

LAUNCHING OF ZERO TOLERANCE POLICY TOWARDS SEXUAL HARASSMENT BY DEPUTY COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE, CUMILLA

All women have the right to work free from violence and harassment at their workplace. The Office of the Deputy Commissioner (DC Office) of Cumilla is committed to preventing and responding to sexual harassment in the workplace, in compliance with the High Court Directive of 2009 and to abiding by rule 27A of the Government Servants (Conduct) Rules 1979¹.

On 1 December 2020 Christian Aid and the Deputy Commissioner's Office, Cumilla, jointly organized the launching of the Zero Tolerance Policy towards Sexual Harassment of the DC Office, Cumilla during the 16 Days of Activism. A total of 48 participants (20 females, 28 males) from the DC office, local government institutions, local CSO representatives and journalists attended the event to acquire knowledge about the policy that is guided by a system-wide and 'whole-of-office' approach to support those who disclose, report, or witness sexual harassment, and to ensure a survivor-centred compassionate delivery of services implemented in a non-judgemental manner. The policy implementation seeks to minimize traumatization associated with the reporting and complaint process, while ensuring confidentiality and protection of staff who disclose or formally report sexual harassment.

Assistant Commissioner Shamim Ara presented the sexual harassment policy that commits to all staff members being provided with a safe working environment free from discrimination and harassment, including sexual harassment.

With the recent high increase in cyber violence, the participants suggested including sexual harassment and violence in social media-based platforms and apps such as Facebook, IMO and WhatsApp in the policy so that any kind of cyber harassment and cyber violence against women can be dealt with through the Digital Security Act 2018.



Launching of Zero Tolerance to Sexual Harassment Policy of DC Office, Cumilla on December 1, 2020. Photo Credit: Christian Aid

Everyone should be safe in the workplace. Sexual harassment is being monitored by the mobile courts so that everyone can receive justice in a short time. The government is trying hard to establish a harassment-free environment for women.

– Md Nuruzzaman,
Additional Deputy Commissioner, Cumilla

¹ Rule 27A of the Government Servants (Conduct) Rules 1979 provides that '[n]o Government servant shall use any language or behave with his female colleagues, in any manner, which is improper and goes against the official decorum and dignity of female colleagues'.

During the open discussion, Farhana Afroz from Christian Aid proposed amending the informal solution procedure from the policy in order to follow the guidelines of the 2009 High Court Directives, and she also proposed that any complaint be dealt by the established Complaint Cell of the DC office, Cumilla. The coordinator of the BLAST Cumilla Unit Office and member of the Complaint Cell of the DC Office, Cumilla, agreed on increasing the visibility of the established complaint box in the DC Office premise by marking the box for sexual harassment-related complaints.



The policy should have a clearer definition of sexual harassment through social media. Now a day, random people comment on and share pictures on social media without having any consent from the original post owner.

– Farhana Akter Nipa, Assistant Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner Office, Cumilla



Deputy Commissioner of Cumilla, Abul Fazal Mir, recommended appointing a focal person in every workplace in the district to make it easy for women to make complaints, and at the next district level coordination meeting of the local government administration he will instruct the Upazila Nirbahi Officers to establish a Complaint Committee in every workplace, as specified in the 2009 High Court Directives. He stressed that the complaints raised under any government office of Cumilla district that falls under the jurisdiction of the DC office, Cumilla, and that does not have a complaint cell, may lodge their complaint at the DC office, since the entire local government administration falls under the authority of DC, Cumilla.

In case of sexual harassment happening in public spaces, the DC office has jurisdiction to run a mobile court under penal code 509 whereby it can take the necessary steps to prevent sexual harassment in the public space and in transport once a complaint has been lodged. The DC Cumilla has also proposed establishing an online complaint mechanism through their district webpage that will be connected to the *Jatio Tottho Batayon* (Bangladesh National Portal).

The DC Cumilla has made a commitment to write to the Government Cabinet Division to adopt the Zero Tolerance Policy towards Sexual Harassment so it can be rolled out in other district offices, including the private sectors. Moreover, he also agreed to conduct a women safety audit at the DC office, Cumilla, and engage with the public transport owners to create awareness about sexual harassment within the office premises and in public transport in the district.

The participants emphasized the need to have more awareness-raising campaigns with the staff of the DC office, Cumilla, and with the adjacent areas regarding sexual harassment issues. Irin Mukta Adhikari, General Secretary of the YWCA and a member of the DC office Complaint Committee, introduced an initiative on familiarizing people with the High Court Directives by arranging more discussion forums on this topic.

The launching of the Zero Tolerance Policy towards Sexual Harassment was reported and highlighted in the major district print media and local newspaper.