

## Fostering Workplace Inclusivity in India: A Legal and Social Perspective on Hiring Rape Victims and Acid Attack Survivors

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### Abstract

This review paper explores the urgent need for workplace inclusivity for rape victims and acid attack survivors in India, analyzing it through both legal and social frameworks. Despite constitutional guarantees such as the right to equality (Article 14), non-discrimination (Article 15), and equal opportunity (Article 16), the practical realization of these rights remains elusive for survivors of gender-based violence. Legal protections such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016, and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (POSH) Act, 2013, provide some avenues for inclusion and redress. However, the lack of targeted implementation, narrow definitions, and bureaucratic hurdles limit their effectiveness. Victim compensation schemes offer short-term relief but often fail to support long-term economic rehabilitation. Judicial interventions, while progressive in tone, have yet to establish binding mandates for survivor employment or workplace inclusion.

Social barriers further compound legal gaps. Deep-rooted stigma, cultural norms around purity and victim-blaming, as well as inadequate educational and mental health support, prevent many survivors from accessing or sustaining employment. Workplaces often reflect societal attitudes, and many employers hesitate to hire survivors due to assumptions about their physical or emotional fitness for work, customer reception, or reputational risk. These barriers are particularly pronounced in conservative or rural settings, where survivors may face restrictions on mobility or decision-making from their families.

The paper examines promising practices and models of inclusion through corporate and civil society interventions. Case studies such as Sheroes Hangout Cafes demonstrate how survivor-led spaces can be both economically viable and socially transformative. Corporate efforts like Tata Steel's diversity hiring and Unilever's Project Shakti offer scalable frameworks for survivor integration, even if they currently do not explicitly target this group. Similarly, the HCL Foundation and Urban Company have shown how partnerships with NGOs and flexible gig economy models can empower survivors with skill training and dignified livelihoods.

Building on feminist legal theory, disability rights discourse, and trauma-informed approaches, this paper proposes a six-pillar model for inclusive employment. These pillars include legal recognition of survivors within employment law and disability frameworks, corporate sensitization to survivor realities, structured community-based rehabilitation programs,

public-private-NGO partnerships, survivor-led policy shaping, and robust monitoring systems to track impact.

The recommendations call for amending existing legislation to explicitly include survivors, creating national survivor employment policies, and establishing employment desks at key touchpoints such as hospitals and colleges. It also suggests integrating survivor hiring into ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) metrics to incentivize corporate participation. Survivor-led sensitization and workplace audits are emphasized as powerful tools to build empathy and accountability.

In conclusion, inclusive employment for survivors is not merely a matter of legal compliance or corporate responsibility—it is a moral and social imperative. By embedding survivor voices into policymaking and creating trauma-informed workplaces, India has the potential to emerge as a global leader in gender-sensitive employment practices. A just, equitable workforce must be anchored in the principles of dignity, justice, and inclusion.

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## 1. Introduction

Workplace inclusivity forms a cornerstone of the rehabilitation process for survivors of sexual violence and acid attacks. In India, this population continues to confront a multifaceted set of barriers that hinder their reintegration into professional spaces. These include legal loopholes, societal stigma, and systemic institutional apathy. Survivors do not merely fight legal battles for justice but must also battle for social acceptance, particularly within professional settings. Employment for survivors holds immense significance—not merely as a means of livelihood but as a powerful tool of healing, dignity, independence, and the reclamation of agency.

The aftermath of sexual violence and acid attacks leaves survivors with deep and often lifelong physical, emotional, and psychological scars. These are compounded by societal attitudes that frequently isolate them, leading to exclusion from mainstream education, economic opportunities, and public life. Despite advances in India's legislative and policy framework—such as the implementation of victim compensation schemes, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD) 2016, and initiatives under the Nirbhaya Fund—there remains a glaring gap in workplace inclusivity. Survivors are often invisible in employment policies and absent from corporate diversity initiatives.

The disconnect between legal intent and ground-level reality highlights the urgent need to bridge policy, implementation, and lived experience. While some survivors manage to rebuild their lives with the support of NGOs and progressive employers, most continue to face discrimination and exclusion. Stereotypes about physical appearance, assumptions of emotional instability, and a pervasive culture of victim-blaming contribute to the isolation of survivors from professional

spaces. In this climate, employment becomes more than economic participation—it becomes a vehicle for social justice.

This review examines the issue of workplace inclusivity for rape victims and acid attack survivors in India through an interdisciplinary lens. Drawing from feminist legal theory, trauma-informed care, and disability rights discourse, it seeks to explore how legal frameworks, social narratives, and corporate practices converge—and often fall short—in enabling survivor integration. Using case studies from organizations like Sheroes Hangout, Tata Steel, Unilever, HCL Foundation, and Urban Company, the paper highlights best practices and innovative models that center survivor empowerment.

The paper also considers global and regional contexts to explore how similar challenges are addressed in other Asian countries, and what India can learn from these comparative frameworks. It integrates findings from civil society organizations, academic literature, and legal documents to propose a rights-based, survivor-led model of workplace inclusion.

At the core of the analysis lies a simple but powerful idea: that economic inclusion and meaningful employment are essential to restoring survivors' agency, healing from trauma, and redefining their identities on their own terms. Survivors must not be treated merely as passive beneficiaries of welfare or charity; they must be seen as capable professionals whose lived experience can enrich and humanize our workplaces.

By proposing a six-pillar model for inclusive employment—focused on legal recognition, corporate sensitization, trauma-informed support, community rehabilitation, survivor-led policy input, and data-driven accountability—the paper lays the foundation for systemic change. This model calls for a multi-stakeholder approach involving government, industry, NGOs, and survivor communities themselves.

Ultimately, the inclusion of rape survivors and acid attack victims in the workforce is not just a matter of fulfilling legal obligations or corporate social responsibility. It is a moral and ethical imperative—a reflection of our collective commitment to justice, equality, and human dignity. A resilient and inclusive Indian workforce must be built upon these values, ensuring that no survivor is left behind in the journey towards empowerment and reintegration.

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## **2. Legal Context and Gaps**

### **2.1 Constitutional Provisions**

India's Constitution guarantees the right to equality (Article 14), non-discrimination (Article 15), and equal opportunity in public employment (Article 16). These foundational rights establish a legal mandate for inclusive employment. However, their interpretation and execution often overlook specific marginalized groups, including rape and acid attack survivors. Legal loopholes and bureaucratic hurdles dilute their practical value, leaving survivors outside the fold of employment-based affirmative action.

## **2.2 RPWD Act, 2016**

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD), 2016, expanded disability definitions to include mental illness and disfigurement—conditions often resulting from sexual violence or acid attacks. However, implementation remains inconsistent. Certification processes are complex, and many survivors are not classified as disabled due to narrow diagnostic criteria. Moreover, many employers are unaware of their obligations under this law. Without targeted awareness and simplified access, the RPWD Act cannot serve as a meaningful tool for survivor inclusion.

## **2.3 POSH Act, 2013**

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act is pivotal in addressing workplace safety. However, it lacks mechanisms to facilitate employment or rehabilitation of sexual violence survivors. There is potential to amend the Act to include post-incident rehabilitation frameworks, aligning protection with inclusion.

## **2.4 Victim Compensation Schemes**

State and central governments offer victim compensation under legal mandates and Nirbhaya Fund provisions. While these schemes provide short-term relief, they seldom support long-term rehabilitation like education, skill training, or employment placement. Survivors often spend compensation on medical treatment or legal processes, leaving them financially insecure without sustainable income sources.

## **2.5 Judicial Interventions**

The judiciary has played a sporadic but influential role in pushing for survivor rights. In *Laxmi v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court directed the regulation of acid sales and better rehabilitation measures, including employment. However, the judgment did not institutionalize employment mandates. Other instances exist where courts recommended government jobs or private employment, but follow-up and accountability mechanisms are absent.

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## **3. Social and Psychological Barriers**

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### 3.1 Stigma and Cultural Norms

In patriarchal societies, a woman's value is often linked to her appearance and perceived purity. Survivors of rape and acid attacks challenge these social expectations and are met with ostracization. The stigma leads to isolation and mental health deterioration. Workplaces mirror societal attitudes and often hesitate to hire survivors fearing reputational risk or lack of customer acceptance. Breaking these entrenched norms requires large-scale awareness, policy incentives, and survivor success stories.

### 3.2 Interrupted Education and Training

Due to trauma, hospitalizations, and legal battles, survivors frequently miss years of schooling. This limits their qualification for formal jobs and excludes them from competitive recruitment processes. Without targeted educational rehabilitation and access to flexible certification, their entry into skilled work remains difficult. Evening schools, online learning, and skill-recognition schemes must be adapted for survivors.

### 3.3 Mental and Physical Health

Acid attacks cause severe burns, multiple surgeries, and physical disabilities. Rape survivors often suffer from long-term gynecological or mental health issues like PTSD, anxiety, and depression. Indian workplaces are largely unprepared to provide trauma-informed environments. Most lack trained counselors or protocols for accommodating survivors' unique needs. Sensitization of HR teams and line managers is crucial for survivor retention.

### 3.4 Familial Control and Mobility

Survivors, especially in rural or conservative areas, face restrictions on mobility and career decisions. Families may discourage survivors from working due to perceived shame or fear of public scrutiny. This leads to social and economic dependence. Empowerment initiatives must include family counseling, community awareness drives, and safe transport solutions.

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## 4. Organizational Case Studies and Best Practices

### 4.1 Sheroes Hangout Café

Sheroes Hangout is a pathbreaking initiative employing acid attack survivors as café staff in Agra and Lucknow. Started by the Chhanv Foundation, it offers a trauma-sensitive work environment and public advocacy platform. The café model not only provides income but also transforms survivor identity from victim to changemaker. Visitors engage with survivors, leading to empathy and social normalization.

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## 4.2 Tata Steel's Diversity Hiring

While not yet including survivors of sexual violence, Tata Steel's hiring of women in mines and transgender individuals in manufacturing sets a benchmark for inclusive corporate policies. Their structured Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) framework includes leadership buy-in, policy revision, and infrastructure audits. This approach can be extended to survivors by creating training pipelines, mentorship networks, and survivor-friendly workspaces.

## 4.3 Unilever's Project Shakti

Launched to empower rural women as micro-entrepreneurs, Project Shakti offers a scalable model for survivor inclusion. Survivors can be trained as distributors or sales agents in their communities. The decentralized, low-investment model ensures flexibility, local integration, and dignity. If linked with survivor NGOs, Project Shakti can become a mass livelihood initiative.

## 4.4 HCL Foundation

HCL's NGO partnerships focus on skill training, employment, and mental health support for vulnerable groups. Survivors receive training in digital literacy, beauty services, and artisan crafts. This integrated approach—combining psychosocial care, employability, and placement—is essential for effective survivor rehabilitation.

## 4.5 UrbanClap (Urban Company)

UrbanClap's collaboration with NGOs has enabled survivors to work as beauticians, cleaners, and therapists on the platform. Gig economy models allow flexible working hours, income control, and minimal infrastructure needs. When survivors can choose their clients and schedules, it restores agency and dignity.

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## 5. The Role of NGOs and Civil Society

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society play a vital role in bridging the gap between policy intent and on-ground implementation when it comes to fostering workplace inclusivity for survivors of sexual violence and acid attacks. Their involvement spans legal aid, advocacy, skill development, psychosocial counseling, and survivor leadership. This section explores key organizations that have demonstrated impactful models, emphasizing survivor-centered approaches.

### 5.1 Chhanv Foundation

The Chhanv Foundation is one of the most prominent organizations working with acid attack survivors in India. Its flagship initiative, the Sheroes Hangout Café, is operated entirely by acid attack survivors and serves as both a workplace and a safe community space. Beyond this café, the foundation offers a comprehensive suite of services including legal aid, vocational training, psychosocial support, and emergency medical assistance.

What makes Chhanv's model particularly effective is its survivor-led approach. Survivors are not treated merely as beneficiaries but as key stakeholders and decision-makers. This strategy helps foster confidence, leadership, and resilience. Chhanv ensures that program design reflects lived experiences, which increases the relevance and impact of their initiatives. Their advocacy also extends to engaging with employers and government departments to create more survivor-friendly workplace environments. As such, Chhanv sets a gold standard in participatory development and social entrepreneurship.

## **5.2 Make Love Not Scars (MLNS)**

Make Love Not Scars (MLNS) is another transformative NGO, known for combining survivor rehabilitation with high-impact advocacy. MLNS supports acid attack survivors through physical and mental health services, rehabilitation, and reintegration into society. They also run awareness campaigns that humanize survivors and tackle deep-rooted societal stigma.

One of their most well-known campaigns, #EndAcidSale, went viral and spurred public discourse around acid regulation. This digital advocacy has successfully mobilized public empathy and corporate interest. MLNS also engages in policy lobbying for stricter laws on acid sale and better government schemes for survivors. Their use of social media and storytelling has not only highlighted the struggles of survivors but also changed perceptions at a mass level.

MLNS is also active in connecting survivors with educational and employment opportunities. They partner with brands, influencers, and training institutions to ensure that survivors have real prospects for self-sufficiency. Their success lies in combining grassroots support with media-savvy campaigns that hold institutions accountable.

## **5.3 Breakthrough and Jagori**

Breakthrough and Jagori are two feminist NGOs that have broadened the discourse around gender justice and inclusivity. While not exclusively focused on acid attack or rape survivors, both organizations have contributed significantly to transforming workplace and community attitudes toward survivors.

Breakthrough uses popular culture and media to challenge gender norms. Their community outreach programs and school workshops aim to prevent gender-based violence at its roots.



They also collaborate with corporations to offer gender sensitization training, ensuring that survivors entering the workplace are met with respect and understanding.

Jagori, rooted in feminist pedagogy, works at the intersection of gender, caste, and economic justice. Their advocacy has led to stronger policies at the local and national levels. Jagori also conducts public art campaigns, survivor storytelling sessions, and legal literacy initiatives that support survivor agency. Both organizations offer diversity audits for companies and help institutionalize inclusive practices.

#### **5.4 Legal Aid and Policy Think Tanks**

Several legal aid and policy organizations have also taken on the mantle of advocating for the rights of sexual violence and acid attack survivors. The Centre for Social Justice and the Lawyers Collective stand out in this domain. These think tanks and advocacy groups offer legal assistance to survivors navigating India's often hostile judicial system. They also undertake extensive research to inform policy and legislative reforms.

The Lawyers Collective, for example, has played a critical role in drafting gender-just legislation and in training judges and lawyers in gender-sensitive practices. They work closely with survivors to bring constitutional challenges, demand better enforcement of existing laws, and push for new categories under welfare schemes, such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act.

Meanwhile, the Centre for Social Justice combines grassroots legal aid with national-level policy engagement. It has run legal literacy campaigns for survivors and provides pro bono legal support for those seeking justice. Their research has also informed Supreme Court and High Court rulings on survivor rights, setting judicial precedents that bolster inclusive employment.

#### **Collective Impact and Future Potential**

What these organizations demonstrate is that sustainable survivor inclusion requires multi-pronged interventions—legal, social, psychological, and economic. They show that effective models are those which combine direct support with long-term structural change. Importantly, these NGOs help fill the implementation gaps left by the government by ensuring that survivors are not just rehabilitated but reintegrated with dignity and purpose.

The future of workplace inclusivity in India lies in scaling these models through greater public-private collaboration. By funding NGO-led initiatives, adopting survivor-led training programs, and institutionalizing partnerships, the government and corporate sector can amplify impact. Crucially, civil society must continue to hold institutions accountable and ensure that survivors are central to every decision that affects their lives.



In summary, civil society and NGOs are not peripheral but foundational actors in the struggle for inclusive employment. Their innovations, advocacy, and survivor-centric models offer both inspiration and instruction for transforming India's workplaces into spaces of justice, dignity, and healing.

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## **6. Policy Recommendations**

To ensure comprehensive and sustainable inclusion of rape victims and acid attack survivors in India's workforce, robust policy frameworks must be established. These policies should not only address systemic gaps but also embed survivor-centric principles, trauma sensitivity, and enforceable accountability measures. This section presents six key policy recommendations aimed at creating a transformative ecosystem for inclusive employment.

### **6.1 Amendments to the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act**

The RPWD Act, 2016 is a landmark law, but it currently lacks explicit recognition of rape victims and acid attack survivors as a distinct category deserving focused attention. Survivors may qualify under physical or psychosocial disabilities, yet in practice, bureaucratic procedures for certification are rigid, time-consuming, and insensitive to trauma. This limits access to disability-linked reservations, benefits, and workplace accommodations.

To address this, the Act should be amended to explicitly list survivors of sexual violence and acid attacks as a separately recognized subcategory. Furthermore, the certification process must be overhauled to include simplified, trauma-sensitive procedures. These should be decentralized, with assessments conducted in collaboration with trauma counselors and social workers rather than solely medical boards. Survivor dignity and autonomy should guide these interactions, and safeguards must be instituted against retraumatization during evaluation.

### **6.2 National Survivor Employment Policy**

India lacks a unified national policy on survivor employment that integrates education, skilling, mental health support, employment quotas, and sensitization. A centrally funded, multi-ministerial policy initiative—driven by the Ministry of Women and Child Development in partnership with the Ministries of Labour, Skill Development, and Social Justice—is imperative.

Such a policy should establish clear mandates for:

- Offering survivors free and flexible vocational training, digital literacy programs, and certification courses.



- Mandating minimum employment quotas in government departments and incentivizing similar practices in private corporations.
- Funding survivor entrepreneurship through micro-loans, startup grants, and mentorship programs.
- Ensuring employers receive tax rebates or social responsibility credits for inclusive hiring practices.

The policy must include provisions for workplace sensitization, with mandatory training for HR personnel and management. Survivor participation in policy design and oversight is essential to ensure that programs are both relevant and empowering.

### **6.3 Survivor Employment Cells**

Institutional support mechanisms for survivors are often fragmented or absent. To fill this gap, dedicated Survivor Employment Cells should be established at district-level government offices, public hospitals, educational institutions, and employment exchanges. These cells would serve as one-stop resource centers, offering:

- Career counseling
- Legal aid and documentation assistance
- Job listings and placement support
- Linkages with NGOs and corporate CSR arms

Staffed by trained counselors, social workers, and placement officers, these cells would also liaise with survivors' families, employers, and mental health providers to create comprehensive support ecosystems. Importantly, survivors themselves should be employed in these cells as peer mentors and resource persons.

### **6.4 Corporate Scorecard and ESG Integration**

To institutionalize accountability in the private sector, survivor hiring and workplace inclusion metrics must be incorporated into companies' Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) scorecards. This would align survivor inclusion with global sustainability standards and make it a key component of responsible business practice.

Mandatory annual disclosures should be enforced through the Ministry of Corporate Affairs and SEBI, requiring companies to publicly report:

- Number of survivors hired or trained
- Workplace accommodations provided
- Sensitization sessions conducted
- Anti-harassment policies and grievance redressal mechanisms

Public availability of this data would enable benchmarking and promote competition among corporations to enhance inclusion. Rankings could be tied to public tenders or awards for socially responsible businesses, fostering a culture of recognition and replication.

## 6.5 Public-Private-NGO Partnerships

Collaborative frameworks are essential to maximize impact, with the government providing policy backing, corporations contributing financial resources, and NGOs handling implementation and survivor support. Public-private-NGO partnerships (PPNPs) can create specialized training centers, run livelihood projects, and facilitate placement services.

One proven model is Sheroes Hangout Café, where the non-profit Chhanv Foundation partnered with local businesses and donors to run cafés managed entirely by acid attack survivors. Similarly, the HCL Foundation's skilling programs for disadvantaged women and the Urban Company's safe workspace policy illustrate the power of co-designed, community-rooted initiatives.

To scale such efforts:

- A national registry of active PPNPs should be created.
- Funding should be allocated through competitive grants.
- Implementation results must be documented and shared through case study repositories.
- Peer learning platforms should be launched to share successes and address challenges.

## 6.6 Survivor-Led Training and HR Audits

Perhaps the most transformative step is involving survivors directly in the design and oversight of workplace policies. By hiring survivors as trainers, consultants, and auditors, institutions can humanize diversity efforts and embed lived experience into the DNA of workplace reforms.

Survivor-led sensitization workshops are proven to be more impactful than generic diversity training, as they build empathy and reduce unconscious bias. Survivors can educate staff about respectful language, trauma-informed management, and inclusive team dynamics. Companies like Unilever have piloted such initiatives with remarkable feedback from employees.

In parallel, survivor-led HR audits should be institutionalized, where survivor consultants review:

- Hiring practices and job descriptions for inclusivity
- Accessibility of grievance redressal mechanisms
- Workplace culture and informal hierarchies

These audits would not only uncover hidden barriers but also empower survivors as change agents. Ensuring adequate remuneration and psychological support for survivor consultants is key to sustaining their involvement.

By grounding policy recommendations in survivor leadership, intersectoral partnerships, and enforceable accountability, India can begin to dismantle the systemic barriers that exclude rape victims and acid attack survivors from dignified employment. These strategies must not remain aspirational. They must become structural pillars of a just and inclusive workforce.

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## 7. Monitoring and Data Systems

Effective monitoring and data systems are essential to ensure that initiatives aimed at enhancing workplace inclusivity for rape victims and acid attack survivors are both impactful and sustainable. Without reliable metrics, transparency, and continuous feedback loops, policies risk becoming performative rather than transformative. A robust monitoring architecture can identify gaps, measure outcomes, and guide future interventions with survivor-centric insights.

### 7.1 National Dashboard

India must establish a centralized, publicly accessible national dashboard to track the employment and rehabilitation status of survivors. This dashboard should aggregate real-time data from states and districts, offering insights into employment rates, access to skill development programs, participation in entrepreneurship initiatives, and rehabilitation services by sector and region. Crucially, it should disaggregate data by gender, caste, geography, and type of trauma to ensure intersectional analysis.

The dashboard would serve multiple purposes: it would increase transparency and hold public and private institutions accountable; it would also aid policymakers, NGOs, and corporate leaders in identifying areas with the highest need for intervention. Integrating survivor testimonies and experiences into the dashboard through anonymized qualitative inputs can offer a holistic picture of progress and challenges.

### 7.2 Impact Audits

To complement digital tracking, annual third-party impact audits should be mandated for both public and private organizations that claim to support survivor employment. These audits should assess the effectiveness of recruitment strategies, workplace accommodations, employee retention rates, and survivor satisfaction.

Findings from these audits must be made public and used to inform national rankings of institutions based on their inclusivity practices. High-performing entities could be rewarded with government incentives, additional funding, or public recognition, while underperforming ones should be required to submit remedial action plans.

Such an audit framework would also help institutionalize feedback mechanisms, allowing survivors to report discrimination, harassment, or neglect without fear of retaliation. Confidentiality protocols and third-party oversight would ensure that these audits are ethical, transparent, and survivor-sensitive.

### **7.3 Research and Policy Feedback**

Monitoring must be complemented by a vibrant ecosystem of participatory research that includes survivors, NGOs, academics, and policy experts. Institutions should fund interdisciplinary research that examines emerging barriers, evaluates policy effectiveness, and develops survivor-informed best practices.

Research outputs—ranging from field reports to longitudinal studies—should be integrated into policymaking and implementation strategies at national and state levels. Government ministries, especially the Ministry of Women and Child Development and the Ministry of Labour and Employment, must commit to iterative policy reform grounded in lived experiences.

Moreover, survivor councils and advisory boards should be formalized within government bodies and large corporate employers. These bodies would ensure that survivors are not merely subjects of research and policy but active agents in their own empowerment.

A resilient monitoring system that combines quantitative data with qualitative insight, rigorous audits, and survivor-led research will play a critical role in institutionalizing workplace inclusion. By aligning data with justice, such a system ensures that inclusivity becomes not just a goal but a measurable, accountable reality.

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## **8. Conclusion**

Employment is more than economic inclusion for rape and acid attack survivors—it is a pathway to healing, dignity, and justice. An inclusive workplace can be a space of empowerment and transformation. India stands at the cusp of becoming a global model in gender-sensitive employment. Legal reforms, corporate engagement, community support, and survivor leadership must converge to make this vision a reality. Empowering survivors through dignified employment is not just a policy goal—it is a moral imperative.



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