in creating a safe and respectful environment by shifting community norms and behavior expectations. This research paper has outlined the potential application of new and creative bystander approaches to address sexual harassment in the workplace. The paper has demonstrated the potential for bystander approaches to make a real difference in preventing and addressing sexual harassment as costly and damaging workplace harm. The research paper has analysed the important role to be played by a bystander and intervention strategies to be adopted for combating sexual harassment in workplaces.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ① Bystander intervention prevention strategy is a solution to the issue of sexual harassment.
- ② It contributes towards creating awareness on sexual harassment.
- ③ It adopts innovative strategies to be an active bystander.

**Keywords:** Bystander intervention, community of responsibility approach, sexual harassment

Workplace sexual harassment is a persistent and pervasive problem not only in India but also elsewhere in the world, demanding new and creative responses (Burn, 2009; Koelsch, Brown, and Boisen, 2012). Many statutes around the world describe sexual harassment as conduct of a sexual nature that is unwanted or unwelcome and which has the purpose or effect of being intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive (Anderson and Whiston, 2005; Katz and Moore, 2013). Sexual harassment includes such unwelcome sexually determined behaviour as physical contact and advances, sexually coloured remarks,

showing pornography and sexual demand, whether by words or actions (Kaithwas, 2017). Such conduct can be humiliating and may constitute a health and safety problem; it is discriminatory when the employer has reasonable grounds to believe that objection would disadvantage in connection with employment, including recruitment or promotion, or when it creates a hostile working environment (DeGue *et al.* 2014).

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One promising area which may inform prevention and response strategies is bystander approaches.

In broad terms, bystander approaches focus on the ways in which individuals who are not the targets of the conduct can intervene in violence, harassment or other anti-social behaviour in order to prevent and reduce harm to others (Potter, 2016). The idea behind bystander intervention is simple: many of these harms or the precursors to them occur in the presence of other people, and these witnessing individuals thus have the ability to disrupt or mitigate these harms (Banyard, Moynihan, Plante 2007). Bystander intervention is the act of feeling empowered and equipped with the knowledge and skills to effectively assist in the prevention of sexual violence. Bystander intervention doesn't have to jeopardize the safety of the bystander (Black 2017; Merrow 2017). Bystander intervention and "bystander education programs teach potential witnesses safe and positive ways that they can act to prevent or intervene when there is a risk for sexual violence (Banyard *et al.* 2018). Bystander intervention is when someone makes an attempt to help the person who is being harassed. This can range from confronting the harasser right there to consoling the victim and reassuring that what happened is not their fault (Campbell, 2008). This approach gives community members specific roles that they can use in preventing sexual violence, including naming and stopping situations that could lead to sexual violence before it happens, stepping in during an incident, and speaking out against ideas and behaviours that support sexual violence (Moynihan *et al.* 2015; Coker *et al.* 2011; Katz, 1995).

### **The objective of the paper**

The research paper has intended to analyse the existing literature on bystander intervention strategy to extend awareness regarding the program.

### **Who is a bystander?**

A bystander is a person who is present when an event takes place but isn't directly involved. Bystanders might be present when sexual assault or abuse occurs—or they could witness the circumstances that led up to these crimes (Basile *et al.* 2016). An engaged bystander

is someone who lives up to that responsibility by intervening before, during, or after a situation when they see or hear behaviours that threaten, harass, or otherwise encourage sexual violence (Ozaki, 2017). It may not be safe or effective to directly confront the harasser in every case, but there is a range of ways bystanders can be involved before, during, or after a situation when they see or hear behaviours that promote sexual violence (Espelage and Swearer, 2003). Bystanders are "individuals who observe violence or witness the conditions that perpetuate violence. They are not directly involved but have the choice to intervene, speak up, or do something about it." "They are someone who is present and thus potentially in a position to discourage, prevent, or interrupt an incident." They are people who have witnessed sexual harassment first-hand or got to know about it from the victim or someone who witnessed it (Espelage, Low, Polanin, and Brown, 2013; Olweus and Limber, 2010). This can be anyone who has not taken any action to prevent it (passive bystander) or someone who has intervened to either prevent it or reduce the harm (active bystander). "Someone who sees a situation but may or may not know what to do may think others will act or may be afraid to do something. "It is important to note that when sexual assault prevention educators talk about bystanders, they typically mean people who know each other, such as friends, classmates, colleagues, or members of sports teams (Olweus, Limber, and Breivik, 2019). The dynamics of bystander behaviour – and the impediments to action – are very different when people know the perpetrator or victim, versus when they are strangers."

### **Why bystander is necessary?**

The #MeToo movement has brought forth thousands of powerful stories illustrating the serious and widespread impact of sexual harassment and abuse (Banyard, Plante and Moynihan, 2004). The wave of stories and research has made clear that sexual violence is not limited to just a few abusers, industries, or populations of victims (Ricardo, Eads and Barker, 2011). Preventing sexual harassment is everybody's responsibility. The behaviours that make up sexual violence exist on a spectrum. While

some behaviours – such as sexist jokes, inappropriate sexual comments, innuendos, catcalling, or vulgar gestures – aren't illegal, this does not make them any less threatening or harmful to the person experiencing them (DeGue *et al.* 2014; Jouriles *et al.* 2018). These situations also take place across a range of locations and settings – often in public spaces, workplaces, schools, communities, and online. Bystander approaches may be useful in extending efforts to eradicate workplace sexual harassment and in the process, to raise awareness of the problem and change a culture of tolerance towards sexual harassment in organisational settings (Bronferbrenner 1977; Dahlberg and Krug 2002; Potter 2016). A focus on bystander interventions in workplace sexual harassment is important because targets of sexual harassment, despite significant negative consequences, often respond passively to the conduct – for example, by avoiding the harasser, minimising the behaviours or denying it altogether (Lisak and Miller, 2002; Lisak, 2011). This may be because although targets want the behaviour to end, they must balance this objective with avoiding reprisals by the harasser and maintaining their status and reputation in the work environment (Edwards *et al.* 2000). Research suggests that substantial proportions of employees, even a majority, directly or indirectly witness sexual harassment at work. In one Indian study, more than 70 per cent of women reported observing the sexual harassment of other women in their work environments (Gordon and Grubin, 2004). Furthermore, in this survey, nearly one in four respondents who had experienced sexual harassment had also witnessed sexual harassment. Employees are also frequently aware of who among their male co-workers harasses female employees and know when a harassment complaint has been made and is being investigated (Cohen and Felson, 1979). Another finding from the Commission's prevalence survey suggested that sexual harassment may cluster in certain workplaces, with around 70 per cent of those who stated they had experienced sexual harassment also reporting that it occurred 'commonly' or 'sometimes' in their workplace (Darley and Latané, 1968). It is uncertain whether the co-occurrence was more related to a single perpetrator who harassed multiple targets, or alternatively, whether sexual harassment was perpetrated by multiple

harassers in the same workplace (Hester and Lilley, 2014). The 'clustering' of sexual harassment in particular workplaces warrants further research attention, especially as it may offer a crucial vantage point from which to examine bystander approaches (Burn, 2009; Rigby & Johnson, 2005). However, difficulty in deciding how to react to the situation in facing the target of unwanted behaviour, feeling of embarrassment, fear of blame, societal allegation on personal character, centre of gossip, family's respect, financial insecurity, lack of confidence, considering harassment as a normal behaviour in society, lack of evidences against the perpetrator etc. are some of the strong reasons that stand in front of a victim of sexual harassment to complain or even to share with others about the incidence.

Bystander-Focused Prevention of Sexual Violence Research on the causes of sexual violence and evaluation of prevention efforts indicates that bystanders (also referred to as witnesses, defenders, or upstanders) are a key piece of prevention work (Powell, 2011). Research shows that bystander intervention can be an effective way of stopping sexual assault before it happens, as bystanders play a key role in preventing, discouraging, and/or intervening when an act of violence has the potential to occur.

### Components of bystander intervention

- ❖ Awareness. A key first step is to heighten awareness so individuals and groups are better able to identify instances of sexual violence.
- ❖ Sense of Responsibility. A sense of responsibility gives the bystander motivation to step in and take action. Bystanders are much more likely to help friends than strangers, and are more likely to help strangers if they see them as part of a group they identify with (like supporting the same sports team).
- ❖ Perceptions of norms. Perceptions of peer norms about helping (whether you think your friends are likely to help), and perceptions of authorities' (like teachers') attitudes are related to bystander attitudes. People often mistakenly think others are less supportive of doing something to address sexual violence than they actually are. Studies show

links between perceptions of helping, trust, and commitment among community members; trust in campus authorities; and their willingness to take action as a bystander.

- ❖ Weighing pros and cons. People weigh the costs and benefits of getting involved in a risky situation. These include threats to their own safety, negative consequences for their relationships with others, and the potential to change the outcome of a risky situation or to help a victim.
- ❖ Confidence. People who feel more confident in their ability to help are more likely to take action
- ❖ Building Skills. People need to know what to do and how to do it. Population survey data shows that many people are at a loss for specific ways to help.
- ❖ Survivors find that friends and family do not always do things that are useful or supportive, and these negative or unhelpful responses make coping with and recovering from abuse much harder.
- ❖ Some of the promise of bystander intervention training is that it can give motivated community members skills to intervene in ways that protect their own safety and are truly supportive to victims.
- ❖ Bystanders also need safety nets for themselves – resources they can call upon and community policies that support intervention.

### **Intervention strategies to be adopted by a bystander**

Below are some intervention tips and strategies:

#### **(a) Distract**

This is a great way to stop a person from engaging in inappropriate behaviour. Examples of this include spilling a drink to create a distraction, walking up to the victim and saying that you need to speak with them for a minute before removing the victim from the situation, and changing the topic of the conversation.

#### **(b) Find Help**

Sometimes incidents are not something that a bystander can respond to alone. Many bystanders benefit by finding someone that can help out in a particular circumstance.

For example, inappropriate behaviour may be occurring in a company email, text chain, or Slack channel. A supervisor may be able to intercede right away without the need for a bystander to intervene on their own.

#### **(c) Be Direct**

Walk up and directly ask the person to stop the behavior. Ending a situation by direct engagement can be done through a variety of phrases such as “I don’t find that funny. Tell me why that is funny to you.” Other phrases may include “That crossed the line” or “that is not appropriate.” This approach works best when the bystander can reference recent training that has been done.

#### **(d) Follow-up**

If a bystander cannot help immediately, then they should follow up with the perceived victim after the incident to see whether they need any help. The bystander should also report any incidents of sexual harassment in accordance with the company’s procedures.

### **Perspectives of bystanders in confronting sexual harassment**

Studies suggest that a person who got to know about a harassment in his/her workplace experiences traumatic emotions similar to the ones experienced by the target (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). This is called “bystander stress”. However, another common phenomenon we all know about is the bystander effect. It is people’s tendencies to follow the cues of others when in a group. When a person sees no one reacting to a harassing behaviour, they tend to remain silent. This is generally because they may feel that they are the only ones feeling uncomfortable about the situation and they do not want to create a scene (Morrison, Hardison, Mathew, & O’Neil, 2004). These contradicting concepts of bystander stress and bystander effect show that people would like to intervene and stop a harasser, but it is the perceived peer pressure that acts as an obstacle. Not just that, even if someone is ready to step in, they don’t know when to and how to (Lonsway *et al.* 2009; Gidycz, Rich, & Marioni, 2002). Bystanders face many of the same obstacles to

reporting incidents and intervening in them as victims of harassment. Bystanders also face the psychological barrier that someone else will act to correct the problem and that the issue is not affecting them, so it is not their problem (Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004; Morrison *et al.* 2004; Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007). These are some of the reasons why the bystander effect, where multiple people witness an emergency or wrongful situation but do not act, is such a widespread phenomenon (Stueve *et al.* 2006). In fact, in many circumstances the more people that witness or are aware of inappropriate behaviour, the less likely it is that any individual will act to help the victim. There is a growing recognition that even observing or hearing about the sexual harassment of co-workers can foster bystander stress and other negative outcomes that parallel those experienced by the direct targets of harassment (Katz, Heisterkamp, & Fleming, 2011). Such outcomes include reduced health satisfaction, team conflict, declines in financial performance, occupational stress and job withdrawal. Studies of both sexual harassment and racial harassment reveal that employees who are victims of direct harassment and who are also aware of their co-workers' harassment, suffer the equivalent of a 'double whammy', with negative occupational, psychological and health-related outcomes over and above the effects of their personal experiences (Banyard, 2011; Katz, Heisterkamp, & Fleming, 2011). It is important to note that observing or even perceiving men's mistreatment of women affects not only targets themselves and other women, but also men. The self-interest perspective suggests that men may show declines in well-being because they are afraid of being personally blamed or concerned that they will be perceived as offensive or harassing (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 2000; Reyes, Foshee, Niolon, Reidy, & Hall, 2016). The genuine concern view suggests that men may feel empathy or compassion when they observe or hear about the mistreatment of a close female colleague. This would be consistent with a more general explanation of bystander stress which suggests that hearing about negative events provokes distress through an 'other-oriented' emotional response, diffusing among individuals occupying the same environment, harassment, pin-ups and sex discrimination and ensured that programs

on sexism and sexual harassment were run (Banyard, 2011; Edwards, 2012). Recently, thousands of schools, college campuses, military bases, workplaces, and other institutions have implemented bystander intervention training programs. These programs are meant to address and prevent social harms like bullying, sexual misconduct, and harassment. They typically take the form of a workshop or series of workshops that teach participants techniques and strategies they can employ if they witness harms occurring, sense that harms are becoming at risk of occurring, or are later told about such harms (Berkowitz, 2010).

### **Steps of Bystander Intervention**

Bystander intervention can be broken down into five steps:

#### **1. Notice**

What is happening that may require we to intervene? Is an employee inappropriately touching another employee? Is someone being bullied or harassed based on their sex? Is someone telling an inappropriate joke?

#### **2. Identify the Problem**

What is the inappropriate behaviour? If an employee is asking another employee out (and not for the umpteenth time), then it may not be a problem. Employees should try to notice social cues. What are the people doing in the situation? Does anyone appear uncomfortable?

#### **3. Assume Responsibility**

Acting and taking a stand is uncomfortable but necessary. The only way to change in the workplace and improve the culture is for everyone to assume responsibility for making the workplace better.

#### **4. Determine the Appropriate Action**

Reviewing the situation and determining how to help is most important implementational step as in intervention. Sometimes the individuals separate before you are able to intervene. Bystanders may need to speak with the perceived victim to lend support or say that what happened was not right.

## 5. Act

There are a number of different ways that people can react to resolve the problems presented. Some of the best ways that employees can call out inappropriate behaviour is through the following actions. The right action depends on the circumstances.

### **Favourable results in adopting bystander intervention strategy**

Bystander intervention has been shown to be an effective and important prevention strategy to decrease rape myths, increase pro-social bystander behaviour and increase self-efficacy. Bystander intervention approaches seek to address the “bystander effect” phenomenon by demonstrating how bystanders can be effective in the primary prevention of interpersonal violence (Edwards *et al.* 2019). Bystander intervention gives responsibility to all members of a community to help ensure the safety of all members within that community. The goal of bystander intervention is to change passive bystanders into active bystanders who feel confident in their ability to “discourage, prevent, or interrupt” a sexual violence incident (Coker *et al.* 2017). Bystander intervention helps grant people the self-efficacy to stand up and speak up when a person is being harassed, or to support a family member when confronting an abusive relative. end sexual violence in comparison to the control group. Bystander intervention approaches help people recognize healthy and unhealthy behaviours that could potentially lead to sexual violence and how they could effectively intervene before the negative behaviour escalates. Bystander intervention can play a significant role in a comprehensive approach to sexual violence prevention (Basile *et al.* 2016; Niolon *et al.* 2017). It discourages victim-blaming and makes sexual violence a community problem, rather than an individual problem. This intervention can play a significant role in a comprehensive approach to sexual violence prevention. The intervention plays a role in helping to change social and community norms.

### **Theoretical models-based Bystander intervention**

Bystanders are more likely to “engage in pro-social behaviour” when they are aware that there is a problem

and they see themselves as a responsible party in solving the problem. This theory is demonstrated by the situational model, developed by Latane and Darley (1970), which is the most commonly used bystander intervention model. The model outlines the following five steps: (1) Recognize signs that an act of sexual violence may occur or is occurring. (2) Identify that the potential victim is at risk and that intervention is appropriate. (3) Decide whether or not to take responsibility to intervene. (4) Decide the most appropriate and safest way to intervene. (5) Implement the decision to intervene safely to diffuse the situation. Bystander intervention works at multiple levels of the Social-Ecological Model. The Social-Ecological Model addresses the multifaceted interaction between individual, relationship, communities, and societal factors that influence all perpetrators, victims and bystanders of sexual violence (Latané & Darley, 1970).

- ❑ On the individual level, certain factors will determine whether or not a bystander is active or passive, depending on his/her own knowledge, skills and self-efficacy.
- ❑ On a relationship level, a bystander may be more likely to intervene if he/she has a supportive social circle.
- ❑ On a community level, bystanders may be more likely to intervene if the school, church or other social environment encourages intervention.
- ❑ On the societal level, bystander intervention can begin to change social norms and expectations about what is considered acceptable behaviour in society.

## **CONCLUSION**

The only way to make the workplace a safe place where people can work without fear of harassment is by acting. Acting to prevent harassment and responding to it when it occurs is a critical part of the process of improving the workplace. Everyone has a role to play in ensuring a safe and welcoming environment for all employees. Bystander intervention represents the next wave in attempting to prevent and address these harms, but social problems have been notoriously difficult to combat.

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