



THEMATIC BRIEF

Sexual harassment at work:

Insights from the global garment industry

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Violence and harassment in the workplace are violations of fundamental human rights. They have profoundly negative effects on the health, wellbeing and productivity of workers.

Better Work's experience in the global garment industry, where many workers are affected by violence and harassment - particularly sexual harassment - provides a unique perspective on how to identify, monitor and prevent abuses of this kind.

This brief provides an overview of the programme's approach to addressing the underlying conditions that lead to sexual harassment and the innovative methods used to assess its incidence. It also details some of the prevention programmes Better Work has put in place and examines their impact.



Violence and harassment in the world of work

For almost a century, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has worked on issues of violence and harassment in the workplace as part of its mandate to protect the safety, health and wellbeing of workers everywhere.

On 21 June 2019, the Centenary International Labour Conference adopted a new labour standard to combat violence and harassment in the workplace.

The [Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019](#), and [Violence and Harassment Recommendation, 2019](#), were adopted by delegates representing governments and Employers' and Workers' organizations.

The Convention recognizes that violence and harassment in the world of work “can constitute a human rights violation or abuse...is a threat to equal opportunities, is unacceptable and incompatible with decent work.” It defines “violence and harassment” as behaviours, practices or threats “that aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm,” and “gender-based violence and harassment” as “violence and harassment directed at persons because of their sex or gender, or affecting

persons of a particular sex or gender disproportionately” and includes sexual harassment. It reminds member States that they have a responsibility to promote a “general environment of zero tolerance”.

The new international labour standard aims to protect workers and employees, irrespective of their contractual status, and includes persons in training, interns and apprentices, workers whose employment has been terminated, volunteers, job seekers and job applicants. It recognizes that “individuals exercising the authority, duties or responsibilities of an employer” can also be subjected to violence and harassment.

The standard covers violence and harassment occurring in the workplace; places where a worker is paid, takes a rest or meal break, or uses sanitary, washing or changing facilities; during work-related trips, travel, training, events or social activities; work-related communications (including through information and communication technologies), in employer-provided accommodation; and when commuting to and from work. It also recognizes that violence and harassment may involve third parties.



Sexual harassment in the garment industry

The ILO has recognized the negative role played by unequal power relations between men and women, as well as gender, cultural, and social norms that support violence and harassment. An ILO Meeting of Experts in 2016 made a link between these power relations and mistreatment in the world of work. “Imbalanced power relationships,” they concluded, “including due to gender, race and ethnicity, social origin, education and poverty could lead to violence and harassment.”¹ Perpetrators can use violence and harassment as a way to maintain this power imbalance, such as when men sexually harass women who enter a predominantly male workplace.²

These dynamics are common in the garment industry, where workplaces are frequently characterized by unequal power relations among staff. Often, the industry is subject to business pressures – such as short turnaround times – meaning workers can be subjected to bullying and verbal and physical abuse as a means to intimidate or, perversely, motivate them to reach production targets.

Working collaboratively with government, business,

union and academic partners in factory settings, Better Work has found innovative solutions to identify, address and prevent incidences of sexual harassment and other forms of violence and harassment.

Sexual harassment is a relatively common occurrence in the garment factories. The industry is largely comprised of women workers under the age of 30, many of whom migrate from rural areas or from abroad for their first formal sector job. Typically, the majority of supervisory and management positions are held by men and power imbalances are endemic.

Migrant workers in particular find themselves isolated, removed from their social networks. They often lack an understanding of the language and culture of the host community. They mostly occupy a position of low power in factories, especially in relation to an often-male, often-foreign line supervisor who assesses their performance. Supervisors can use their position to sexually harass workers in their teams, and disempowered workers may interpret such conduct as a condition of their employment or promotion.



Measuring the prevalence of sexual harassment

Better Work staff regularly carry out two-day, unannounced assessments of how factories are complying with core ILO labour standards and national labour law. As a part of the discrimination component of this assessment, factory workers and management are asked a series of gender-related questions. While responses to these questions have yielded important insights, in many factories, there are powerful disincentives for workers to report incidences of sexual harassment. Cultural norms, fear of reprisal or shame and embarrassment might act to limit what workers are prepared to say about their experiences.

To overcome these concerns, Better Work complements its in-factory assessments with independent impact assessment research based on anonymous input from workers gathered through surveys. Partnering with independent researchers, Better Work facilitates Audio Computer-Assisted Self-Interviews (ACASI) surveys on tablet computers equipped with headphones. Survey content is translated and read out in the local language with pictorials to aid low-literacy workers. This approach encourages workers to share their concerns with a greater sense of privacy and in a less intimidating environment than when responding directly to an assessment team member.

Related specifically to issues of sexual harassment, workers are asked, “Is sexual harassment a concern for workers in your factory?” They have the option of answering “No” or “Yes”. If they answer “Yes”, then they can choose a number of actions taken as a result of their sexual harassment concern, including: “Yes, dis-

cussed with co-workers” or “Yes, threatened a strike.” Workers can also answer that they do not know or do not want to answer.

Since the ACASI survey’s advent in 2010, questions about sexual harassment have been added and evolved to focus on specific behaviours, attitudes and experiences related to gender dynamics in the factory. These additional questions and the survey methodology have also been introduced to factories in Cambodia since 2015, and to factories in Bangladesh since 2017.

Results from Better Work’s impact assessment worker surveys carried out from 2010 to 2015 provide an important insight into the magnitude of the problem. Across several country contexts, the issue of sexual harassment was identified as a significant concern at baseline. In Indonesia, around four out of every five workers stated that sexual harassment or sexual touching is a concern in their factory³ (see Figure 1).

Furthermore, baseline worker surveys carried out in garment and footwear factories in Cambodia show that “quid pro quo” sexual harassment is reported by 22 per cent of respondents. (Quid pro quo sexual harassment is when a job benefit is offered in exchange for sexual favours or a sexual relationship.) The most commonly reported demands for sexual favours were in exchange for better treatment or pay (35 per cent), followed by hiring (25 per cent), a report documenting the achievement of the production quota, in itself linked to pay (20 per cent), ending probationary period (11 per cent) and a promotion (9 per cent) (Figure 1).

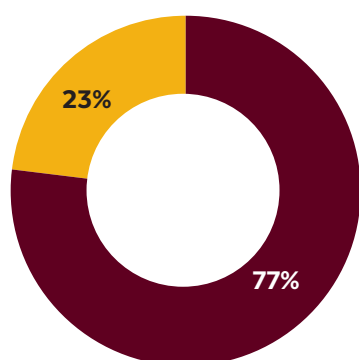
FIGURE 1: “IS SEXUAL HARASSMENT A CONCERN FOR WORKERS IN YOUR FACTORY?”

PER CENT, BASELINE:	JORDAN N=444	INDONESIA N=626	HAITI N=63	NICARAGUA N=277	VIETNAM N=2,207
No, not a concern	70.1	15.7	68.3	70.4	97.6
Yes, discussed with co-workers	8.8	12.8	19.1	13.7	0.9
Yes, discussed with supervisor or manager	10.1	36.7	7.9	8.7	0.7
Yes, discussed with trade union representative	2.5	20.9	—	2.9	0.5
Yes, considered quitting	3.2	8.6	4.8	3.3	0.2
Yes, nearly caused a strike	0.9	1.0	—	1.1	0.1
Yes, caused a strike	4.5	4.3	—	—	0.1

Answers of “I don’t know” or “don’t want to answer” are excluded from the above table. Such responses suggest that the topic continues to be taboo and therefore the Tufts assessment may not have captured all worker concerns. This is particularly relevant in Jordan, where migrant workers (particularly from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka) are far less likely to report sexual harassment concerns than Jordanian workers. This may be due to the perceived risks in reporting due to fear of stigma, retaliation (including fear of deportation) and language barriers.

FIGURE 2: BASELINE SURVEY QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

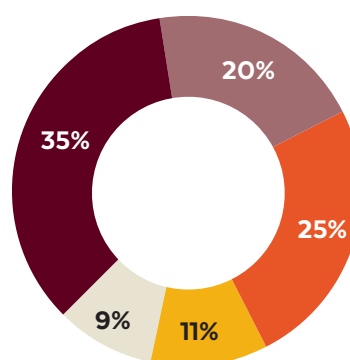
Have any of the supervisors or managers offered you benefits in exchange for sexual favors or a sexual relationship?



N = 1,588 worker responses.

■ No
■ Yes

If yes, in exchange for which benefits?



N = 363 worker responses.

■ Better treatment or pay
■ Reporting that you met your production quota
■ Hiring you
■ Ending your probationary period
■ Promotion

Baseline impact assessment survey results, Cambodia, 2016.

Drivers of workplace sexual harassment

Better Work's impact assessment research has shown that specific workplace conditions are correlated with higher concerns about, and likely prevalence of, sexual harassment.

For example, low organizational and managerial awareness of workplace dynamics can contribute to sexual harassment prevalence. In factories where managers are unaware of supervisors' stress and lack of managerial skills, researchers find sexual harassment concern among workers is 4.9 per cent more likely. Higher likelihood of sexual harassment is also associated with factory settings where workers express a lack of general trust and a sense of fair treatment.

Misaligned pay incentives and structures are linked to the likelihood of sexual harassment. When gar-

ment workers are paid "by the piece" with production targets set by their line supervisors, sexual harassment concerns are higher. Workers in Haiti who report that they – but not their supervisors – receive a pay bonus if their daily production target is met are 25 percentage points more likely to report that sexual harassment is a concern in their factory.

Better Work research has also highlighted the vulnerability of migrant garment workers, demonstrating that sexual harassment is more likely to occur when workers have constraints on their freedom of movement. Migrant workers are 11 per cent more likely to report concern with sexual harassment, and workers in Jordan without access to a phone are 35 per cent more likely to express concerns.



Tackling sexual harassment: the Better Work approach

Since 2012, Better Work has developed and implemented a comprehensive sexual harassment prevention programme. This factory-level approach consists of several elements:

- ◆ **Establishing systems**, including implementing Better Work's model anti-sexual harassment policy, providing support to set up grievance mechanisms and providing referrals to the relevant national authorities.
- ◆ **Tackling organizational tolerance of sexual harassment through awareness raising**, including the use of animated videos, posters and 'Do's and

Don'ts' checklists.

- ◆ **Building capacity** to prevent and respond to reports of sexual harassment through targeted training of general managers, Human Resources managers, line supervisors and workers.

Tools are adapted to the specific cultural context in which Better Work countries operate after focus group discussions with industry stakeholders, including workers, as well as collaborations with local NGOs. The posters below, for example, were produced for local and migrant workers in Jordan.



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සිරිමි සහ කාන්තාවන්, මහලු සහ තරුණ, දේශීය පුද්ගලයින් සහ සංස්කෘතිකයින්, ස්ථානීය සහ අග්නිදේශීය



**EVERYBODY DESERVES RESPECT.
YOU'RE WORTH IT.**

Men and Women. Old and Young. Locals and Migrants. Workers and Supervisors.



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Through their extensive longitudinal analysis, impact assessment researchers have identified a reduction in concerns about sexual harassment attributable to Better Work's efforts.⁴ Even after taking into account external factors, the programme's services account for a significant share of a reduction in sexual harassment concerns.

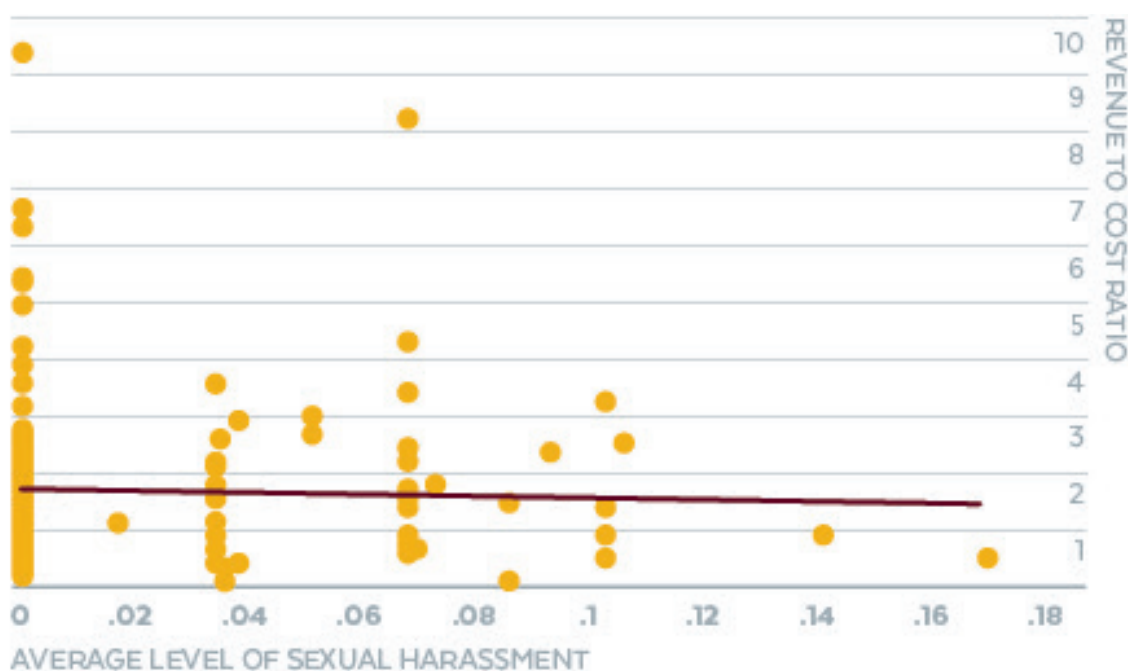
The impact of Better Work is most evident in Jordan, where the programme reduced the probability of workers being concerned with sexual harassment by 18 percentage points by the sixth year of participation in Better Work.

In Indonesia, the average level of sexual harassment concern reported per factory is significantly higher relative to other country programmes, which suggests workers are likely more willing to voice their concerns through surveys. Moreover, workers' responses suggest they are comfortable in doing something about their concerns, such as seeking help from their trade union representative or from their Human Resources department. Taking such actions indicates that workers are becoming more aware of their rights and are increasingly confident about seeking help to address the issue.

In Nicaragua, despite the small number of factories evaluated, there is evidence that when managers are aware of the problem of sexual harassment, worker concerns are 29 percentage points lower. It is arguable whether manager awareness could translate into broader organizational awareness, such as the establishment of anti-harassment policies. Impact assessment analysis suggests that change is driven by a combination of Better Work interventions, starting with the compliance assessment, the introduction of anti-sexual harassment policies and the provision of targeted training services.

An important finding from the Better Work impact assessment is that, in addition to the damaging psychological and physical effects sexual harassment can have on victims, it also negatively affects workplace communication and overall productivity. Factories where the average sexual harassment concerns are higher tend to have lower profitability, as shown in Figure 3. The data show there is a business case, as well as a moral and rights-based one, to reduce sexual harassment in the workplace.

FIGURE 3: PROFITABILITY AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT PREVALENCE



Expanded efforts to tackle sexual harassment

Since the programme's inception, Better Work assessments have covered sexual harassment as a form of discrimination in factories. However, due to the sensitive nature of the issue and the fear and shame often associated with it, there is a clear risk of under-reporting non-compliance findings related to sexual harassment. As a result, Better Work has shifted its approach to provide capacity building and advisory on prevention and remediation related to sexual harassment without necessarily finding non-compliance in factories. Better Work staff provide tailored recommendations and support to factories to improve management practices related to sexual harassment.

In recent years, Better Work has refined and improved its training on sexual harassment prevention, and introduced new courses for workers, supervisors and managers.

Since 2012, Better Work has developed and implemented a comprehensive sexual harassment prevention programme. The development of Better Work's five-year Global Gender Strategy, released in 2018, led to a revision of the materials and approach to sexual harassment prevention, with the development and roll-out of the 'Respectful Workplace Programme' (RWP). This course targets sexual harassment and also broader gender-based violence and harassment issues, and is tailored to different levels of management and workers. Subjects covered include 'The Hidden Cost of Sexual Harassment in your Factory' for general managers, 'The Importance of Prevention' for middle managers and 'Do's and Don'ts' checklists for supervisors and workers.

The course is supported by advisory services directed to manager and worker representatives on bipartite committees, designed to build factories' ownership of the issue of sexual harassment and to help them upgrade relevant policies, grievance mechanisms, and

management systems. RWP also includes train-the-trainer sessions to transfer Better Work's expertise in this field to internal factory teams and industry stakeholders.

To date, RWP has been delivered in factories in Jordan, Vietnam, and Indonesia and piloted in Bangladesh. Remaining Better Work countries will begin providing the course in 2019. In Cambodia, a collaboration with CARE is providing similar training for workers, supervisors, and managers. Better Work has also worked to build the ability of Indonesian and Nicaraguan trade unions to be effective advocates on the issue through seminars and training.

Better Work hosts regular industry seminars that directly address sexual harassment and its prevention. These seminars elaborate the industry-wide (and societal) nature of the issue, its serious implications and highlight its links to other forms of discrimination and gender inequality. The meetings gather support from key industry bodies, from workers' representatives to factory owners, and help reinforce changes resulting from factory level engagement.

Better Work also actively recruits partners, including brands, NGOs and other UN organizations like UNICEF and UN Women to support its work in training and educating on sexual harassment prevention and issues of gender inequality. Collaborating with governments to influence policy and strengthen their governance ability is also a central plank of Better Work's approach. Training for Jordanian labour inspectors by Better Work has included tools to detect and investigate sexual harassment. Changes to Vietnam's labour law to mandate Better Work style worker-management committees are likely to have strengthened factory communications, which is a proven factor in reducing sexual harassment.

Next steps

Despite the documented improvements brought about by Better Work, sexual harassment remains a pressing problem for workers in many factories. Notwithstanding the significant numbers of reported incidents in some contexts, a high percentage of workers did not want to answer the question on impact assessment surveys about sexual harassment, suggesting continued reticence in many countries to report concerns about the issue. A continued effort is needed to tackle workplace sexual harassment through Better

Work's tested prevention approach.

Within the context of the new international standard on violence and harassment in the world of work, Better Work's experience can be instrumental in informing constituent discussions around issues of sexual harassment. Importantly, the programme's established approach and proven results are a concrete entry point to challenge unequal power relations that often underpin sexual harassment in the workplace.

END NOTES

- 1 3 ILO. GB.329/INS/INF/3, Appendix I, para. 12.
- 2 Gender-based violence is predominantly associated to cases where men are the perpetrators and women are victims; however, it is socially-constructed power imbalances, and not the sex of the victim or the perpetrator, that drive the phenomenon.
- 3 Workers were asked whether sexual harassment or sexual touching is a concern in their factory, not whether they were directly victims of sexual harassment.
- 4 For full results, see: “Progress and Potential: How Better Work is improving garment workers’ lives and boosting factory competitiveness” (2016), available from betterwork.org/research

Better Work Research Briefs present a summary of the programme's research findings on particular topics.

INTRODUCING BETTER WORK

Better Work—a collaboration between the United Nations' International Labour Organization and the International Finance Corporation, a member of the World Bank Group—brings together all levels of the garment industry to improve working conditions and boost the competitiveness of apparel businesses. Currently active in eight countries and 1,700 factories reaching more than 2.4 million workers, the programme creates lasting change through assessments, training, advocacy and research. Find out more at betterwork.org.



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