

How HUL is dealing with sexual harassment and ensuring women are safe at the workplace and beyond



In the 21st century, do working women need to be escorted home by their male colleagues after a long day at work that stretched late into the night? India's largest FMCG company [Hindustan Unilever](#) (HUL), known to be a trendsetter in HR practices, thinks so.

The FMCG giant, regarded as one of the most women-friendly companies in India, allows its female employees the option of having a male colleague escort them if they leave office after 8:30pm. It also encourages women professionals to avoid late working hours as much as possible.

As part of its HR practices against possible harassment, any instances of late working by women (beyond 8:30pm) are detected by the attendance card reader and sent to the employee's line manager automatically.

Moneycontrol spoke to two HUL women employees, who said that the company's policies have been designed for their safety. "There are days when I had to stay back for work. The company drops us back home and hence we don't feel any hesitation in working late hours when required. It is always safer to opt for company transport than third-party aggregators," said one of the employees, who works in an office in the Delhi-NCR region.

Do men need to escort women home?

Kolkata-based human resource consultant Madhushree Guha Roy questions why a woman should need to have a male staffer accompanying her in the vehicle till she is dropped home.

"Women travel everywhere alone. Is it necessary to have a man tag along for safety? Companies having this practice could introspect," she said.

While there has been a debate over whether policies to have male colleagues escort women are restraining or liberating, a spokesperson clarified that at HUL, the policy is exercised at the discretion of the women.

Confirming this, an employee at HUL's Mumbai headquarters said: "Not all women may seek to be accompanied by a male colleague while being dropped. However, some women do ask for a male colleague to escort them, hence it is an option provided."

HUL's Annual Report said that in circumstances where late working becomes unavoidable, women employees are required to take a drop home from a company-approved car vendor, be escorted by a male colleague and inform their line managers upon reaching home that they have reached safely.

HR practices, specifically on women's safety, have been under focus ever since the MeToo movement took off. More recently, the Hathras incident has re-ignited the debate on women's safety.

A [Moneycontrol report showed](#) that in FY20, seven years after the Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH) was passed, there was an 8 percent increase in the number of cases of sexual harassment against women in [Nifty50](#) firms.

When it comes to the corporate world, companies have to strike a fine balance between what is politically right and ground realities.

How HUL handles PoSH cases

While a layman would think that having zero cases is the ideal situation, human resource experts state that what needs to be looked at is whether a company has a culture of respect and fairness where women can report incidents fearlessly.

Among the Nifty50 companies, a [total of 761 complaints](#) of sexual harassment were filed in FY20. [Hindustan Unilever](#) (HUL) had a total of three complaints.

Of these, two were resolved in FY20 while one was pending. The HUL Annual Report said that the complaint pending as on March 31, 2020 was disposed of at the time of adoption of the annual report by the Board.

“Disciplinary action is taken based on the facts of the case and as per the decision of the Internal Committee. Sanctions may range from a verbal counselling to a written warning / transfer, including termination,” said an HUL company spokesperson.

Under the stipulations of the POSH Act, all companies are required to have an internal complaints committee (ICC) in place, and required to disclose data related to such cases annually.

HUL said in its annual report that the company endeavours to complete the inquiry process within the stipulated period of 90 days. The law states that an aggrieved woman has a time limit of three months to file the complaint to the internal committee in writing.

Continuous sensitisation

In response to a query by Moneycontrol, an HUL company spokesperson said that continuous sensitisation sessions are held on respect, dignity and fair treatment across the organisation.

Here, awareness on the subject of POSH is conducted for all new recruits during induction sessions.

Human resource consultants are of the view that it is necessary for companies to promote a culture of openness from the top.

Independent HR consultant Jasudha Diwan told Moneycontrol that in POSH cases, it is the responsibility of the organisation to ensure that there is no unfair treatment of women who complain.

“We have often noticed that there is a bias against women in the workplace in some companies once they complain against a male boss. This defeats the purpose of the POSH Act because it will dissuade more women from coming forward to report untoward incidents,” she added.

HUL, however, has a speak-up culture and follows a strict anti-retaliation policy. Anti-retaliation means that there won't be any counter-action for reporting an incident. The company said that the global Policy on Respect, Dignity and Fair Treatment inter alia covers women's safety and anti-harassment and is followed uniformly across all Unilever entities, including HUL.

“Multiple initiatives by way of tone from the top communications, regular cascades, communications encouraging all employees to raise concerns, socialising the channels available for reporting concerns and encouraging a speak-up culture with reassurance of support against potential retaliation are undertaken,” said the company spokesperson.

There is also a periodic communication from the CEO and the senior management of the organisation encouraging employees to speak up with reassurance of support against potential retaliation.

Steps taken to promote fairness and respect for women

HUL has women working in the supply chain as well as in office locations. For blue-collared women staff who may not be aware of sexual harassment laws, the company organises classroom training and town halls.

POSH related communication is common for all women employees, be it office staff or those who are part of the supply chain.

The HUL spokesperson said that all units follow the principles laid down in the Factories Act to prevent late working hours, especially after sunset.

Sought-after employer

Moneycontrol spoke to three human resource consulting firms to seek a perspective on HUL's women-centric practices. All three said HUL is among the companies women prefer working for because of its female-friendly rules.

"A lot of practices against sexual harassment are driven from the top, which is why one would find HUL remains a preferred brand for women job seekers," said the senior vice-president of a large HR firm. He spoke anonymously because company policies do not allow him to reveal his personal views on individual clients.

HUL said that it promotes higher reporting of cases both by employees and also by non-employees (third-party suppliers) by providing for anonymous reporting through online portals accessible internally and externally.

Since not all women may be comfortable with confiding about sexual harassment incidents with male bosses, HUL has a policy where female managers are encouraged to have discussions with women workers to ascertain any concerns on safety and well-being.