

# #MeToo puts spotlight on co-working spaces

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MUMBAI: Even as #MeToo has companies in knots while trying to address sexual harassment issues at the workplace, questions are being raised on where co-working spaces stand on this aspect. A co-working space is a place whose facilities are used by freelancers and workers belonging to different organisations. People working in a co-working space are not on the rolls of the company that owns the facility. However, legal experts say any space where people sit and work can be termed as a workplace.

Vikram Shroff, leader (HR law) at Nishith Desai Associates, said the Indian law on prevention of sexual harassment (POSH) extends to all workplaces, which also includes co-working spaces. Owners or lessees of the space & their clients (who are using the space) may need to comply with that law.

However, there exists an ambiguity. Shroff said implementation of the POSH law at co-working spaces could lead to certain challenges since multiple companies are involved. “For example, a sexual harassment complaint may involve employees of different organisations at a co-working space. Whose internal committee should investigate? How will the decision be implemented? And, importantly, who will be responsible for ensuring a safe and harassment-free workplace?”

Co-working spaces have cropped up in recent years, and their numbers are growing. Not all follow strict internal guidelines, which leaves people working in these places at risk of being harassed and not getting access to a redressal mechanism. Co-working spaces offer desks on a monthly rent and meeting rooms on a fee charged at an hourly basis. According to a news

report quoting data from consultancy firm CBRE, there are over 600 shared workspaces with more than 1.80 lakh seats across the country. The area under co-working spaces is around 13.5 million square feet. Experts reckon the numbers could double in a few years.

Kamal Karanth, co-founder of Xpheno, a specialist staffing firm that operates from a co-working space, said, “Clearly, these are becoming mega workplaces that need governance. POSH needs to become the responsibility of the co-working brands and should not be left to entrepreneurs who are too small to have POSH on their own.”

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Globally, there have been some instances of sexual harassment at co-working spaces that have been reported. TOI reached out to owners of co-working spaces to get their views. WeWork declined to comment. But Sudeep Singh, CEO and chief evangelist at another similar organisation GoWork, said, “We have a set of policies for our in-house employees. In addition, we do take care of people who work in our campuses. Though understanding that the companies working at GoWork have their own redressal policies, pro-active measures are taken to eliminate the likelihood of any such incident occurring.”

Bipin Taneja, GM of One Co.Work, said, “We ensure a healthy and safe work environment. Should there be anything that goes against our policies, we’ll leave no stone unturned to investigate the matter and take strict action against the defaulters.”

A co-work space should have internal policies, said Karanth, and these should include a stated, visible policy, a complaint redressal mechanism where someone can put across a complaint and is aware of the next steps for redressal, and regular training and awareness sessions on POSH. “Else, these co-working spaces will be just like cafes where everybody has to fend for themselves,” said Karanth.

It’s not clear whether co-working spaces should have an internal complaints committee (ICC) for every space. Complykaro Services founder and director Vishal Kedia said if the aggrieved at a co-working space is self-employed, the only option is to go to the local complaints committee (LCC).