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THE COURAGE TO SPEAK, THE RESPONSIBILITY TO LISTEN

"Silence is not always consent. Sometimes, it is fear disguised as normalcy."



Gender issues may manifest in a variety of ways. These can be sexual harassment and discrimination, but they can also be stereotypes, exclusion, inappropriate comments, unequal power relations, and common expectations of who is listened to, expected to change, and whose concern is listened to. The experiences may impact individuals differently in classrooms, in the workplace, in residence, and in informal campus interactions.

There are circumstances when we are challenged to consider how gender, hierarchy, and social norms can impact willingness to assert themselves:

1. Why might a student not want to speak up when a classmate is the subject of a sexist joke, inappropriate comment, or humiliating language?

2. For what reasons might someone be reluctant to speak up about the inappropriate behaviour of a faculty member or supervisor?

3. What could stop colleagues or other witnesses from responding if they see bullying or harassment behaviour related to sex, gender, or insults?

4. How might the belief that women and gender-diverse people should always put others first get in the way of them disagreeing or raising concerns?

5. How can we make sure the same rules for respectful conduct are enforced for all students, faculty, staff, administrators, and seniors as representatives?

6. If someone brings a concern, how do we listen with care, not jump to conclusions, and consider it in a fair process?

These questions widen our view and reflect on the way that the environment of the campus, our interactions, and the various kinds of support can influence the willingness to speak.

What is the reason why people hesitate to speak up?

It can be a number of reasons. A person is generally balancing the potential ramifications of raising a concern with the support that is expected.



1. **The fear of being retaliated against and unequal power:**

   a) Student concern may be that raising their voice will impact their grades, recommendations, internships, placements, or relationships with peers. These concerns can make it difficult to decide how to respond.

   b) Employees may have similar concerns about their professional reputation, job security, workplace relationships, or future opportunities.

   c) These concerns may feel more significant when the person involved holds a position of authority or influence. In such situations, individuals may be uncertain about the safest and most appropriate way to raise an issue.

A person considering whether to speak up may wonder:

- Will my concern be heard and considered fairly?
- Will my privacy be respected?
- Could raising this concern affect my academic or professional relationships?

In settings where academic and professional opportunities matter greatly, these concerns can make it harder for someone to decide whether and how to raise an issue.

2. **The pressure to fit in**: People naturally value acceptance and have a great sense of belongingness**.** It can be hard to deal with a popular, or influential peer or colleague in a cohort, workplace or residential campus. What is meant as a joke might be interpreted as a comment on the person, and a personal comment might be taken as harmless flirting. Others might laugh, say nothing, or shift the conversation out of their comfort zone if they are not sure what to say or do not wish to make it uncomfortable. A

supportive environment allows for the respectful response to such moments more easily.

3. **The bystander effect:** When there are several people present as part of an incident, each individual may think that someone else will respond to the incident. Some may feel uncertain about taking action or whether the individual involved would like assistance being provided. A considered and small gesture can make a difference in classrooms, groups of students, offices, and informal settings. This might involve meeting alone with the individual involved, speaking quietly with the individual about an inappropriate statement or contacting an appropriate institutional contact.

4. **Fear of disbelief:** If they have been subjected to inappropriate conduct, they may not know how their story will be treated. May fear that their activities, relationships, or personal lives will be reviewed. They may be less likely to seek support if questions are directed at them in a dismissive manner, or if they feel they are being judged on their ability to support the story before it has been understood. Respectful listening and adherence to a fair process can contribute to addressing this concern.

5. **Fear of being called out:** Individuals who raise concerns might fear that they will appear oversensitive, difficult or incapable of taking a joke. They may also be concerned about how speaking up could affect their relationships or place in a group. Thoughtful responses and no labels can help avoid considerations of concerns based on their label alone.

6. **Gender stereotypes and social expectations:** Social conditioning can play an important role in determining what people see as right or wrong. Some people may have been conditioned to think that women should be quiet, men shouldn't be vulnerable or that people who identify themselves as being a part of the LGBTQIA+ community are not a part of the society. This can impact everyone regardless of their gender. Men may be too afraid to speak out as they will be made fun of. Women may feel it is their fault. People of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities people may feel afraid to speak out. Therefore, it isn't a personal choice to be quiet, it could be due to social norms which make it difficult to talk about certain experiences and easy to ignore certain people's voices.

7. Uncertainty about support and reporting processes: Even when formal procedures are available, people may not know whom to contact, what the process involves, or whether they can seek guidance before making a formal complaint. Clear information about available options, confidentiality, impartiality, and possible next steps can make support easier to access.

A Look at Campus Experiences: Selected Findings from India and Abroad

Institution	Key findings	What the findings tell us
Harvard University (2024)	Sexual harassment was reported by 28.9% of undergraduate women, down from 32.2% in 2019. Among graduate and professional	The findings suggest that reported experiences remain an important concern, even as the reported percentages have declined. They also point to the value of awareness,

	women, the figure declined from 21.9% to 17.7%.	support, and respectful bystander responses.
Stanford University (2023–24)	Recorded 222 reports of prohibited conduct, compared with 175 in 2022–23, 214 in 2021–22 and 279 in 2018–19.	Reasons for a change in the number of reports are many, such as changes in incidents, awareness, or willingness to report. These complaint numbers are not representative of the campus experience.
University of Oxford (2020–21)	10% of staff respondents (847 people) experienced workplace bullying or harassment. Only 46% of those affected reported their experiences formally or informally.	The survey results show that certain staff members affected by this did not report their experiences. Effective communication, trust in confidentiality and support can affect a decision to seek help.
Indian Higher Education (2022)	In a survey of 578 current and former female college and university students reported by Scroll, about 48% said they were subject to explicit sexism like cat-calling or inappropriate touching. Some 10% reported sexual assault by at least one person from their institution.	The survey reveals concerns of both day-to-day and serious misconduct. The sample is not representative at the national level; therefore, the results are to be considered as a representative sample of what survey participants experienced.
Institutional context in India: The University Grants Commission (UGC), through its SAKSHAM initiative, promotes gender sensitisation and safer higher-education environments. Its gender-sensitisation data also records institution-level sexual-harassment complaints across academic years. These administrative figures help monitor reported cases, but they do not establish the actual prevalence of misconduct.		

These findings offer a few points for reflection:

1. Reports of gender-based misconduct are not restricted to institutions that have fewer resources or are more of a public profile. The following examples illustrate the fact that these concerns are also continuing to be explored at universities in different contexts. Reputation and a respectful campus life are both central to the academic life of the institution

2. Formal reports do not reflect all experiences. Surveys, complaints, and disciplinary records measure different measures. Some individuals may not report because they are unsure, have privacy concerns, or lack trust in the process. It is important, therefore, to interpret the figures in the light of the manner in which the information was gathered in each study.

3. Accessible and trustworthy support systems are important. Individuals should have the opportunity to voice their concerns, have a hearing, and understand what actions may occur if they do. Feedback and recent trends can help institutions reflect on their processes and determine what additional information or support they may need.

A useful question for any campus community is, how can we make it easier for people to seek advice, express concerns, and have them considered fairly? Respect, dignity, safety, and academic excellence are all part of a positive learning and working environment.

From Silence to Solidarity: What Can We at IIMA Do?

IIMA has always been an institution where a responsible, respectful, and inclusive culture has been promoted. Its work on gender-related issues and raising awareness demonstrates the importance of the Institute to the principles of dignity, equality, and mutual respect. This positive institutional commitment will lead to the development of a culture where every member of the IIMA community feels respected, heard, and empowered to act and contribute to a safe and inclusive campus experience.

A gender-sensitive campus is not just about the number of complaints received or the policies and mechanisms that are in place. Equally important will be their confidence in the institutional environment that they can voice issues with confidence, that they are listened to sensitively, and that every issue is given fair and appropriate consideration. Lack of complaints does not mean that there is no discomfort or discrimination, but it should cause us to constantly reflect on the effectiveness of our efforts to build trust and increase open communication.

The response to instances of gender-based misconduct at IIMA be more than just reacting to them. It is designed to foster an atmosphere on campus where dignity is preserved, differences are accepted, solidarity is encouraged, and inappropriate behaviour is discussed and addressed in a positive manner.

It is not out of place to mention that this is not the duty of any one committee or institutional leadership but a shared commitment between students, faculty members, staff, and administrators. An inclusive IIMA will be a space where everyone feels their voice is valued, where speaking up is valued over apprehension, and where fair, empathetic, and accountable institutional responses shape the way decisions are made. **From silence to solidarity is not only about urging people to speak up but also about building a community where no one has to remain silent.**

Let us continue building a campus culture in which respect is reflected in everyday interactions as well as in institutional policies.

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Sources:

1. **Harvard University, Results of Student Survey on Sexual Misconduct and Awareness (2024); Harvard Gazette, 21 October 2024.**
2. **Stanford Report, 2023–24 Title IX Annual Report Released (21 May 2025).**
3. **University of Oxford, Equality Report 2020–21.**
4. **Scroll, Sexual Harassment: Why Indian Campuses Remain Unsafe (2022).**
5. **University Grants Commission, SAKSHAM initiative and Gender Sensitization Data.**