

**SEXUAL HARASSMENT OF WOMEN AT  
WORKPLACE IN SIKKIM- A HUMAN RIGHTS  
PERSPECTIVE (2000-2015).**

**(SYNOPSIS)**

THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ARTS

AT

JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY

BY

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY

KOLKATA

2023

# **SEXUAL HARASSMENT OF WOMEN AT WORKPLACE IN SIKKIM- A HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE (2000-2015).**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Nature has created everyone as equal; it never made any difference between a man and a woman besides anatomical and biological difference. Nor has it differentiated between the kinds of roles and responsibilities, men and women perform in particular. The patriarchal social system in which the males predominantly dominate the society has always thought of women as lesser humans due to which women have been disadvantaged in every aspect of their lives.

Male domination or control can be the root cause of gender inequality. Gender inequality between men and women mostly make women more vulnerable to violence as society has given men the power to control everything, including women. This power play can be traced back to the kind of violence one has witnessed or faced at their home, in the family, or the society. The patriarchal system can be held responsible for the kind of subjugation women face in their day-to-day life. But Patriarchy, is not only affecting women, in a broader sense men are also affected by this social system. Patriarchy dehumanizes men, as men are not allowed to express their emotions for the fear that they might be considered non-masculine.

In India, ruthless male domination over women has been continuing since pre- historic times. Women have suffered and are suffering with discrimination in silence. Women have been subjected to inequalities, indignities and discrimination (Ramaswamy 1996). The UN Women Gender Equality in the 2030- Agenda for Sustainable Development Report states that- the gender wage gap is estimated to be 23 percent. This reflects the deep-rooted oppression against women in general.

In the present-day scenario women are coming out of their homes and giving services in various sectors. With the increase in the cost of living more women are taking up jobs to supplement their family's income. But the discrimination against women continues in the workplace as well, the employers adopt a discriminating attitude towards women as regards to

providing safety, equal opportunities, promotions, equal wages and various social benefits. At the place of work, women are also suffering from sexual harassment, eve teasing, and molestation. The situation is worse where women come from the lower socio-economic group and are placed in the unorganized sector.

The issue of sexual harassment at workplace gained momentum with the pivotal case of Vishaka and others vs. the State of Rajasthan, in 1992. This was the much-publicized case of the gang rape of a government social worker, Bhanwari Devi. A writ petition filed in the Supreme Court by Vishaka, a women's rights group for the enforcement of fundamental rights of working women under Articles 14, 19, 21 of the Constitution of India, along with four others, led to the Supreme Court directives which were to serve as guidelines on prevention of sexual harassment of women until the enactment of Sexual Harassment Act in 2013. These directives termed as Vishaka guidelines were part of the historic judgment passed on 13 August 1997. It recognized that sexual harassment of working women amounts to a violation of the rights to gender equality, and a violation of the right to practice any profession, occupation and trade. It included definition of sexual harassment and stated that such conduct can be humiliating and may constitute a health and safety problem, emphasizing preventive measures for sexual harassment.

Women are subjected to many kinds of harassment and oppression, dowry deaths, eve teasing, rape, molestation, domestic violence, female feticide, etc. Numerous socio-political and legal reforms have failed to change women's position and their exploitation in one form or another is still rampant. Particularly, the working-class women are greatly exposed to sexual abuse and criminal exploitations. The continuing phenomena of women's torture in all walks of her life are a clarion call for humanity to wage an ultimate war against these atrocities. At this juncture, the new role of women as working class, though a modern phenomenon has increased the existing responsibility of woman to perform their roles as a housewife, good mothers, and committed workers at their workplace successfully. She has ventured to come out alone without her family's protection to attend her place of work, mostly to fulfill the economic necessities of the family, and to raise her own status. A large number of women are entering into the workforce to maintain their independence. They are being exposed to the outer world and it is obvious that there is chance for them to be affected by different crimes. The position of working women in the family, in society, at their workplace, conveyance, and their protection outside the house has

created complex problems. The position of working women in the present-day society is precarious though their presence in workforce of the country is quite encouraging for development. Hence, there is an urgent need to prevent the crimes against the working-class women to save them from criminal victimizations. The aim of any civilized society should be to secure dignity for every individual. There cannot be dignity without equality of status and opportunity. The absence of equal opportunities for women in any walk of social life is a denial of equal status and equal participation in the affairs of society and equal membership. The democratic foundations are missing, when equal opportunity to grow, govern and give the best to society is denied to sizable section of the society.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM**

“Women rights are human rights”, a phrase first used by Hillary Rodham Clinton, the First Lady of the United States, on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1995, at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Women enjoy various rights as according to the law yet women are never treated equally because of their gender. Women are human too but the society and its deep-rooted patriarchy as always treated women as a lesser human than men.

Several, laws have been enacted to improve women’s social status, economic independence, political participation, and professional growth. The Constitution of India, International Conventions including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provide most of the rights for the empowerment of women. The Government has launched various welfare schemes to raise the status of women. Despite all these, atrocities on women are on rise and are increasing at an alarming rate. Civil and penal laws in India do not adequately provide for specific protection. The guidelines given by Supreme Court in Vishaka vs. Union of India are not strictly followed by the organizations.

In Sikkim, cases of sexual harassment at the workplace are seldom reported which gives a false indication that this kind of violence against women does not exist in the State. But, one must understand that sexual harassment is coercive and mostly lacks evidence. Thus, it does not occur in an open space with too many witnesses; hence, making it hard for the victim to prove

that she has been sexually harassed. There is a necessity for an exclusive study of sexual harassment of women at the workplace in Sikkim given a diverse socio-economic, political, legal, and cultural sphere.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The review of literature is a vital step to conduct any research in order to build knowledge in a particular topic of study. There are various aspects of sexual harassment and an extensive amount of work has been published regarding various issues relating to women in various journals, books, newspapers, blogs, etc. The literature for the study was collected keeping in mind the objective of the study. Firstly, to understand the kinds of violence women face in their day-to-day lives it was very important to study the status of women over time. Meera Seth in her book, *“Women and Development: The Indian Experience”*, has comprehensively analyzed the changing status of women based on regional and religious lines. Seth also attempts to highlight women’s development programs since independence. Slowly and steadily women became aware of their rights and privileges. Education and political participation brought women to the forefront of the nationalist struggle and other movements for social change. Geraldine Forbes in her book *“Women in Modern India”*, has meticulously researched and written about the reforms that were undertaken in the nineteenth century to modernize women in India.

Gender being another important aspect of violence against women, the study on gender-based violence and sexual harassment of women in the workplace in particular is analyzed through authors like Dr. Martha Farrell, who had extensively worked on the construction of the concept of sexual harassment from a layman’s view to a much wider idea of it in legal terms. Dr. Farrell’s, *“Engendering the Workplace: Gender Discrimination and Prevention of Sexual Harassment in Organizations”*, gives vivid detail of gender mainstreaming in institutions and also provides rationale for preventive measures against sexual harassment in organizations. Dr. Martha Farrell along with Feisal Alkazi, and Priti Jain has also incorporated various methods and illustrations to help its readers reflect and analyze the deeply rooted beliefs and old-aged customs related to gender in a training manual titled *“Gender on the agenda”*. The manual acts as a handbook for consultation and workshops on sexual harassment of women at workplace and should be read along with the POSH Act 2013. *“Gender and Politics in India”*, edited by

Nivedita Menon is a collection of essays reflecting upon key issues of gender and environment, gender and work structure, gender and law, and largely on women's movement in India. It deals with a wide range of issues relating to women and its impact at different levels but unlike Nisha Agrawal's, *"Her Right to Equality- From Promise to Power"*, Menon has failed to highlight the reality of gender equality enshrined in the Constitution of India and its applicability in real life situations where patriarchal norms prevent women from exercising their rights.

Romana Asmat and Sidra Mehboob in their article *"International Laws and Policies for Addressing Sexual Harassment in the Workplace"*, published in International Research Journal of Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies (IRJIMS), elaborately discuss about sexual harassment as a global issue and not as a private issue between the harasser and the victim. It emphasizes on the legal measures each nation has drawn to regulate harassment. Dr. H.O. Agarwal's book *"International Law and Human Rights"* is divided into two parts. Part I deals with International Law and the second part discusses about various international conventions and treaties on human rights. R.C. Jiloha's, *"Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace: Mental Health and Social Aspects"*, discusses the crucial subject of mental health and social aspect of sexual harassment of women at workplace. The discussion about legal aspect is also looked into but the issue of psychological consequences which are hardly touched is explored logically. Dr. Arundhati Bhattacharya's article, *"Indian Women in the Workplace"* looks over the issues women face in their day-to-day life and at the workplace in particular. Bhattacharya emphasizes on the discrimination at workplace and the safety issue at public spaces and tries to highlight the rights conferred to women as a citizen of India to protect them from being victims if such abuse. An article by Punam Sahgal and Astha Dang, *"Sexual Harassment at Workplace Experience of Women Manager and Organizations"* attempts to explore the dynamics of sexual harassment of women managers in the workplace. It seeks to explore the adequacy of the existing provisions of the law in the protection of women against sexual harassment and study about the experience those women managers go through on a personal level when their dignity is jeopardized.

Since sexual harassment is a wide topic, so studying it in the regional context felt important. South Asia is home to various kinds of faith, ethnicity, and social practices and the women in the region also have evolved with time. Crimes against women are not a new

phenomenon in the region and “*Women, Security, South Asia- A Clearing in the Thicket*” edited by Farah Faizal and Swarna Rajagopalan, addresses several issues relating to women in general but most importantly, it explores women’s perspective on security in South Asia. The book emphasizes on the nature of security and its difference in understanding by women and men at large and seeks to address this question in the South Asian context. Crimes against women are also rampant in academic spaces, bullying, ragging, and sexual harassment at universities, schools and colleges are now and then reported by the media. “*Sexual Harassment is Endemic in Academic Spaces: An Insiders’ Perspective*”, by Leena Pujari in Economic and Political Weekly talks about the culture of misogyny and sexism which is endemic in academic spaces and she also argues that most of these forms of sexism are so subtle and implicit that they are difficult to recognize and thus, easily pass off as innocuous statements, comments or actions. The law on sexual harassment in India mandates every institution to constitute an internal committee to look into matters of harassment in academic spaces. It is the University’s onus to conduct workshops and seminars on sexual harassment to spread awareness among the staffs, teachers, and the students.

Legally, sexual harassment has been recognized by the judiciary, and without the proper understanding of the Indian Penal Code it is impossible to examine legal provisions in a correct perspective. K. D. Gaur’s, “*Textbook on Indian Penal Code*” is an important book to look at the judicial provisions present in the ambit of law in India. Gaur discusses landmark judgments with each provision which is helpful in the understanding of the law and will be helpful in the formulation of future policies. “*Sexual Harassment: The Conundrum of Law, Due Process, and Justice*”, by Monica Sakhrani in Economic and Political Weekly reflects on the loopholes of the legal system of India and how the law aims to provide a safe working environment for women but has failed to keep Bhanwari Devi outside the scope of the current law, whose gang rape led to the petition being filed in the Supreme Court. “*Sexual Harassment and the Limits of Speech*”, by Rukmini Sen in Economic and Political Weekly deeply analyzes various perspectives on consent, Sen argues that not speaking does not mean remaining silent, and neither does silence mean consenting to a certain act.

*Handbook on Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal Act, 2013*, Government of India, Ministry of Women and Child Development, November 2015, and the *Handbook for Internal and Local Committees on Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal of Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace* prepared by Martha Farrell Foundation for Social Justice, Empowerment and Welfare Department, Government of Sikkim (2016), provides a comprehensive analysis on the genesis of the act, the definition of each term related to sexual harassment of women, and the procedures to be followed while dealing with cases of sexual harassment of women in the workplace. It also includes scenarios related to harassment of women in the workplace for a better understanding of the problem. “*Some General-Social, Economic, History, Geo-Political and Cultural Aspects of Sikkim (India): A Review*”, by Bishnu K Sharma and Lokesh Chettri, published in the International Journal of Arts and Social Science, Volume 3, Issue 5. The review shows data on the amount of research work published in the context of Sikkim, by different scholars on different fields, like history, geography, politics, economy, etc., from the year 2000 to 2020. “*Women ‘Pursuit’ for Rights and Empowerment among Sikkimese Society*”, an article by Neelam Rai highlights the status and women in Sikkim and recommends suggestions to empower women from both rural and urban areas to become self reliant. “*The Gazetteer of Sikkim*”, published by Sikkim Nature Conservation Foundation provides valuable information on the rich cultural heritage of the state. In-depth knowledge of the erstwhile kingdom of Sikkim, its physical and geographical positions, the customary laws, and religious traditions has been explained thoroughly in this book.

Annual Reports from Home Department, Rural Management Development Department, Health and Family Department, Labor Department, Social Justice and Welfare Department and various reports and data from the State and District Legal Service Authority and the Women’s Commission, Sikkim provided valuable information on the State’s commitment in eliminating various forms of violence against women.

## **RESEARCH GAP**

A review of the existing literature on sexual harassment at work place reveals that though other forms of violence against women have been addressed fairly, there is a major lacuna in the



study on sexual harassment of women in the workplace in Sikkim. So far, the literature on the topic is scarce. Hence the researcher felt that, there is an immense need for the study of sexual harassment of women in the workplace in the context of advancing the understanding of the problem through a socio-cultural and legal perspective.

## **THE OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The prime objective of the present study is:

1. To trace the historical, constitutional, legal and international instruments on violence against women in India and Sikkim in particular.
2. To examine the presence of sexual harassment as a form of violence against women at all levels of society in India and Sikkim in particular.
3. To examine the factors responsible for sexual harassment at workplace as a basic human right violation in India and Sikkim in particular.
4. To examine the roles played by NGOs and other statutory bodies in curbing workplace harassment in India and Sikkim in particular.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. How do the societal restrictions, customary laws and tradition lead to harassment of women in general and working women in particular in Sikkim?
2. How responsive is the Indian legal system to deal with the issue of harassment of women in the workplace in Sikkim?
3. Does the Government of Sikkim consider women rights as basic human rights issue?
4. What are the existing mechanisms implemented by the government of Sikkim to address the issue of sexual harassment of women in the workplace?
5. What roles do the NGOs play on the issue of sexual harassment of women in the workplace in Sikkim?

## **METHODOLOGY**

The problem is selected with a great interest keeping in mind the significance and an endeavor to study the prevalence of workplace sexual harassment against women in Sikkim. The study is empirical, as the researcher has analyzed the existing legal provisions and landmark cases to develop a theoretical understanding. Beside this, the problem deals with the socio-cultural and legal dimensions of sexual harassment of women in the workplace only. Material and information were collected from various sources. Official documents and reports published by the government have been considered as primary sources and scholarly journals, books, and media publications have been considered as secondary sources. Web sources have also been accessed to collect data from the public domain. The researcher has adopted an ethnographic method to deal with the core dynamics of the study. The research was conducted through interviews with officials of various departments; the questions asked were open-ended with a few leading questions to keep the respondents on track. The researcher took notes of the answers in a notebook; the medium of language used was English and Nepali. Since the researcher was familiar with both the languages it was not difficult to conduct the interview. Permissions were also taken to access data and observe the work culture of the state which was vital for the research. A questionnaire survey in the four district of Sikkim was also conducted exclusively with women employees of the State. Analysis was carried out on the basis of collected data in light of the research question.

## **CHAPTERISATION**

The present study will be divided into five chapters dealing with different dimensions of the problem.

### **Introduction**

**Chapter 1-** Sexual Harassment in India- a Theoretical Perspective.

**Chapter 2-** Nature of Sexual Harassment of Women in Sikkim.

**Chapter 3-** Existing Constitutional Provisions and Laws on Sexual Harassment of Women at

Workplace.

**Chapter 4-** Role of the Government of Sikkim and NGOs in the Protection of Sexual

Harassment of Women at Workplace.

**Chapter 5-** Field Survey Report and Concluding Observations.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS**

**Introduction-** in the introduction of my thesis I have distinctly described my area of research with an extensive literature review. The works of literature are of eminent researchers, social activists and policy makers of Sikkim and India at large who have extensively worked in the field of women empowerment, gender, and law. I have also mentioned the research gap that I have analyzed from the literature review and have pointed out some major research questions which have been vividly discussed in the following chapters.

**Chapter-1** examines the theoretical perspective on sexual harassment of women. An attempt will be made in this chapter to explain sexual harassment taking in account different theories. Theories of why crime, atrocities, and violence against women occur provide insight into the changes necessary to prevent and eradicate them. Sexual harassment at work is a complicated phenomenon because it cannot be explained as solely the result of individual psychopathology. Sexual harassment is multi-dimensional problem that persists in the workplace. The study on workplace harassment in the state of Sikkim can be well understood through the socio-cultural theory with a feminist orientation. It is impossible to understand harassment of women without understanding the socio-cultural context in which this kind of harassment prevails. According to feminist socio-cultural perspective, sexual harassment is a consequence of the gender inequality and sexism that exists in the society since time immemorial. The status of women in the society determined their status at workplace as well. The pre-conceived notion of male supremacy has been carried through the domain of workplace which has led to the submissive treatment of women, hence leading to sexual harassment. The chapter also examines the historical background on the nature of harassment against women in

India. The status of women in ancient India and the development of the concept of harassment in India will be discussed briefly. The recognition of the problem and different forms of harassment present in ancient India such as Purdah, Sati, Devadasis, and Child Marriage etc., will be analyzed. An attempt will be made to inquire into causes that are responsible for harassment of women in ancient India till today where women's participation in the workforce of the country is increasing day-by-day. Also the role of SAARC in combatting violence against women will be analyzed in brief under this topic.

**Chapter-2** examines the nature of sexual harassment of women in the state of Sikkim. This chapter contains discussion on the history, geography, economy, and culture of the state to understand the status of women in Sikkim in general. During the monarchical period, Sikkim had no schemes to empower women. Most parts of state was controlled by the landlords (the Kazis) who “acted as barons” in order to collect taxes for the king and rule with an iron grip where no women hold the post of landlords and neither in the king's ministry and the people had to suffer the atrocities in the form of forced labor, especially peasant women they were utilized for pleasure by the landlords with the aid of its henchmen. Socially they were exploited and legally they didn't have any rights. In the present scenario, political participation is denied to women in North Sikkim whereas there is 50 per cent reservation in panchayat for women in other parts of Sikkim. The panchayat in places like Lachen and Lachung in North Sikkim is known as ‘Dzumsa’, where a woman cannot contest the election, nor can she take part in the decision-making of the Dzumsa. The Dzumsa is mainly controlled by men and is headed by a Pison (panchayat head) who also happens to be a man. The chapter also discusses about the difference between sex and gender. Sex is biological and thus, natural. It is given to us by nature and is constant. Our societies define what a girl or a boy should wear, or how they should behave. Because societies create gender, their definition can vary from society to society and time to time. The terms gender and sex are often used interchangeably, but in reality they are two different terms. It should be remembered, however, that there is a huge difference between allegations of sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and sexual assault. Sexual abuse and assault have clear and concise lines of demarcation which define the offense and leave little doubt when a violation upon a person has been committed.

**Chapter-3** will deal with existing constitutional provisions and laws on sexual harassment of women in the workplace. The guidelines prescribed by Supreme Court in Vishaka case are tested in detail. Response of the judiciary is discussed through the detail analysis of the case laws. The principles of gender equality are enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its preamble and fundamental rights under Articles 14, 15 and 16. Article 21 of the Constitution guarantees the dignity of women. The directive principles of the state policy contained in part IV of the Constitution under Articles 38 and 39 directs the state to provide equal right and equal status for men and women to adequate means of livelihood. Article 42 of the Constitution, states that the state shall make provision for securing just and human conditions of work. Under Article 51- A (e) it is the fundamental duty of every citizen to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. Apart from constitutional provisions, India also ratified various international conventions and human rights instruments to secure equal rights of women. Several commissions have been set up by the government to look into the matter of status of women in the Indian society. There are provisions under sections 509, 294, and 354 of the Indian Penal Code dealing with obscenity, eve-teasing and sexual harassment of women. Sexual harassment at workplace is a form of systematized violence against women. Most of the working women at some time or the other face this kind of violence from their colleagues, bosses or employers. Women working in fields and mines are often sexually exploited by landlords and contractors. Women industrial workers also face sexual harassment from factory owners, supervisors and even from their male colleagues. Women employed in the service sector face sexual harassment from their office colleagues, bosses and clients. Though sexual harassment in the workplace is an age-old problem, women have been left to deal with it on their own or sometimes with the support of women's organizations. Increasing participation of women in all fields of work, and changes in social attitudes towards women has not shown much progress. There have been no effective legal measures to counter it.

**Chapter-4** critically examines the role of NGOs and Statutory Commissions in curbing sexual harassment. The efforts of the Government of India and the Government of Sikkim and various women's organizations and NGOs, to enlighten the women about sexual harassment, legal measures, and research are highlighted. It will also covers the assistance extended by National and State Women's Commission, and National and State Human Rights Commission in prevention, prohibition and redressal of sexual harassment act in the state of Sikkim. The Sikkim

State Women's Commission work hand in hand with the Social Justice, Welfare and Development Department to organize workshops and trainings for women on various kinds of violence against women in the State. The State's Legal Service Authority provides free legal aid and counseling to the aggrieved.

**Chapter-5** evaluates the entire study and draws the conclusions based on the research questions. Sikkim has been working towards making workplaces safe for women. Compared to other states in India, Sikkim has time and again proved to be the best state in many areas of state development but as the finding goes deeper as what is on records is not implemented in action. An extensive field survey was carried out through a questionnaire form of inquiry in the four towns of the four districts of Sikkim namely- Gangtok in the East District, Soreng in the West District, Mangan in the North District and Namchi in the South District; with two hundred respondents who worked in both the organized and the unorganized sectors. The study was carried out over a span of six months starting from 18<sup>th</sup> of April, 2019 till 10<sup>th</sup> of October, 2019. The study started from the East District as it is also known as an administrative hub of the State. The questionnaire for the survey was framed in a simple manner with some basic yet important questions. The respondents included government officials, lawyers, bankers, university students, journalists, and members of NGOs, factory workers, hoteliers, MGNREGA workers, ASHA workers and human rights activists. The study meted out how traditional and social restriction on women poses a problem for them in complaining against sexual harassment at workplace. Women belonging to rural areas are a little hesitant to talk about anything that has a sexual connotation. A major understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment came into light as many women had an idea that sexual harassment is only about physical sexual abuse. The study highlights that women are considered a weaker section because in most cases the harasser is in a senior position. Hence, this signifies that there is a need to create awareness on the SHW Act, 2013, as most women are unaware of their rights and also the Act needs to be implemented as mandated by the law. The study indicates that there is a lack of awareness among the employers and employees about the act. The compliance with the law is inadequate and no further course of action for penalty have been prescribed for employers not complying to the provision of the act. More organizations still have to constitute committees like the hospitals and small enterprises having more than 10 employees. Since more and more women are joining the workforce, sexual harassment in the workplace is still to be recognized as a serious issue in Sikkim. Sexual

harassment in the workplace is a universal problem. Even though the occurrence of sexual harassment in the workplace is widespread in India and elsewhere, this is the first time it has been recognized as an infringement of the fundamental rights of a woman, under Article 19(1) (g) of the Constitution of India ‘to practice any profession or to carry out any occupation, trade or business’. Cases like *Seema Lepcha v/s the State of Sikkim & Ors*, and cases of sexual harassment in Sikkim University now and then, make headlines in all leading newspapers of the state. Students from Sikkim University have time and again reported cases of sexual harassment in the university by their professors or colleagues or friends. The safety and security of women should be considered vital if women are to be empowered. But the absence of a report of any case of violence against women does not hold a valid reason to claim of high safety index in the state.

## SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Since the scope of sexual harassment of women is wide, the study is confined only to workplace sexual harassment of women with reference to Sikkim and India at large during 2000 to 2015; as the problem deals widely with human behavior, which is too subtle and complicated and is influenced by so many factors; physical, social, and psychological. Hence the researcher limited the scope of the study only to socio-cultural and legal dimensions.

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