

If It Crosses the Line Offline, It Crosses the Line Online



(This image is AI generated to provide a visual context to the article)

“Yummy Choco, dress up well ❤️”, **“Smart slim figure attracts ❤️”** on the surface, this may look like a casual or light-hearted message, however, for the recipient, such comments create discomfort and fear, as it marks the beginning of blurred professional boundaries in a workplace where respect and professionalism are expected.

Any comment directed at a person's sensuality, sexuality, physical attractiveness, or perceived sexual appeal in a professional work environment constitutes harassment and is inappropriate workplace conduct. It strips a professional of her identity and replaces it with an assessment of her body, leaving her to be noticed not for what she has built or contributed but for how she looks, which is not a compliment by any reading. It is a harm.

The modern workplace no longer ends at the office door. A common misconception persists that workplace harassment must occur physically within office premises. In reality, workplace misconduct may also manifest through digital communication platforms, where employees remain connected because of professional relationships or organizational hierarchies.¹ Harassment does not lose its seriousness simply because it is delivered through a phone or computer screen. If a remark, tone, or message is unacceptable in a physical workplace setting, it remains equally unacceptable in digital communication.

A late-night voice-note from a manager, an emoji that made you pause, a joke that was never really a joke. None of this register as harassment in the moment, which is precisely why it persists. In many instances, employees may initially dismiss such conduct as *“normal office culture”* or fear that objecting may negatively affect workplace relations or career progression. The issue becomes even more sensitive where a power imbalance exists. Communication from supervisors, managers, or senior colleagues may carry implied pressure, particularly where an employee feels unable to ignore, refuse, or report such

¹ [Convention C190 - Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 \(No. 190\)](#). is the first international treaty to recognize the right of everyone to a world of work free from violence and harassment, including gender-based violence and harassment.

interactions. Thus, what may appear “casual” to one person may feel intimidating, coercive, or deeply uncomfortable to another.

Digital evidence has also transformed the manner in which harassment complaints are examined. Importantly, workplace harassment in the digital age is not limited to explicit misconduct. Screenshots, chat histories, voice notes, emails, deleted-message recoveries and metadata may all become relevant during inquiry proceedings. Unlike verbal interactions that may leave little trace, digital communication often creates a documented pattern of behavior capable of being reviewed objectively.

An employee who receives an inappropriate message at 11 p.m. from a supervisor does not stop being an employee because the office is closed. The power dynamic travels with the conversation. Organizations that treat digital conduct as an informal, consequence-free space are not just enabling poor culture, they are creating legal exposure. Under the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010², harassment includes any unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment. Digital communication is not exempt from that definition.

Author:

Noor Fatimah,

Assistant Law Officer,

FOSPAH, Lahore

² [Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Work Place Act, 2010](#) – as amended in 2022, is applicable to all Federal Government organizations and trans-provincial entities. The Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Amendment) Act, 2022, significantly broadened the scope of the Act by expanding the definitions of “workplace,” “employee,” and “harassment,” thereby extending its protection to a wider range of work-related environments and individuals.