

14 PUNISHED FOR HARASSING WOMAN

The daily News, Lahore in its news item dated 4th October, 2014 has reported that due to a landmark verdict delivered by the Punjab Ombudsperson for the Protection of Women against Harassment at Workplace Dr. Mira Phailbus, 14 employees of a government department have been penalized by their supervisor for their role in harassing a female co-worker.

The news reporter stated that the Punjab Ombudsperson Dr. Phailbus had received a complaint of the woman last month. The complainant woman was employed in a government department had reported that 14 of her male colleagues had made her feel 'deeply' uncomfortable in the office due to their derogatory remarks and gestures.

The Ombudsperson informed the news reporter that after receiving complaint, she set up an appeals court presided by Dr. Mira Phailbus and both the female complainant and 14 defendants were summoned to attend hearing. Completing the process of cross-examination and after hearing all relevant parties, Dr. Mira Phailbus issued a verdict on September 25 establishing the 14 men guilty of harassing the female complainant. In the light of prescribed rules and regulations of the 2010 Act, the Punjab Ombudsperson wrote to the management of the government department to take appropriate action.

The reporter in her new items has stated that the Ombudsperson imposed penalties ranging from censure to a denial of yearly increments and compulsory retirement on the guilty male staff. The office of the Ombudsperson has also recommended to the government department that the complainant woman be transferred to another office to protect her from future harassment by male co-workers.

The reporter has further stated that while speaking of her duties as laid down in the 2010 Act, Dr. Mira Phailbus said that she had a period of 30 days since the time of a complaint being lodged to dispose of a case. Despite receiving over 43 cases this year, the Ombudsperson said that speedy justice remained a top priority for her office. Responding to the lack of harassment inquiry committees in both private and public registered establishments, she said all organizations falling under the Act required by law to ensure inquiry committees of three persons, including one woman were established to receive staff complaints.

Fines can be imposed and appropriate action can be taken against establishments denying this right to their employees, she said. She said ignorance from the law was no excuse for employers not cooperating with government orders to create inquiry committees. Moreover, all registered establishments are required to display the mandatory code of conduct in the workplace and duties after office hours and duties on holidays for women must be approved from the head of the wing.

While the law does not cover actual 'physical' sexual harassment, the Ombudsperson said that Section 509 of the Pakistan Penal Code had been expanded to cover the workplace and abused women workers should write applications directly to the court in this regard. Dr. Phailbus said her office also refers vulnerable women to the offices of Secretary Social Welfare, DCO Lahore, and DIG police for assistance in matters not related to harassment.

A campaign to increase awareness of the services provided by the office of the Ombudsperson for Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace in small towns and tehsils will commence soon, she said, adding that amendments to expand her powers were currently being vetted by the Punjab Law Department and were to be presented soon by Punjab Women Development Minister Hameeda Waheed uddin.