



Impact of Toxic Work Culture on Employee Mental Health in the IT Sector

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Abstract

In the fast-growing Information Technology (IT) sector, employees face continuous pressure to meet deadlines, deliver quality results, and adapt to new technologies. However, such demanding environments often give rise to toxic work cultures, where long working hours, poor management, and lack of emotional support lead to severe stress and mental health problems. This study focuses on how toxic work culture affects the mental well-being of IT employees in Chennai, one of India's leading IT hubs. Data were collected through surveys and informal discussions with professionals from software, operations, and support departments. The findings reveal that toxic environments increase stress, anxiety, and burnout, reducing job satisfaction and productivity. The study concludes that IT companies must adopt positive management practices, provide mental health counseling, and promote work-life balance to create healthier workplaces.

Keywords: Toxic work culture, employee mental health, IT sector, work-life balance, burnout.

1. Introduction

The Information Technology (IT) sector is one of the fastest-growing industries in India and a major source of employment in cities like Chennai, Bangalore, and Hyderabad. It contributes significantly to the country's economic growth and digital transformation. However, despite its success, employees in this field face several challenges, including heavy workloads, long hours, and continuous pressure to perform. A toxic work culture refers to a negative workplace environment where employees experience stress, disrespect, poor communication, and lack of recognition. Over time, these factors affect not only their job performance but also their mental health, leading to conditions such as depression, anxiety, and burnout.

In Chennai, where many IT parks such as TIDEL Park, DLF Cyber City, and Olympia Tech Park operate, the competition and workload are extremely high. Employees often struggle to balance work and personal life, leading to emotional exhaustion and dissatisfaction. Hence, this study aims to analyze the impact of toxic work culture on mental health among IT professionals in Chennai. Moreover, many IT professionals hesitate to talk about their mental struggles because of social stigma or fear of losing their job. As a result, mental health issues go unnoticed and untreated. It becomes a silent crisis that affects individuals, families, and organizations.

2. Review of Literature

- i). **What "Toxic Work Culture" Means in Real Life:** A few studies define toxic culture as things like constantly being under pressure, having unrealistic deadlines, vague tasks, little appreciation, or being bullied. What really hurts people is not just the workload, but how the workplace treats them. If managers are unsupportive or communication is poor, employees feel alone and stressed.
- ii). **Stress, Sleep, and Mental Health in Chennai IT Employees:** One local study during the COVID-19 lockdown asked about IT employees in Chennai working from home. It found that nearly three-quarters of them felt their work hours had gone up, which meant less rest and more sleep problems.
- iii). Another study on women working in IT in Chennai reported that many of them felt moderate to high levels of stress, anxiety, and signs of depression due to role conflicts (when work demands clash with personal life or unclear job roles).
- iv). **Physical & Emotional Effects of Overwork:** Some research talks not only about emotional distress but also physical symptoms: headaches, tiredness, increased heart rate, and trouble sleeping. Chennai-based doctors have noted that when people don't switch off after work emails late at night, always "on call", or working on weekends

— the body starts reacting. Over time, this leads not only to burnout, but also long-term health risks.

- v). **The Role of Management & Workplaces in Making Things Worse — or Better:** In Chennai, a lack of mental health awareness and weak support systems (like counseling or peer help) have been flagged in studies. Many employees feel their companies do not provide enough transparency or empathy from leaders—this makes the stress worse. When managers act more like task-masters than human beings, people are more likely to hide concerns rather than speak up. Some studies also point out that organisations which do try to reduce toxicity by allowing more flexible schedules, recognizing effort, keeping realistic deadlines, and encouraging rest see better morale, less turnover, and even better productivity.

- vi). **Why Chennai Might Be Special/What Local Studies Suggest:** Because Chennai is a big tech-city: many large tech parks, many IT/MNC offices, large commuting times, hot weather, traffic — these add to stress. The more time people spend commuting, the less time they have for rest, family, relaxation, all of which are important for mental health. In the “Work from Home” study in Chennai, the effects of increased hours and sleep deprivation were especially strong. Similarly, women in Chennai IT roles showed more stress because many also carry responsibilities at home (family, childcare) along with demanding work.

3. Research Methodology

- i). **Population and Sample:** The study focuses on IT employees working in different companies located in Chennai, especially in areas like, Guindy, and Taramani. A total of 45 respondents participated in this research. They included both male and female employees from various roles such as developers, testers, and support staff. The convenience sampling method was used since participants were chosen based on easy availability and willingness to respond.
- ii). **Data Collection Method:** Data was collected using a Google Form questionnaire. It contained both multiple-choice and short-answer questions that helped respondents express their real experiences about workplace culture, stress levels, and mental health. The online method made it easier for working professionals to participate quickly and safely.
- iii). **Research Instrument:** The main tool used was a structured questionnaire divided into three parts personal details, workplace environment, and mental health impact. The questions were simple, clear, and designed to understand how toxic work culture affects employees’ emotions and job satisfaction
- iv). **Data Analysis Technique:** The responses were analyzed using basic statistical methods like percentages and mean values. Charts and graphs from Google Forms were used to show trends in stress, burnout, and job satisfaction. The open-ended answers were reviewed carefully to find common themes such as long working hours, pressure, and lack of recognition.

v). Research Questions

1. Gender

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say

2. Age

- 18–25
- 26–35
- 36–45
- 46+

3. Which IT sector are you currently working in?

- Software Development
- IT Services & Consulting
- Data Analytics/AI/Machine Learning
- Testing/Quality Assurance
- Cloud Computing
- Cybersecurity
- Networking & Infrastructure

4. Have you ever experienced toxic behavior at your workplace?

- Yes
- No
- May be

5. Which of the following have you personally experienced or witnessed at work?

- Harassment (verbal or physical)
- Bullying or gossip
- Favoritism or nepotism
- Public criticism or humiliation
- Discrimination
- Lack of transparency from leadership
- None of the above
- Other

6. Work Experience

- 0–1 year
- 2–5 years
- 6–10 years
- More than 10 years

7. Do you feel psychologically safe to raise complaints or concerns in your workplace?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes
- Other

8. How often do you experience these behaviour?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never
- Other

9. In your opinion, who are more likely to face toxic behaviour in your workplace?

- Men
- Women
- Both are equally
- Depends on the situation

10. How often do you intness workplace toxicity/due to fiduciary relationship?

- Never

- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Very often

11. How was toxic work culture affected you?

- Increased stress on anxiety
- Loss of confidence
- Decreased work performance
- Feeling isolated from colleagues
- No impact
- Other

12. Have you ever taken leave or considered quitting due to workplace toxicity?

- Yes
- No

13. Are you aware of laws protecting employees from harassment or discrimination?

- Yes
- No
- Not much

14. Which of these favourable enactments are you aware of?

- Prevention of sexual harassment, 2013
- Industrial disputes act, 1947
- Mental healthcare act, 2017
- None of the above

15. Does your workplace have an internal complaint mechanism?

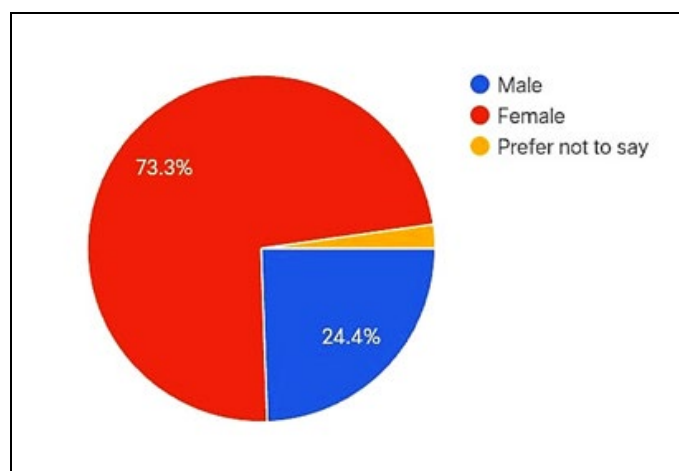
- Yes
- No
- I don't Know

16. What steps should management take to reduce toxic work culture and what's your suggestion?

- Short answer

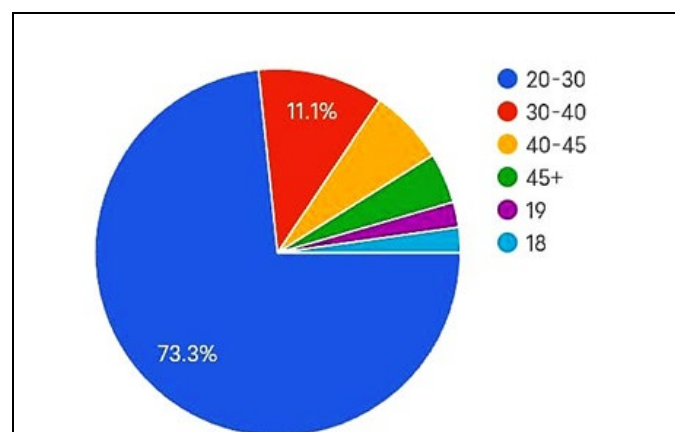
4. Findings

i). Gender



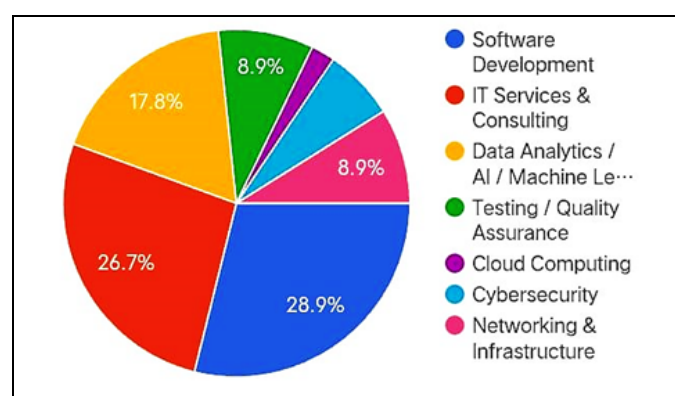
Among the selected Population of 45 respondents 73.3% were female, 24.4% male, and 1 preferred not to say. This shows women formed the majority of participants.

ii). Age



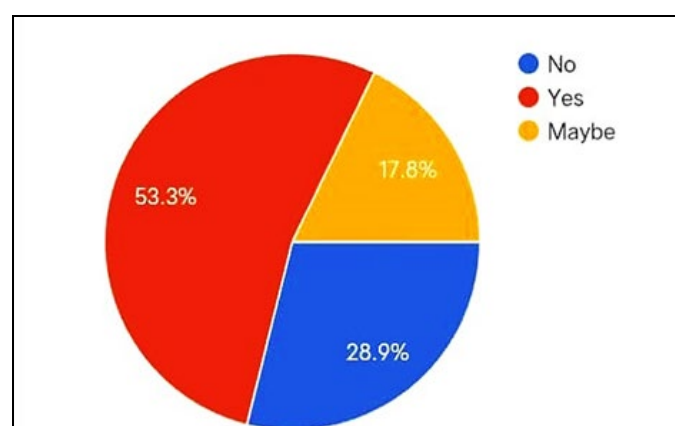
Among the selected population of Respondents, Most (73.3%) were between 20–30 years, followed by 30–40 (11.1%). Only a few were above 40 years. Hence, young working professionals dominate the sample.

iii). IT Sector



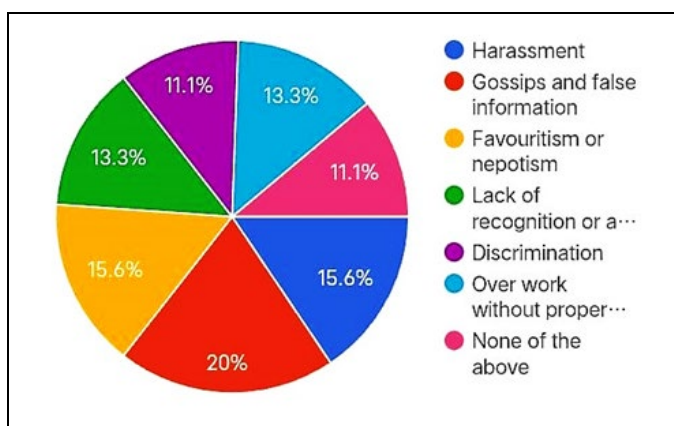
Among the selected population of respondents, 28.9% were from IT Services & Consulting, 26.7% Software Development, and others from Data Analytics, Testing, and Cybersecurity. This shows variety across IT fields. Software and service sectors form the major portion.

iv). Experienced Toxic Behaviour



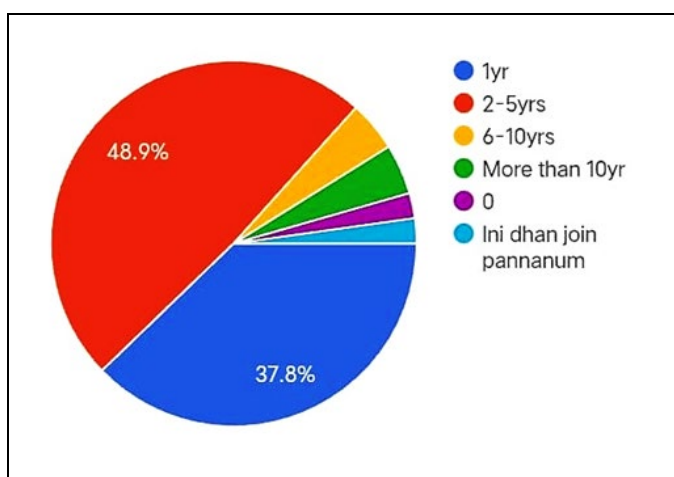
Among the selected population of Respondents, 53.3% said yes, 28.9% maybe, and 17.8%. Most respondents have directly or indirectly faced workplace toxicity. It highlights a concerning presence of toxic culture in IT.

v). Type of Toxic Behaviour



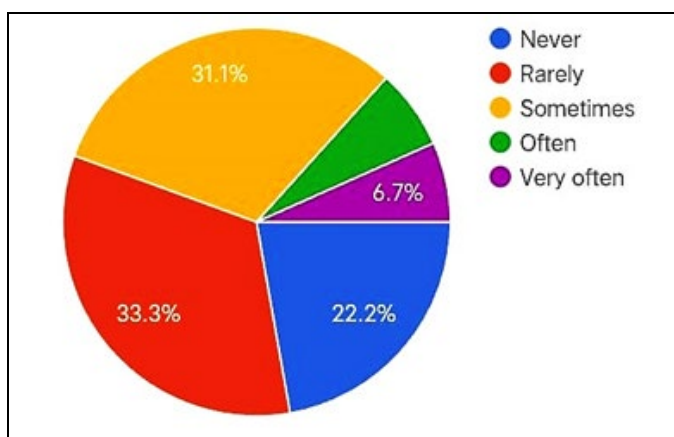
Among the selected population of respondents, Common issues were harassment, gossip, and overwork without compensation. Favouritism and discrimination were also reported. This reveals multiple forms of toxic behaviour exist simultaneously.

vi). Work Experience:



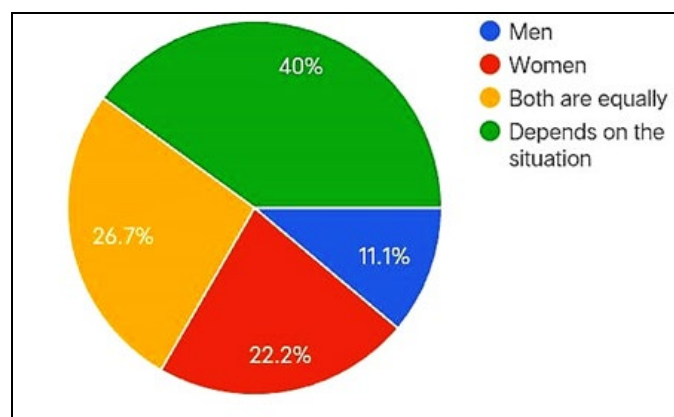
Among the selected population of respondents, 48.9% had 1 year, and 37.8% had 2–5 years of experience. Few had over 6 years. This shows the majority are early-career professionals.

vii). Frequency of Toxic Behaviour:



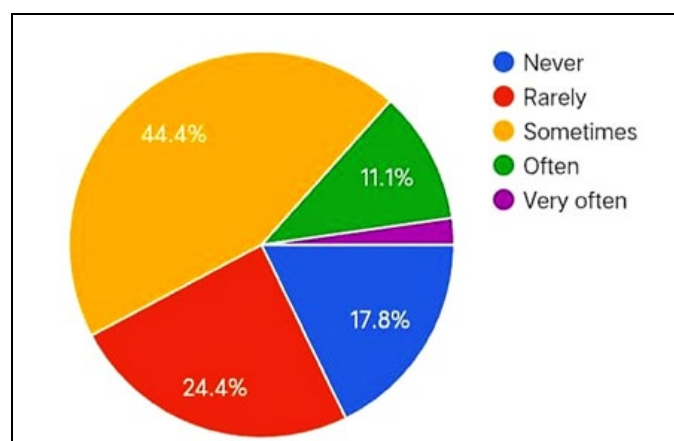
Among the selected population of Respondents, 33.3% often experience toxicity, and 31.1% sometimes. Only 22.2% said never. So, toxic experiences occur quite frequently.

viii). Who faces More Toxicity:



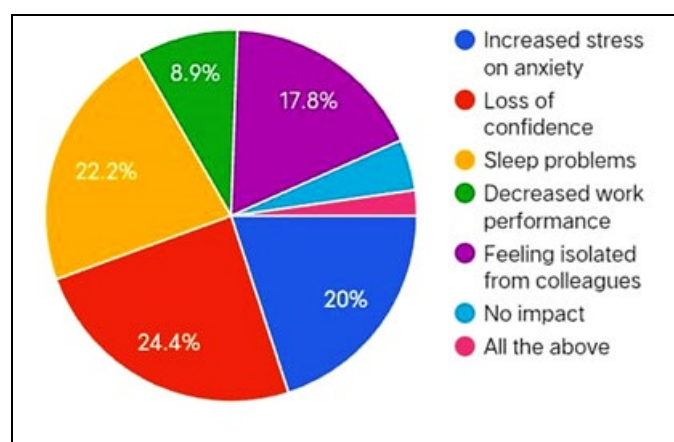
Among the selected population of Respondents, 40% said women, 26.7% said both equally, and 22.2% said it depends. This shows women are perceived to face more toxicity. However, many also believe it's situational.

ix). Toxicity Due to Fiduciary Relationship:



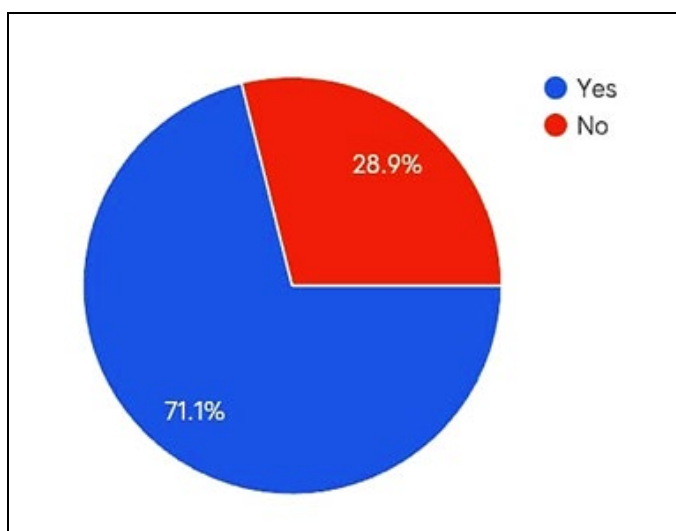
Among the selected population of respondents, 44.4% sometimes witness it, 24.4% often, and 17.8% never. This indicates moderate frequency of such incidents. Fiduciary issues contribute notably to workplace toxicity.

x). Effects of Toxic Work Culture:



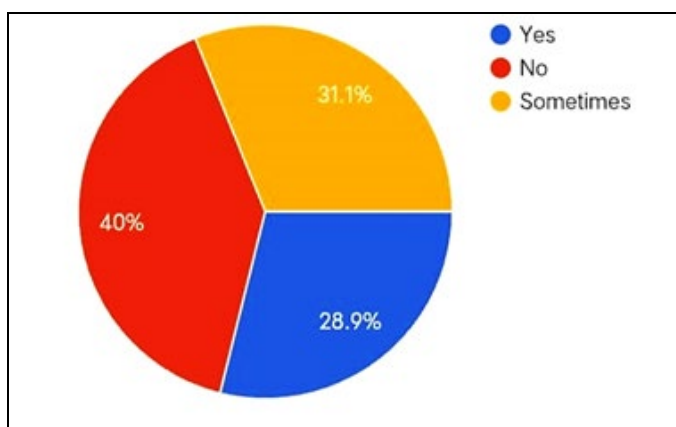
Among the selected population of respondents, Main effects include stress, loss of confidence, and isolation. 22.2% reported decreased performance. Toxicity clearly impacts both mental health and productivity.

xi). Leave or Quit due to Toxicity:



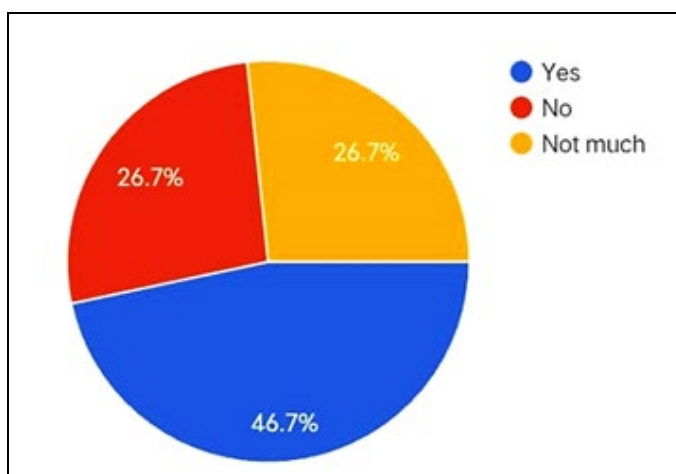
Among the selected the population of respondents, 71.1% said yes, they have taken leave or thought of quitting. Only 28.9% said no. This proves toxicity drives high turnover intentions.

xii). Psychological Safety to Raise Complaints:



Among the selected the population of Respondents, 40% said no, 31.1% yes, and 28.9% sometimes. Many feel unsafe to speak up. This shows lack of trust in complaint systems.

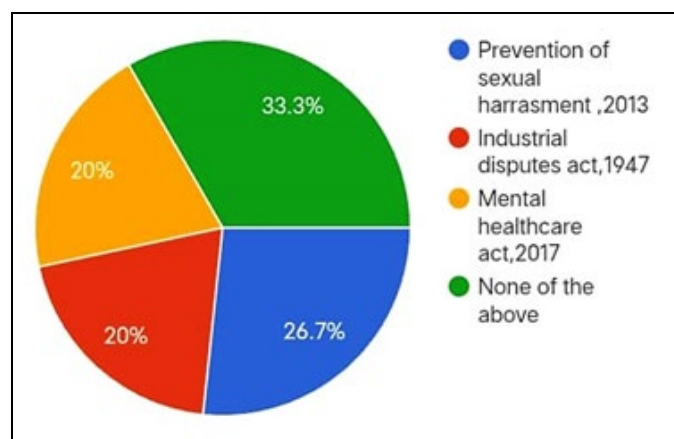
xiii). Awareness of Laws:



Among the selected the population of respondents, 46.7% said not much, 26.7% yes, and 26.7% no. Legal awareness is low

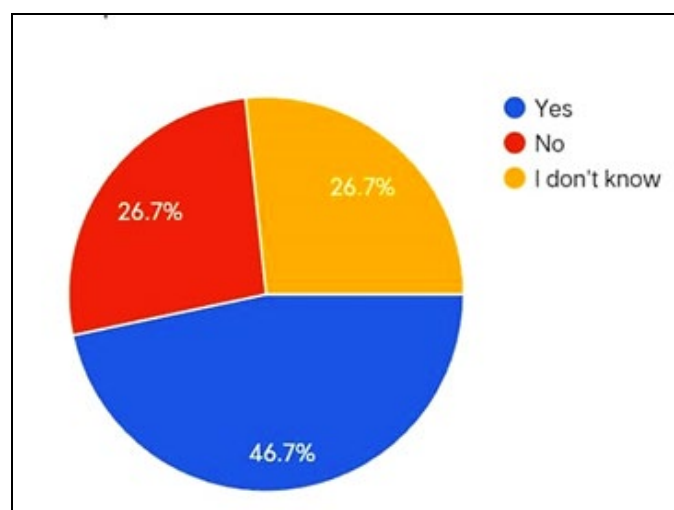
among employees. This highlights need for education on workplace rights.

xiv). Awareness of Enactments:



Among the selected the population of respondents, 33.3% knew about the POSH Act, 2013. 20% knew Industrial Disputes and Mental Healthcare Acts. 26.7% had no knowledge of any.

xv). Internal Complaint Mechanism:



Among the selected the population of Respondents, 46.7% didn't know if one existed, 26.7% yes, and 26.7% no. This shows poor communication within organizations. Employees lack clarity about internal grievance systems.

xvi). Suggestions to Reduce Toxic Culture:

Common ideas which was given by the employees open communication, clear rules, fair treatment, and work-life balance. One-on-one meetings and awareness programs were also suggested. Employees emphasized respect, empathy, and appreciation as key solutions.

5. Analysis

The survey shows that most participants are young IT employees, with over half (53.3%) experiencing toxic behaviour such as harassment, favoritism, and overwork. Many faced stress, anxiety, and low confidence, and a majority were unaware of legal protections or complaint systems. The results indicate that workplace toxicity is common and affects both mental health and productivity.

6. Conclusion

The study concludes that toxic work culture is a serious issue in the IT sector, caused by poor communication, favoritism, and lack of awareness. Companies must promote open dialogue, ensure fair treatment, and create supportive environments to protect employee well-being and improve performance.

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