

Sexuality & Harassment

A One-Day Round Table
December 1 | India International Centre

*Seminar Hall 1, Kamladevi Complex, 40, Max Mueller Marg,
Lodhi Gardens, Lodhi Estate, New Delhi - 110003*

INTRODUCTION

The debate around sexual harassment in the wake of the #MeToo movement already seems to be saturated in terms of meaningful dialogue. The purpose of this one-day round table is hence, to reopen this dialogue and move beyond cautionary tales about perpetrators and narratives of victimhood in order to see how we can provide a radical challenge to the ways in which we sexually relate to and work with one another.

These conversations, spread across three panels, will look at the many dimensions involved in sexual desire, attraction, boundary setting, agency and transgression. Can we universally codify what it means to be in a consensual relationship? Do we understand the cultural undercurrents and the formal structures that inform our agency to give consent, as well as the power differentials that underpin it?

PROGRAMME

10:30 A.M. | Opening Remarks by Madhavi Menon

11:00 A.M. | Panel Discussion | Psyche

Speakers: Shifa Haq (Assistant Professor, Ambedkar University Delhi), Amrita Narayanan (Psychotherapist, Writer) and Divya Rastogi Tiwari (Psychotherapist)

Moderator: Madhavi Menon (Director, Centre for Studies in Gender and Sexuality, Ashoka University)

The psyche has been largely neglected in our public engagements with sexuality. Instead, we overwhelmingly rely on law, and its vocabulary of crime and punishment as the primary tools with which to address sexuality and harassment. Such a skewed emphasis has resulted in a lack of knowledge about how, why, and whom we desire. It also flattens out structural complexity in favour of punitive certainty.

It is worth asking, for instance, how students on a university campus—who have just about reached the age of consent as per legal definition—understand their sexual selves in an environment riddled with peer pressure, ideas of sex peddled by popular culture, as well as growing awareness of their sexual desires? How do adults navigate the realm of intimate pleasure-seeking relationships at their workplace? A recognition of the power differential in sexual relationships can lead to a clampdown on intimacy at the workplace; mind/body dualisms can be invoked to deny the presence of a desiring physical body. This panel will address how a psychoanalytical approach to sexuality can help us negotiate better the complications of power and the messiness of desire.

1:00 P.M. - 2:00 P.M. | Lunch

2.00 P.M. - 4.00 P.M. | Panel Discussion | Agency

Speakers: Manak Matiyani (Executive Director, The YP Foundation), Ratnaboli Ray (Psychologist and Mental Health Activist) and Aвали Khare (Student, MA in Gender Studies, Ambedkar University Delhi)

Moderator: Shohini Ghosh (Professor, AJK Mass Communication Research Center)

The discourse on sexual harassment in the public domain seems to be dominated by the ethical complications of the #MeToo movement, primarily concerned with debating the pros and cons of a “naming and shaming” campaign. Such campaigns take refuge in the binaries of yes and no, calling for “affirmative consent” as the universal touchstone for negotiating sex. What are the implications of such a policy on our sexual lives?

If all we understand by consent is a clear and unequivocal “yes” at every point of the sexual encounter, then do we also leave people confused about the many unspoken acts that make up a sexual relationship in its entirety? Does such a policy not treat consent as a settled matter, relevant only for the

determination of crime, rather than a field of transformatory possibilities? This panel will try and explore the spectrum of “consent” beyond the necessity of its legal codifications. In the context of institutions and structures that are inherently hierarchical in their composition, how do we reach an understanding of “mutual consent”? How do we, as individuals, approach questions of comfort and unease within the subjectivities and power differentials embedded in our cultural framework?

4.00 P.M. - 4.30 P.M. | Tea

4.30 P.M. - 6.30 P.M | Panel Discussion | Law

Speakers: Prabha Kotiswaran (Professor of Law & Social Justice at King's College London), Mihir Samson (Advocate) and Siddharth Narrain (Lawyer and Legal Researcher)

Moderator: Madhu Mehra (Executive Director, Partners for Law in Development)

Can harassment and abuse be tackled meaningfully without a robust engagement with sexuality? Can a concept such as consent, now part of the legal lexicon, be applied neatly across the spectrum of sexual experiences? This panel will address the following questions: Is the law capacious enough to accommodate the complexities of desire? How does the law deal with the range of ways in which people communicate their sexual desires or lack thereof? When sexuality is taboo and consent is not culturally embedded in routine social relationships or institutional functioning, then does the burden of the law, particularly on young adults, appear reasonable and just?

Likewise, an overwhelming reliance on stringent punishments, short circuiting of due process, and strict liability provisions, suggest a consensus on deterrence as the pathway to sexual justice. The recent instances of “naming and shaming” of sexual offenders adopts the deterrence model even as it rejects the “due process” aspect of the law. This panel will also focus on the understanding of due process and punishment applicable to formal or informal processes, to comment on notions and approaches to justice.


6.30 P.M | Panel Discussion | Final Thoughts

Speakers: Madhu Mehra (Executive Director, Partners for Law in Development), Paromita Chakravarty (Director, School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University), Shohini Ghosh (Professor, AJK Mass Communication Research Center)

Moderator: Madhavi Menon (Director, Centre for Studies in Gender and Sexuality, Ashoka University)

This panel will have speakers conversing with members of the audience as we attempt to think together about structures of Psyche, Agency, and Law in relation to sexuality and harassment.

For Further Queries:

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